

ON A FARM IN VANCOUVER, Jim Denevan—the 45-year-old nomadic chef, sand artist, and founder of the culinary road show known as Outstanding in the Field—is strutting out past the turnips and the kale, looking for a place to put his tables. He’s six feet four, with surf-weathered skin and the knowing half smile of a man who’s kept company by an amusing secret. Wearing red flip-flops, jeans, no shirt, and a blue baseball hat with SKATEBOARDING IS NOT A CRIME embroidered >>>



(FOOD)



Every summer, **Jim Denevan** fires up his bus and travels the country, staging elaborate dinners on farms, in parks, and on beaches, from Alaska to New York City. His goal is to free us from the cult of celebrity chefs and the limits of the restaurant experience. Count us among the believers

*THE WANDERING CHEF

By **Howie Kahn**
Photographs by **Andrea Fazzari**



★ Jim Denevan and crew prep for dinner on Zephyros Farm in Colorado; above, a salad of fresh feta, haricots verts, and heirloom tomatoes.

across the front, Denevan stops in a spot he has seemingly claimed *afar*. “This is perfect,” he says, and starts converting this stretch of dirt and grass into the setting for a carefully executed food-driven experience—his singular take on dinner.

Over the next half hour, Denevan hoists flattops, two at a time, over his head. (They’re rectangular, ten feet long, and weigh forty pounds each.) Soon, several tables linked end to end parallel beds of emerging vegetation: Swiss chard, Bull’s Blood beets, purple-crowned alliums. He removes chairs from a trailer and carries ten at a time, unfolds them, pops them into place. Volunteers drop tablecloths like parachutes and lay down silver- and stemware, paying close attention to the symmetry of their settings.

Initially, Denevan’s Outstanding in the Field operation cooked for the paying public on California farms to showcase local farmers and their food. He put on three dinners in the summer of 1999, two in 2000, took the year off in 2001, came back with seven meals in 2002, and eight in 2003, when Denevan, the longtime chef at a popular Northern California restaurant called Gabriella Café, left the kitchen for good. In 2004, convinced of his company’s reach, Denevan bought a streamlined 1953 bus for \$7,000, hired a staff, and began touring North America. His troupe hosted weekly dinners throughout the summer and fall, and most of the time Denevan handed over the cooking duties to chefs of local renown (the thought being, local chefs would know better how to handle

the local ingredients), like Paul Kahan of Chicago’s Blackbird and Gabrielle Hamilton of Prune in New York City.

Eight tables now form one giant table—a feeding platform eighty feet long. At the field’s end, a blackberry hedge nine feet high holds the shape of a wave in suspension. Chickens lunch in the sun. I hand-truck a couple of cases of British Columbian wine (Ehrenfelser, Pinot Gris) into the shade, where tonight’s chefs—a trio in surfer trunks, white coats, and clogs led by Denevan’s chosen delegate, David Hawksworth (who helms the restaurant West in Vancouver and is among the best chefs in Canada)—are drinking beers and stoking the barbecue. It’s a makeshift thing, an iron tray on stilts filled with lumps of charcoal and just-split cherrywood. Hawksworth and his crew—Dino Renaerts, the former chef at the Hotel Georgia, and Quang Dang, the chef at C—seem happy to have escaped their respective jobs for the day. They literally whistle while they work. “It’s just nice,” says a blissed-out Hawksworth, “to feel the breeze.” For both chefs and diners, Outstanding in the Field provides an antidote to restaurants and their institutional shortcomings. There’s no pressure out here—no bills to pay, no Michelin stars to chase.

“We had this idea from the beginning,” says Denevan, “that the farmer should be the star, that the chef should be of secondary importance. It needed to be done. The chef was rising in stature as a culturally significant figure, and the farmer really

wasn’t talked about. Maybe that happened because people didn’t see farming as a creative pursuit. But I would argue that it is. Have you ever heard a farmer discuss his crops? Why he *chooses* to grow acidic peaches instead of white ones? Why one year he *chooses* to plant a special green Romans like to eat with anchovies? All these choices are stories created by passion, and story is the substance of food.”

If story is the substance of food, then taste must be the soul—that which lingers even after being separated from its given form. On this summer night in Vancouver, once all seventy guests arrive—university professors, graffiti artists, motorcycle enthusiasts, vintners, fishermen—farmers speak to the gathering about substance: truncating the food chain, reducing crop yields to increase flavor, humane slaughtering practices. The stuff of farm life that’s unsentimental and hard.

