

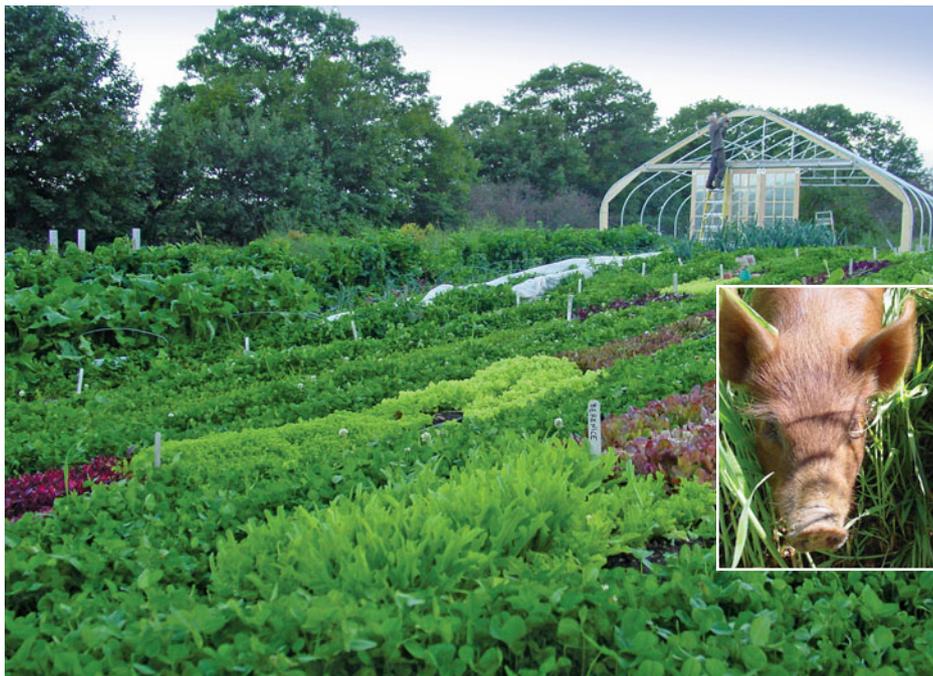
PRIMO RESTAURANT'S HOLISTIC RENOVATION

When the owners of Primo, a gourmet restaurant of renown, decided to expand and renovate their building in Rockland, they took the environmentally friendly route.

BY SALLY NOBLE

PRIMO IS ONE OF MAINE'S preeminent restaurants, housed in a 130-year-old Victorian farmhouse situated on four acres of gardens and greenhouses on the line between Rockland and Owls Head. Dinner guests reserve their tables months in advance, often traveling miles to experience not only haute cuisine, but also the mystical ambience created by the owners, Melissa Kelly and Price Kushner. On the grounds behind the restaurant, honeybees buzz around Italian hives and heirloom hogs feast on scraps of organic restaurant leftovers and cultivated pea tendrils and rye grass. Greenhouses and extensive gardens sustain more than 30 varieties of heirloom tomatoes, as well as purple cauliflower, fava beans, cardoons, celeriac, white alpine strawberries, and squash blossoms.

A restaurant with its own vegetable gardens and greenhouse, Primo even has heirloom hogs to help clean up any leftovers.



all photographs courtesy Primo

The restaurant was enlarged to nearly twice the original dining capacity without doubling the resources required to operate it.



The enlargement and renovation of a restaurant may not sound glamorous, but Primo's owners and the people who worked with them can be proud of their keep-the-carbon-footprint-small project.



George Haselton, the man who oversaw Primo's renovations, stands in the middle of Primo's partially rebuilt kitchen.

Kelly and Kushner had long considered enlarging their restaurant to twice the original dining capacity while remaining steadfast and true to their all-things-green philosophy. Finally, two winters ago, they took a deep breath of that rarified air where unwavering environmental principles thrive, exhaled, and called Rockport Mechanical, a local company that provides subcontracting services.

"When they asked me to do the job," said George Haselton, owner of Rockport Mechanical, "I asked them what contractor would be executing their plans. Price told me that would be done by a bunch of friends—oh, this is a mess, I thought."

Indeed, it seemed that way. Kelly and Kushner didn't have a prescribed plan when the renovation began—many of their plans were in their minds

"Of course, because it's a publicly occupied building," said Haselton, "an architect's



The new bar was built from reclaimed lumber and given a hammered copper top.

plans were required, but the details unfolded as we went along. Yet I must say truthfully that everything was done and done well. Seemingly impossible tasks—like moving walls—happened, while at all times keeping the building up to code.”

Primo’s owners call their renovation a holistic endeavor, which sounds a tad incongruous considering that much of the subject is about plumbing and grey water and rewiring and basic carpentry.

“In building designs,” Haselton pointed out, “I think holistic means a systems approach, where the design and function of a building work together as an integrated system.”

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“Holistic” also meant that George Haselton had to learn to work with a creative crew, headed by Kelly and Kushner, that approached building construction with many of the same principles that rule their famous kitchen.

“Price and Melissa are ethereal thinkers,” said Haselton, “not nuts-and-bolts people.”

There was, nevertheless, synergy within the chaos. The project was undertaken with the same innovative thinking that has made Primo a culinary success. The renovation involved a pinch of this, a dollop of that, and a whole lot of sensory architectural invention, and it worked: the job was completed within budget, on time, and with a Zen-like environment of collaborative effort.

Sometimes, however, high-minded theory, when put to the test in a renovation, clashes mightily with functional realities. At times, Haselton’s mindset on function butted heads with Kushner’s strong aesthetic vision.

