

## **PASA Business Member Profile Restaurant Alba**

*By Gayle Morrow*

Ah, spring - when our collective fancies turn to thoughts of love.  
Or to thoughts of asparagus and arugula.  
Maybe risotto of leeks.  
Even new peas.

At Restaurant Alba, lovers and others can celebrate spring, or any season, with “contemporary cuisine” featuring fresh, locally produced food. Husband and wife team Sean and Kelly Weinberg, owners and operators of the Malvern (Chester County) eatery, believe in “food of the area for people of the area” and in working the menu around what is available.

“Prepare it simply, let it shine, and people will walk away happy,” says Sean Weinberg (he is the chef; she handles front-of-the-house duties). “There is such potential for us to help local farmers. I have an obligation as a chef in a restaurant to support local farmers. It is really up to us.”

The couple is “both into the idea of local food,” Weinberg says, and has an extensive and eclectic history of experience in the restaurant business. Kelly Weinberg has worked in restaurants for nearly 20 years, including a stint as general manager of Rose Tattoo Cafe in Philadelphia, a facility owned by Weinberg’s parents. He had spent some time in Italy after graduating from the Culinary Institute of America; it was there he became involved with the Slow Food movement and became enamored with the “live fire” method of cooking. Restaurant Alba, with its small, open kitchen and its live hickory and mesquite wood fire, takes its name from a Slow Food facility in Alba, Italy, where Weinberg worked.

About four years ago, he continues, they came to Chester County to open their own restaurant “because we wanted to be close to our farmers.”

“We thought this would be a great area to be a sustainable restaurant,” he says, adding, “in the city, farmers are coming in only once a week.” But now “we can pick up every day.”

When it’s asparagus time, for instance, that much-anticipated seasonal delight comes to Restaurant Alba daily rather than languishing in a cooler somewhere.

“It’s never seen a refrigerator. We’ve got three farms within four to five miles of the restaurant, and new farms are popping up every year.”

Some of those farms also provide the Weinbergs with the freshest meat available and, again, the customer benefits from the chef's dedication to sustainable practices and his creative bent (e.g. a slow roasted pork, escarole and Amish cheddar sandwich).

"We purchase the animal whole and use it all," he says. "That shows respect for the animal and helps the farmer."

For a country and a culture starved for healthy, regional, delicious food, Restaurant Alba sounds almost too good to be true. You can find out for yourself by visiting Restaurant Alba in Malvern at 7 West King Street. Call 610-644-4009 or go to [www.restaurantalba.com](http://www.restaurantalba.com) for more information. The restaurant also recently acquired their liquor license, so they are no longer BYOB.

### **What is unique about your business?**

We really do deal with a lot of different farms. At the height of the season we are dealing with up to 12. Buying locally has become a trendy thing amongst restaurants, and that is good, but, as with any trend, there are those who use the label to promote themselves without actually being that committed to it. We are one of a handful of restaurants in the Philadelphia area at which you can dine knowing you are being offered as much local product as possible. And, we bring home the concept of the European restaurant. We try to stay true to traditional techniques; we really try to transport people.

### **Why did you join PASA?**

We joined because, honestly, I feel like it's one of the best organizations we've come across. And we joined to support them. We feel like it is an awesome organization! Another reason is for the contacts and to network with like-minded people.

How has your membership been a benefit to your business?

We've actually had a lot of people seek us out and become customers through our membership. PASA members are going to search out people doing the right thing.

### **What does the term "sustainable" mean to you and how do you incorporate that into your business?**

For me, ultimately, it's one nice little local circle. It's the idea of doing a restaurant in Chester County, having people living here, working here and eating here. There is less environmental impact, and not needing outside sources to keep things moving.

### **What do you see as some of the critical issues facing ag and ag-related businesses today?**

Suburban sprawl is definitely one, especially for our area. Although it brings customers and restaurants to one's area, it drives up the price of land, etc. for the

farmers. It wears on the landscape when you take 30 acres and put 80 homes on it. You can look at the way the economy has tanked and see so much growth and wearing on local resources. It feels like farmers are really being pushed out. Also, government interference makes it difficult for small-scale farms to maintain traditional artisan techniques such as cheese making. [The number of] Quality butchers who care about customers and livestock are shrinking to the point where you might say it is a dying art. Consumer support is also an issue. How many times have you seen promotional materials for businesses and homes that claim to be “nestled in the rolling hills of Chester County”? Well, if you want to maintain that aesthetic, you need to support the farms that make it so, because it is disappearing fast.

**What do you see as the connection between sustainable ag and the consumer?**

Consumers hold the key to making sustainable ag the norm. Buying local should be an obligation! It benefits us all in so many ways. The consumer needs to be educated and the ag community is doing their part. We hope to help that effort by raising awareness and getting people to taste local food and recognize how much better it can be than food that's been trucked in from so far away. There is a good feeling about eating meat that you know was raised humanely and treated with great care all the way from farm to table. It's amazing how people are willing to ignore the truth about the origins and path their food generally takes. People are so discerning with so many aspects of their lives, yet they don't get picky when it comes to food they feed their families. Maybe we could get Fast Food Nation or one of Michael Pollan's books added to high school curriculums!