Meanwhile, Hawksworth addresses the soul. He starts with king salmon: raw, chopped, marinated in lime juice, accented with diced red onion, jalapeño, salt and pepper. He caught the fish himself at a depth of thirty-five feet off Graham Island—one of those unspoiled Canadian places where beer commercials are set and all the wild animals taste like themselves and not like corn-fed approximations. The color of the meat is unlike any salmon I’ve ever seen: It exudes the vigor of a still living thing. Hawksworth comes around and garnishes my portion with a (*continued on page 163*)

Denevan connects eaters with food producers. He serves dinner at its source. He brings tables to places you only dream there could be tables.

ring of gazpacho made from tomatoes just plucked from the farm's vines. For course number two, we get octopus pulled from the waters off Vancouver Island. Cooked for four hours at a low temperature in a vacuum-sealed bag containing olive oil, chilies, lemongrass, and ginger, it spends a few extra minutes on the grill. Having picked up some char and smoke, it tastes more like sausage than cephalopod. Course three is Duck Two Ways: legs confit and breasts grilled and drizzled with a cherry-cinnamon reduction, and as it comes to the table, the woman who fed and raised the ducks, Virginia Jacobsen of the nearby Polderside Farms, gets up to talk. She tells us she loves her ducks *and* the people who eat them. (Which makes me feel better about picking mine clean.) By the time the blueberry tart and glass of local wine number seven roll around, it's nine o'clock and the moon is out. Like me, it's nearly full.

Some of my tablemates start planning an afterparty at their pool. Others debate whether French beef compares favorably with Canadian beef, and others discuss whether French women compare favorably with Canadian women. Every story now is a story of flesh. Denevan squats next to my chair and shares one about an Outstanding in the Field dinner he arranged a few years ago beneath fruit-bearing trees in a California orchard where, he says, some hippie girl felt so overwhelmed by the sensuality of the experience that she took off her shirt, presented her breasts to the table, and delivered a sermon on how they reminded her, in shape and in sweetness, of apples.

At ten, the wine runs out and the guests begin lamenting; they don't want the night to end. They don't want to drive off the farm and back into the world of eighteen-wheel food—where the products do the traveling and the people stay put. They won't eat like this again anytime soon, and they know it. "Once you've been to one, you want to go to all of them," says Frish Brandt, who directs the Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco. "You don't know what's going to come out of Jim, so you know that each one will be a bit different. When you know Jim's working, you start to think, *It's happening. I want to be there.*"



IT'S NO COINCIDENCE that Jim Denevan walks with the wide, confident gait of a model: In the mid-'80s, he was one. Before one of his male superiors proposed a sex-for-work plan—*sleep with me, you get Armani*—Denevan lived in Milan, posed for a

leading agency, and ate prodigiously. While his peers snorted lines, he cultivated an appreciation for olive oils and herbs, focaccia, pizzas topped with raw egg. "I was involved in a pretty superficial pursuit," he says, "but I found meaning on my plate." In 1986, he would return to California and take a job in Capitola as a cook at a good Italian restaurant with an obsessively authentic menu. In less than a year, Denevan, the autodidact, would be promoted to chef.

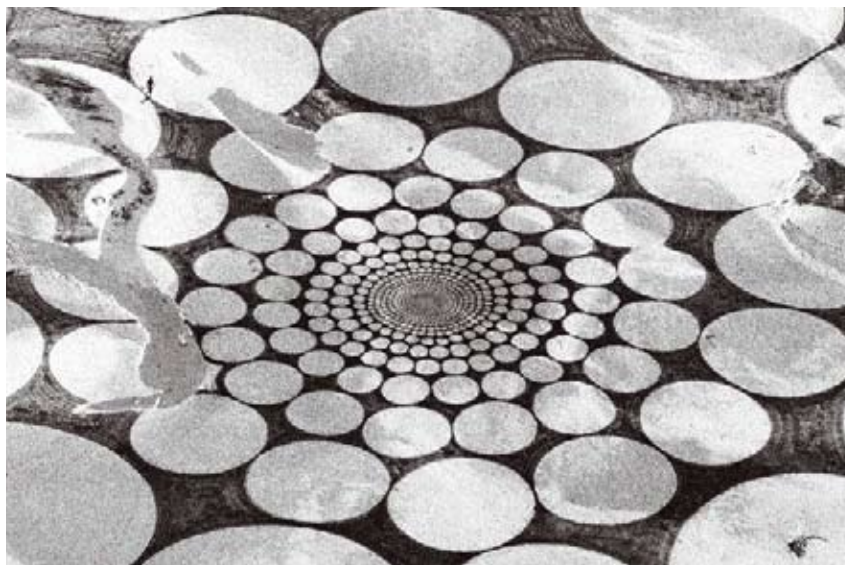
Restaurant work kept him happy until the mid-'90s, when his mother, a doctor of mathematics, fell ill with Alzheimer's. The disease crashed her brain and erased all the numbers. As her problem-solving capacity diminished, her second-youngest son—Denevan has six living siblings, among them Bill, a pioneering organic farmer; Tish, a two-time world-champion body surfer (Denevan's own surfing skills have made him a local legend and have earned him the moniker King of Pleasure Point); Pat, a hang-gliding mogul (another brother, Mike, died in a hang-gliding accident); and Dan, who sells mattresses—poured himself into a new pursuit: sand art. He left the restaurant, took to the beach, and found himself consumed by shapes. "My mom

