

Bocage Boys branch out, to open Standard Fare on Phila Street

Zac Denham, Clark Gale — whose joint nickname comes from their Champagne bar down the street — approach hospitality with fun

By Pam Abrams, *Times Union*

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Clark Gale, left, and Zachary Denham, aka “Bocage Boys,” are seen outside their new restaurant Standard Fare located on Phila Street on July 16 in Saratoga Springs. The new restaurant is across the street from their current one, Bocage. (Lori Van Buren/Times Union)

A guy walks into a bar. He’s with a girl, and they’ve stopped into Bocage, a classy, cozy Champagne bar on Phila Street in Saratoga Springs. “They sit down and the guy’s like, ‘I don’t do wine,’” says Zac Denham, co-owner of the bar, who describes this as a recurring scenario.

Denham, 39, and Clark Gale, 42, his partner in both business and life, are passionate restaurant owners, and fun people. They arrived in Saratoga five years ago, restaurant veterans from NYC intent on having a place (or two) of their own.

“We moved to Saratoga with no shortage of ideas,” Denham says. A Champagne bar was not supposed to come first, but after a false start with a jazz bar concept (including the pandemic, supply chain issues, and landlord concessions that fell through) a quirky little spot on Phila Street became available.

“We walked in,” Denham said, “looked at each other, and were like, ‘Oh God, this is the Champagne bar.’ It was just perfect.” The right spot, in the right location, at the right time. A bubbles bar.

Did they think such a niche concept would work? “Absolutely,” says Gale, who turned out to be right. “People here are educated, traveled, and open to new experiences. We didn’t invent the concept of a bubble-focused wine bar, but we did think it was something that people in Saratoga would inherently get.”

Tiina Loite, a Saratoga resident and former photo editor for the New York Times, got it. “Bocage is my ‘Cheers,’” she says, “but a few notches up. It’s attractive and elegant, but also unpretentious and comfortable. It beckons those who like Champagne and those who would like to like Champagne.”

Gale maintains that many people are knowledgeable about wine. “But they don’t know a lot about sparkling wine. Most of us don’t because, at least in this country, we don’t drink it that often.” Denham finishes the thought. “Their experience is, maybe, Champagne at a wedding, or the Moët brunch.”

At Bocage, the pair and their trained staff, stand ready to demystify and recommend. “We can offer you a pet-nat that’s like a sour beer or an IPA,” says Gale, of the minimal-intervention sparkling wine that’s enjoyed a recent resurgence. “Or a chilled and juicy, red Lambrusco that’s approachable for first-timers.”



Clark Gale, left, and Zachary Denham, aka “Bocage Boys,” are seen behind the bar at Bocage one of their restaurants located on Phila Street on July 16 in Saratoga Springs. Their new restaurant Standard Fare is nearly across the street from their current one. (Lori Van Buren/Times Union)

“People are often surprised at the breadth of sparkling wine,” says Gale. “There’s daytime Champagnes that are crisp and clean, and nighttime Champagnes that are fuller and more decadent.” The by-the-glass options, which range in price from \$15 to \$85 make it possible to

try new things and change with the seasons. Parties ordering by the bottle make up about a quarter of their sales.

Occasionally, Bocage holds special tasting events to give people the chance for a deeper dive into a region, like a recent evening featuring Portuguese wines. Other themes have included celebrations of spritzes and rosés. (You can join Bocage's mailing list for alerts.)

Saratoga is familiar ground for Gale, who grew up visiting his grandparents in Glens Falls. He went to concerts at SPAC, worked summer jobs at The Gap when it was at the Wilton Mall, and the Applebee's near there, too. Years later, and ready to leave New York City, Gale introduced Denham to Saratoga, who loved it immediately. "For some reason, it reminded me of New Orleans," he says.

When Denham was a kid himself, the Louisiana native wanted to be a song and dance man. He chased that dream to New York, where he had some success including touring with "Seussical the Musical." Using his degree from the Crane School of Music at SUNY Potsdam, Gale began his career in the music business to land a job at MTV. Both he and Denham segued to the hospitality business, each eventually managing successful restaurant brands. "I dabbled in every kind," Gale says. "Fast casual, upscale, casual fine dining, and Michelin-starred."



A shake called “Go Shawty, it’s your birthday” at Standard Fare owned by Clark Gale and Zachary Denham, aka “Bocage Boys,” located on Phila Street on July 16 in Saratoga Springs. (Lori Van Buren/Times Union)

The Bocage Boys, as they are fondly known, are about to open their second restaurant, Standard Fare, just across the street on Phila. The 40-seat restaurant will serve nostalgic classics like meatloaf, lasagna and layer cake. Executive Chef Connor Demarco, 32, takes the reins, assisted by sous chef Nicholas Shialdone. “The kids,” Denham calls them.

“I’m grateful to be on the ground floor, opening a brand-new operation in my hometown,” DeMarco says. “It is actually my first time leading the charge, and that’s a huge motivator.” DeMarco, who grew up in Saratoga Springs, aspires to eventually own his own business. “I see

Clark and Gale as role models,” he says. “It’s like a looking glass, because we are very much alike in our communication.”

Standard Fare opens in August in the renovated space occupied for 21 years by the creperie Ravenous. The new restaurant has a full bar (six of the seats are at the bar). The kitchen will open at 4 p.m. and close at midnight, a welcome option for late diners in town. The couple’s good taste (mid-century chic-modern decor), and sense of humor are also on display. The menu is filled with nostalgia (“The Blue Plate Special is back!” “Swedish Meatballs are cool again!”)

Recently, DeMarco and team previewed an inviting meatloaf, topped with a generous layer of fresh tomato relish and house-made lemon oil, served on a bed of herbed and creamy mashed potatoes. Other tidbits: Lil’ Oinkers for pig-in-blanket fans, a smoked pork chop, from Oscar’s Smokehouse, served with a squash pancake and potato rosti, a “lasagna,” put in quotation marks because it’s vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free. Baker Sam Pierre will contribute the layer cakes in three flavors: Toasted Coconut, Brooklyn Blackout, and Pineapple Upside Down.

And there’s a signature milkshake, ringed with Funfetti colored sprinkles, Fruity Pebbles mix-ins, and a super-wide straw. “I’m calling it the Go, Shawty, It’s Your Birthday,” Denham proclaims. “The young ones get it.”

With Bocage a success, and Standard Fare debuting, the couple is looking to the future in Saratoga. Gale recently joined the Board of Directors of Opera Saratoga. Denham runs a local celebrity-bio book group. And they’re hoping to start a family. “You get older and priorities change,” Gale says. Cheers to that.

Pam Abrams, based in Saratoga Springs, is food writer and producer of culinary events at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center and Franklin Square Market.