

## A sliver of the liver

Aubrey's Meats finds a receptive audience for Dave Neil's line of homemade pâtés

By K. Scott Perry



**PEOPLE WHO ARE COMFORTABLE** using the term *nasty bits* in a conversation about food tend to know what tastes good, and Dave Neil, the young sous-chef at Sweetgrass Aboriginal Bistro, is no exception. When he goes on to say that you can do amazing things with pigs' feet, it's a slam dunk. Neil, it turns out, is also the inspiration behind a line of house-made specialty pâtés that Aubrey's Meats has been selling for close to a year. His idea was inspired by the pâté he was already making for Sweetgrass. The restaurant is known for its pâtés, with Neil's pâté making influenced by Sweetgrass owner and executive chef Warren Sutherland.

Confident that he was the man to expand the line of pâtés Aubrey's had on offer at the time, Neil approached owner Brian Kennelly eight months ago with a business proposal to provide Aubrey's with a different restaurant-quality pâté each week. Customers, he hypothesized, would enjoy the variety, and the move would also generate more general interest in pâtés. "Pâtés are such a good product, but not a lot of people know about them," Neil explains.

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**Spread the word:**  
Dave Neil's selection of homemade pâtés has included a lavender and lamb with black olives and a cinnamon- and nutmeg-scented duck

Through the 1980s and early 1990s, the trend leaned toward healthier foods, and people became more conscious of the amount of fat they were eating. Falling pâté consumption was a reflection of this knowledge. "Pâtés are not something you have to eat—there's a lot of fat that goes into each pâté. In a full log, there is a pound of fat, so it's not a very healthy thing," explains Neil. "But it is all natural," he adds, trying to recover. Fortunately for foodies, the trend has reversed slightly in more recent years, with people rediscovering what tastes good and becoming more concerned about what food should really taste like. With that has come a resurgence in the demand for products like pâté.

## More Food

Neil's proposal, which included the costs and potential revenue Kennelly could expect, was to create pâtés from some of the products that the store received on a regular basis but that didn't always sell and to sell the pâtés in the meat market alongside some of the other store-made meat products, such as Aubrey's rotisserie chicken. "The idea has taken off," says Kennelly.

wants something specific, Kennelly will try to accommodate him, but it depends entirely on the timing and the amount of notice provided.

The sideline gives Neil a great opportunity to experiment with different flavours, taking advantage of ingredients that he believes pair naturally with the different livers. Certain livers, such as pheasant, chicken, duck, and guinea

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### There's not a lot of difference between haggis and pâté except 400 years of refinement by the French

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"Last Christmas Aubrey's sold 12 whole pâtés in a single week."

*Pâté* is a medieval French word that originally referred to chopped-meat preparations enclosed in dough. In English, it was best defined as a pie, which meant anything enclosed in pastry (although over the centuries, the term *pie* has evolved to include pasties and patties). French pâtés are traditionally baked in a crust (*en croûte*) or moulded as a terrine. Here, however, pâté tends to refer to something that is more uniform, finely textured, and spreadable, without the pastry, while its close cousin, the terrine, tends to be coarser. As Kennelly jokes, "There's not a lot of difference between haggis and pâté except 400 years of refinement by the French."

The first pâtés Neil made were based on the recipe he was using at Sweetgrass for a black-pepper rabbit pâté. However, whereas the Sweetgrass menu features one flavour for two to three months, the Aubrey's selection changes weekly. The recipes Neil develops for Aubrey's use a variety of livers including, but not limited to, chicken, duck, guinea fowl, and goose. He uses local ingredients and products, avoiding chemicals and nitrates (preservatives).

The owner of Aubrey's gives Neil virtually a free hand in what he wants to do with the recipes and flavours he creates. Neil tells Kennelly what he wants to make, not the other way around. "He has proven his standards meet the expectations of our clients and the obvious benefit of the product to the store," Kennelly explains. Certainly, if a customer comes in and

fowl, tend to be better than others for pâté making. While chicken has a neutral flavour, pheasant exhibits a very distinct flavour and duck a gamier flavour. "So if the chicken is your base, you can go with anything."

While the mainstays so far have been the smoked guinea fowl, a cinnamon- and nutmeg-scented duck, and a chili chicken, Neil has sold other flavours, including a black-mustard-seed and pheasant pâté and a lavender and lamb with black olives. This last pâté evolved from a visit to another local vendor, La Bottega, where Neil taste-tested their line of fresh olives to come up with a good match for a lamb-liver pâté. As Neil explains, however, he doesn't make lamb pâtés often because they are more complex. Since lamb liver has a very strong flavour, it must be cut with chicken liver. He also has to bathe the lamb liver in milk for 24 hours to make it smoother and to remove some of the bitter aftertaste that could otherwise creep into it.

Neil's best seller is the chili-chicken pâté. He previously worked at Azteca and while there refined his understanding of working with chilies. Drawing on this experience, he experimented to find a chili variety that would have enough depth to complement the flavour of the chicken pâté but would not give off too much spice. The results, obviously, have been a resounding success.

The pâtés are made on the premises in a kitchen below the meat market that includes a residential oven and stove. Kennelly purchased a large stainless-steel blender to mix the pâtés, while



**The dish:** In the lead-up to Christmas, Aubrey's sold up to 12 of Neil's 18-inch pâtés each week

Neil bought two traditional 18-inch-long terrine dishes with the characteristic steam spout. "Fortunately, pâtés are not something that requires a huge footprint," says Kennelly. What they do require is attention to detail, technical precision to get them right, and a certain amount of passion. Neil typically prepares two pâtés each week, although production peaked at eight to 12 a week in the lead-up to Christmas.

And reflecting Aubrey's demographics, there's no discernable pattern to the people buying the pâtés—it could be a 90-year-old woman buying a small sliver to treat herself, a group of students planning a special party, traditional weekend shoppers stocking up for the week, or the home chef who wants to take it home, copy it, and try to come up with his own version.

Kennelly tells a story from this past summer when Cirque du Soleil was in town. Some of the spouses of the troupe happened upon Aubrey's one evening while looking for something to take back to their hotel. On the first night, they spent over \$100 on pâtés, then returned every two days thereafter to stock up until the Cirque's run ended.

Moving beyond the pâtés, Neil is now experimenting with sausages, reflecting, in a *Pulp-Fictionesque* sort of comment, his fascination with pigs. But while he works on his latest project, he remains committed to the pâtés, continuing taste experiments that may end up for sale at Aubrey's in the weeks to come. **END**