was losing her mind, and I was pretty much losing mine, too," says Denevan, who also knows of deep cerebral discord from growing up with three mentally ill brothers. "I had always been interested in creative activity, but watching my mother—who was very gifted—deteriorate really pushed me over the edge. I experienced so much stress that I couldn't endure the intensity of the kitchen, so I pretty much drew in the sand for a year." He worked at low tide with sticks and rakes, drawing for hours, marking entire beaches with impermanent but perfect images: conjoined triangles, interlocking spirals, three-dimensional rectangles. They looked like hourglasses, abstracted clock hands, and coffins—until the tide rolled in and erased them.

"People always ask how it feels to have them wash away," he says. "But who would want it *not* to wash away?"

On a cloudy day last summer, I watched Denevan, over the course of six hours, tattoo, in a helical pattern, 320 perfectly round, exactly proportional circles—the smallest ones silver-dollar sized, the largest ones big enough to hold a house—onto a wind-whipped tidal flat in northern Washington. He looped around aerobically like a human Spirograph, using a four-foot stick to create the likeness of a microscopic image blown up to epic proportions. When finished, it looked like a beautiful convergence of active cells, the inner map of some enormous living thing. He did this without employing a single equation, schematic, or

* ENTER SANDMAN



When Jim Denevan leaves the field to draw on the earth, he'll find a stick near the sand or he'll bring a rake. With it, he'll compose patterns, lines, and figures, sometimes up to three miles across. No matter the locale, the drawings mesmerize. When Denevan completed a series of circles—the size of Times Square—in Washington State, *above*, a man found one that suited him and started doing yoga in its center. "Cool," Denevan said. And his art has become sought after, too. Last June, Range Rover called with a six-figure offer for an ad campaign that would feature his work, and in the winter a reputable contemporary-art museum in New York approached him about a show. "Very cool," he said.—H.K.



★ After four-plus hours of cooking, the lamb is finally carved, *far left*; an assortment of local eggplants, potatoes, and just-picked purple beans.

measuring device. He measured only by stepping forward again and again without pause. Marching through the sand, he demonstrated an uncanny understanding of the same geometry his mother studied when she was alive.

“Some relatives thought my constant drawing was evidence I was going crazy,” says Denevan. “That’s a very intense and difficult thing to hear in my family—with my brothers going from being admired, brilliant people in my eyes to eating out of Dumpsters, cursing God and the Devil.”

It’s impossible to separate Denevan the artist from Denevan the chef. His dinners, like his sand art, have evolved into grand, temporal compositions. They appear in a specific place for a short period of time. They happen and they vanish. “I like the idea of coming to a farm where there’s no table,” he says. “It’s a patch of land that just happens not to have plants in it at the time. It could be zucchini in three weeks. Or a few weeks before, it could have been something else. But at the moment, there’s room to put a table there. The whole field is a constantly changing composition. It’s not just the table that’s transitory.”

The two typically dissimilar things—visual art and feeding people—began, for Denevan, to conceptually mirror each other eight years ago. By then he was into his seventh year at Gabriella Café, but having taken time off to draw in the sand, he realized that restaurant life no longer suited him. The gig started to feel stale, punishing in its monotony. “The real creativity there was when I first started,” he says. “Gabriella was packed every night for years, but creativity waned once the customers became consistent and dependent. People expected all the same things. They considered them vital.”

Denevan had little interest in repeating himself, so he created *Outstanding in the Field*. “I felt like I was escaping,” he says, “crossing a boundary, discovering the world.”