Unfortunately, the footprint of the original 130-year-old building dictated some irrefutable rules. The restaurant’s owners wanted to go completely solar, but the original building stood in their way.

“Because the building was already built,” Haselton said, “we had to work within the parameters that we had. We couldn’t change the envelope. They had an antiquated, inefficient air conditioning system. As a



The post-renovation Primo.

BY THE TIME PRICE KUSHNER first saw the petite, very pretty Melissa Kelly, she had graduated first in her class from the Culinary Institute of America, in Hyde Park, New York. It was 1992, and Kushner was working for the family linen supply business. He met Kelly when he tried to sell her on his family’s cotton napkin service. “We were lucky to get the account,” said Kushner, “I think it was because she had her eye on me.”

Once they began dating, Price ate dinner every night at Kelly’s renowned eatery. In 1993, she moved to San Francisco to work as a consultant, and he went with her. Kushner, a man who spent his days mountain biking, wind surfing, and sailing, went looking for a night job in the food industry. He knew that if he planned to spend time with Kelly, a woman on the rise as a passionately dedicated chef, he needed to learn a trade in the restaurant business.

“There can only be one chef in the kitchen and I had to find my place somehow,” recounts Kushner. “So I got a job working the graveyard shift at Acme bakery, molding baguettes 10 hours a night.”

When the couple moved back East, Kushner avidly studied the bread and pastry business and eventually opened a highly successful European-style bakery. Meanwhile, Kelly won the 1999 James Beard Foundation, Northeast Award as chef of Old Chatham Shepherding Co. Inn and Restaurant in New York

In 1999, they bought the Rockland farm, which had been run as a restaurant named The Benner House, and opened their own restaurant, Primo, the following year. Kelly is the executive chef while Kushner serves as maitre d’ and sommelier. In 2003 Kelly partnered with JW Marriott to open a second Primo at the Grande Lakes Resort in Orlando, Florida; later that year a third Primo opened at Starr Pass Resort in Tucson, Arizona.

“We both work 16 hours a day,” said Kushner. “If you want to have a life and your partner is a dedicated chef, you have to be part of that business or you’ll never see her.”



The pre-Primo restaurant when it was a loosely adapted farmhouse.



Seating capacity was increased from 65 to 90 without making the building seem crowded.

result, there were uneven temperatures. With an old attic air conditioner and a hodgepodge of single units installed here and there, the building suffered uneven comfort issues, particularly on hot days.”

They were able to improve the envelope with insulation, both of the

glass and of the building itself, but a hoped-for geo-exchange system proved to be beyond pay-back justification. The thermostat controls on the new heating and air conditioning system they did install caused friction. Every site Haselton selected for this device,

Kushner rejected as aesthetically ruinous.

“Price would never give me a place where we could put a thermostat that would work well for comfort,” Haselton said. “So we finally devised a hidden remote sensor—and Price still doesn’t know where we put it.”

Throughout, Rockport Mechanical, as state-of-the-art energy engineers, delivered energy-efficient technologies as well as conservation practices for all existing lighting, heating, ventilation, air conditioning, plumbing, and office equipment. For example, the new dishwashing system saves many gallons of hot water; the heat from used (“grey”) dishwater is recycled via heat transfers to efficiently deliver steaming hot water to scour the next batch of dirty dishes. Even the garden was reworked: Primo now has two greenhouses, with one operated on biodiesel fuel.

The restaurant, which originally seated 65 guests, was enlarged to accom-

modate 90. This required doubling the number of rest rooms from two to four and insuring that one would be handicap accessible. All the rest room fixtures, and the systems that support them, are of cutting-edge environmental quality.

The building itself was made eight feet wider, and a new staircase was built that runs from the basement kitchen to the upstairs dining rooms. For all that, the building remains true to its original look, feel, and integrity.

One linchpin to the success of Primo's renovation was Chris Biggart, a carpenter, a master of many trades, and a Renaissance thinker who was able to smooth ruffled feathers while coming up with creative solutions to difficult problems. Kushner had also worked with him in the past, which helped.

"We worked our butts off," Biggart said. "After the electricians, plumbers, and carpenters left, that's when Price and I could get creative. One night we took some sheathing taken off the side of the

building, ran it through a planer to clean it up, and built the bar."

"This wood has history," said Melissa Kelly. "It's part of the Benner house. Why buy new wood when we already own a piece of beautiful wood with character and soul?"

"Another night we created a vaulted ceiling," Biggart said. They also installed the hammered-copper bar top. "The bar, like the rest of the building, really has that European sensibility the clients wanted. I pushed for plastering all the walls, not using sheet rock. We tried to stay away from joint compound, so it looks more rustic and not ultra smooth."

"Expanding the bar was a business

Sometimes, high-minded theory, when put to the test in a renovation, clashes mightily with functional realities.

decision," Kushner said. "Rockland is a diverse community, and there are people who live here year round and people who only visit in the summer. The bar has always been popular with locals because it's more approachable, more casual, and not just for special occasions."

Primo's bar grew from 8 to 24 seats with the renovation. A wine cellar sits behind it, able to maintain 700 bottles of white wine at perfect temperature.

The enlargement and renovation of a restaurant may not sound glamorous, but couched in the language of saving the planet, one piece of new technology at a time, Primo's owners and the people who worked with them can be proud of their cost-intensive, keep-the-carbon-footprint-small project. ✨

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Part of Primo's approach is to grow, on site, much of what the restaurant's patrons eat.