From the onset, he established lofty goals: “I wanted to do something culturally significant, something needed. I figured if we presented the model in a thoughtful way, people would copy it without thinking where it came from. They’d think: *This is what people do. They go to the farm. They learn about it and have an interesting, meaningful, and delicious experience.* Eventually, they won’t know who Jim Denevan is and what *Outstanding in the Field* is, and they won’t need to.” His method,

“These dinners are the story of thousands of years of people bringing in the harvest, gathering it at a table, and breaking bread,” Denevan says.

however, was entirely down-to-earth: He connected eaters with food producers. He served dinner at its source. He brought tables to places you only dreamed there were tables: an Alaskan farm, an urban garden in Manhattan, the belly of an illegally excavated California sea cave. Denevan even enlisted John Sundstrom of Seattle’s Lark restaurant to push a barbecue through a marsh at dawn in preparation for an evening of spot prawns and roasted pork on the very same isthmus where Denevan would himself return a year later to draw 320 perfect circles in the sand.



JIM DENEVAN USUALLY rides from farm to farm on his bus, *Outstanding*, but the mighty coach, sputtering black smoke, broke down in Whitehorse, where it remains stranded in various states of disrepair. Getting his bus back from the Yukon has proved no easier than getting a bus back from the moon, so Denevan, his staff of two, and I make the drive from Vancouver to Colorado in a Dodge Ram pickup instead.

On the road, Denevan goes hours without talking. He spends Montana contemplating menus and eating beef jerky. Outside Boise, he scarfs down an Idaho Spud candy bar because he always wants to understand, with no exceptions, what places taste like. For 1,400 miles, he has

either a full mouth or a full mind, and if you want him to share his snacks or his thoughts, you usually just have to wait until he offers. On a hundred-degree day, before stopping for gas-station corn dogs in Helper, Utah, he finally offers this:

“I identify with focus and passion. People say I’m obsessed, but I don’t think creative people hit their heads against the wall that way.”

And this: “Origin stories are interesting; I’m concerned with origins.”

And this: “When I dance with women, I pick them up and carry them over my shoulder. They really like it. I like to do it to larger women. Not huge, but larger.”

And this: “I’m not particularly wanting to say things like *organic, organic, organic* or *sustainable, sustainable, sustainable*, or any words that are really mushy. It just so happens that the story of small farms is interesting and alluring. And it just so

happens that what they do tastes pretty good, too. We need the ingredients. We don’t need those words so much.”

And of Robert Smithson’s nearby signature earthwork, the holy 1,500-foot *Spiral Jetty*, Jim Denevan offers this: “We should do a dinner out there.”



MORNING ON ZEPHYROS FARM—in Paonia, Colorado, ninety miles southwest of Aspen—begins with Daphne Yannakakis shouting out her back door, “Breakfast is ready!” People pour into the house from tents and outbuildings. Denevan comes straight from the field where, last night, he threw down his sleeping bag and dozed off in the middle of a lightning storm. He’s greeted by a mug of strong coffee, a skillet of baked eggs and vegetables, a loaf of steaming bread, preserved apricots, and raw-milk chèvre crafted on-site. Daphne, the 33-year-old sunburned dervish who owns the farm with her husband, Don Lareau, says, “It’s nothing fancy, just some fresh chèvre.”

Denevan eats for a good hour, readying himself to cook tonight’s meal. “I like to do one or two myself every year,” he says. “For me, this isn’t about self-aggrandizement.”

Once breakfast is cleared away, every available inch of Don and Daphne’s kitchen fills up with homegrown food: heirloom tomatoes and peppers in psychedelic shades of

★ **Dinnertime on Zephyros Farm, with Denevan hand-delivering the second course.**

red, orange, and green; dirt-flecked mushrooms and potatoes that smell of forest and earth; sinuous purple-white beans called Dragon's Lingerie. Denevan starts working the haul in a manner I recognize from watching him draw in the sand. He's all forward motion, resolute silence, concentration. His cooking, like his sand drawing, is the physical manifestation of his own intuition: no recipes, no formulas, no apparent calculations. He goes where he wants to go. He'll see a jar of honeycombs and he'll need to use it. He'll spot some special variety of eggplant in the field and he'll need to use that, too. When a woman asks him, "What's on the menu?" he smiles his knowing smile and reveals only that "it's a work in progress."

Don enters, carrying a forty-pound lamb carcass that, with its legs tethered to its body, looks like a map of Pakistan—complete with ridges of white fat to signify topographical rises. He slaughtered it a couple of days ago and not today, he explains, because it needed to bleed.

Denevan grabs the lamb by the neck and throws it over his shoulder like one of his dance partners. He takes it out to the roaster, which is actually a rusty oil drum fitted with a small motor, a bicycle chain, and a meat cradle that pops out of the drum like a tool from a Swiss Army knife. Denevan loads the lamb into the cradle, rubs it with rosemary, balsamic vinegar, salt, and pepper. He flips it back into the 350-degree chamber, Don hits a switch, and the whole contraption starts humming: The chain spins the cradle, the cradle turns the lamb. It completes one revolution every two minutes and makes crackly, come-hither noises until it's ready to eat.

When it's done, I'm at the table with fifty-four other hungry guests. We're in a field at 5,600 feet, tall grass and wildflowers everywhere, mountains jutting up all around. The table isn't exactly at the top of the world, but it feels pretty close. As the sun goes down, Denevan addresses the gathering with the gravitas of some culinary pope. "We search for what's



meaningful and delicious about a place," he says. Then he brings the food.

He calls the first dish Green Food, Brown Food, Red Food. It doesn't sound like much, but toying with expectations is one of Denevan's favorite things to do. The dish consists of pureed favas (green), whipped eggplant (brown), and roasted Tolle's Sweet peppers (red), each spread on thick pieces of toast.

"What does it taste like?" I ask Denevan.

"Like an eccentric farmer's idea of poetry," he says. "Like hard work."

His next course—goat's-milk feta, haricots verts, and tomatoes robust enough to dress themselves—is enhanced by a story. The cheese, we learn, was made not by some milkmaid just off the boat from Mykonos but by Heidi Gruber, a 15-year-old local with huge blue eyes and a herd of goats that numbered fifty-three until coyotes recently ate fourteen of them. Heidi confirms that she made her first batch at the age of 8. Why? Because her family had extra goat's milk. A doctor suggested her brother needed it to help combat a case of eczema; he got better; plenty of milk remained; so Heidi, ever industrious, made use of it. The story enriches the food, but unfortunately, it can't make it last any longer. Heidi's feta disappears too fast. Thankfully, I'm pacified by some Chardonnay, some Riesling, and

a few glasses of a smoky Cabernet Franc/Foch blend with a deep cherry finish. The wines are all from a start-up Colorado vineyard called Jack Rabbit Hill, and although they taste sort of experimental and not totally balanced, they capture something about life in Colorado (experimental, not totally balanced, a study in extremes) that I appreciate. The red couples nicely with the lamb, which Denevan serves with crisp roasted potatoes and sticky stewed onions. Dessert this time around is a farmer's idea of indulgence: half a tender peach, a spiral of fresh-pressed honey, a splash of local pear grappa, a scoop of Daphne's creamiest chèvre, and some utterly potent spearmint from her garden.

Again, nobody wants to leave.

Guests linger and drink more grappa; a dog gnaws on a goat's leg near the pond, which was a cloud mirror throughout the day and is now reflecting the fat silver moon; the potato farmer tilts back in his chair and takes in the stars. Denevan's in the kitchen, barefoot and spent. I tell him how much this meal moved me, how I'll always remember it, which, for him, is the point. He offers that even the most transient things—a cheese course, a sand drawing, a few hours in a field—leave indelible marks.

"These dinners," he says, "are the story of thousands of years of people bringing in the harvest, gathering it at a table, and breaking bread. It's the most profound and elemental of human experiences. In a way, it's sad that events are now organized to share the things that are really the human birthright. We're born to understand the harvest. To feel it." Here he pauses, pinches some pink meat off the lamb's rib, and stuffs it in his mouth. "I think giving people the chance to share the table with all the characters involved in the process," he says, "it's something that might change culture." ❧

HOWIE KAHN profiled the artist John Currin in the April issue.

★ COMING SOON, TO A FARM NEAR YOU

SANTA CRUZ, CALIFORNIA

JUNE 9

Live Earth Farm

SONOMA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

JUNE 24

Andante Dairy

SANTA CRUZ, CALIFORNIA

JULY 1

Route 1 Farm

SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA

JULY 22

Coleman Farm

HALF MOON BAY, CALIFORNIA

AUGUST 5

Secret sea cove

VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA

AUGUST 19

U.B.C. Farm

BOULDER, COLORADO

AUGUST 26

Cure Organic Farm

CHICAGO

SEPTEMBER 2

Sandhill Farm

MARTHA'S VINEYARD, MASSACHUSETTS

SEPTEMBER 9

NEW YORK CITY

SEPTEMBER 16

La Plaza Cultural Community Garden

HOUSTON

SEPTEMBER 23

Hollywood Community Garden

HOLLYWOOD

SEPTEMBER 30

Hollywood Community Garden



SANTA CRUZ, CALIFORNIA

OCTOBER 7

Everett Family Farm

SONOMA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

OCTOBER 14

Devils Gulch Ranch

SANTA CRUZ, CALIFORNIA

DECEMBER 2

Santa Cruz Mountain Forage

Meals cost about \$150 per person; see www.outstandinginthefield.com for more details.