

A place for food, love and memories

Executive chef embraces nostalgia, fun at Zingerman's Cornman Farms

By **Kristen Jordan Shamus**
Detroit Free Press

Keiron Hales was already at work at 5 a.m. Monday in the kitchen of Zingerman's Cornman Farms, prepping for an intimate wedding of 30 people later that morning.

He whipped up breakfast before the big event, served on vintage floral china that has been in his family for generations, brought with him from his native England.

"We wanted a sense of nostalgia straight away with it, and it was a really nice, easy way to do it," Hales said of the delicate plates used at the 1834 farmhouse for weddings, banquets, corporate events and private dinners.

He talked as he cooked about what he was making, and about how a boy from Stoke Gabriel, a small village in the south of England, ended up as managing partner and executive chef of a Zingerman's-affiliated farmhouse in Michigan.

"We've got some pancakes — some blueberry and some savory — coming up right here, some fried eggs, poached eggs. Scrambled is coming," said Hales, 35, who lives in Chelsea with his wife and two young sons. "And those are homemade chipolatas, a British sausage."

Made of classic pork, chipolatas aren't easy to find in the U.S., so Hales makes them from scratch.

"And then you've got some beets picked out of the ground today and flash-pickled. Then you've got baked beans, and maple syrup bacon with our maple syrup from March. Then you've got some straw-

berry jam, some clotted cream, Lincoln Log pimento cheese, Bridgewater cheese. Then you've got bacon-fried bread, regular bread, eggy bread, carrots and potatoes from the farm, kale from the farm."

Using fresh ingredients mostly grown right outside the kitchen door is part of Hales' recipe for success. The house sits on 42 acres of working farm; most of the produce harvested is used in Zingerman's restaurants and catering businesses. A smaller chef's garden next to the farmhouse is where many of the herbs and produce are grown for use at Cornman Farms.

Hales draws inspiration from the cookbooks that his mother, Lindsay Hales, used when he was young, and from the fresh ingredients his family once grew on the other side of the Atlantic.

He brought back a rhubarb plant from his mother's garden. It now grows on the grounds, along with a bay tree from the property where his grandfather, Albert Whitworth, once lived. He planted some lovage, too. It's a celery-like vegetable his aunt Wendy Wotton used to put in her brandy on Sunday afternoons.

"She used to crush up some leaves, put them in a glass and then ask for a bottle of brandy. That's why we grow lovage," Hales said.

"My mom and dad, when they bought their house in Stoke Gabriel, planted a red maple. So I took a cutting from that and planted the tree in the backyard. They'd just got married and got their house when they planted it."



The farmhouse at Zingerman's Cornman Farms in Dexter, which hosts events, is nearly 200 years old.

His parents and grandparents have all passed away. So the plants, the china, the cookbooks, family photographs and a collection of postcards his great-grandparents wrote in the early 1900s are Hales' way of holding them close. They bring a warm and homey atmosphere to the farm, too.

"I'm not a religious person, so I really like the sense of remembering from the things that are left after you. And so like having those plants is having a sense of my parents and grandparents. The china, too. People will ask what happens if the plates get dropped or smashed. And it's like, 'Well, then they get dropped and smashed. At least they're not sitting around in a cupboard.'"

Hales remembers being the only boy in his grade growing up in the small village. He played bassoon, and loved music, art and cooking.

When he was 13, Hales got a scholarship to work in London with some of the country's top chefs, and a few years later, joined the Royal Academy of Culinary Arts, working in kitchens around the world and even cooking for Queen Elizabeth and three U.S. presidents.

It was by chance in 2008 that Hales met Ari Weinzweig, the co-founder of the Zingerman's empire who was visiting England. They hit it off, and Hales asked whether there might be work for him in Ann Arbor.

Two years later, Hales came to the U.S. and started working at Zingerman's Roadhouse as a sous chef. He met his now-wife, Joanie Mallory Hales, at the Roadhouse and quickly rose to head chef while drafting plans for what would soon become Zingerman's Cornman Farms.

It took two years and \$4.6 million to turn the Greek revival farmhouse and surrounding property into the venue it is today.

Trees line the drive leading up to the stately main house, which stands beside a garden. A balcony stretches over the wide front porch, which is studded with white wooden rockers. Upstairs, the house features several rooms for the bride, groom and wedding party to dress. There's space for smaller parties in the main living area.

Larger events can be hosted in the historic red barn on the property, which actually is two barns in one.

"They took down the entire barn, which was built in 1837, and shipped it to Ohio in a flat-bed," said Liza Olympitis, sales and marketing director for Zingerman's Cornman Farms. "All the wood was treated and restored, refurbished, and shipped back.

"After they razed the barn,

and going through the whole process and making it into an events venue that was all-season, they decided they needed to have it insulated. So they purchased a neighboring barn that was built around the same time.

"So it's a barn inside of a barn. They put in air-conditioning, heating, fireplaces, an elevator. But the original barn was put back together with all the original pegs and everything. So the inside is basically the original structure."

That includes massive beams that were hand-cut with axes that are connected not by nails or bolts, but by wooden pegs. The barn's lower level features a bar and more seating space.

Not too far away is a white tent pavilion that can be heated when there's a nip in the air, allowing the farm to stretch the season well into November. The tent pavilion is primarily used for larger events of up to 300 plated dinner guests or up to 400 for a strolling service.

Hales does the cooking for events with 50 or fewer people. For larger events, three catering partners — Zingerman's Roadhouse Catering, Zingerman's Catering and Events and Forte Belanger in Troy — are brought in to handle the food, Olympitis said.

That formula, they've found, allows Hales to cook more creatively.

"For us, it's defining our boundaries around what we do well," said Olympitis. "And I think for Kieron, private dining and keeping it to 50 people allows us to do cool fun, smaller events, weddings, anniversaries."

When he's cooking for a group larger than 50, the menu is more rigid out of necessity.

"I like being able to wake up in the morning and change the menu. ... I like walking out in the garden" and choosing from the herbs, fruit and vegetables that are at their peak. "It's liberating in the morning,

Detroit Free Press/Metro Detroit Chevy Dealers Top 10 Takeover: Flowers of Vietnam at Zingerman's Cornman Farms

Flowers of Vietnam Chef George Azar is no stranger to beautiful places.

Last spring, after shuttering his popular Vietnamese restaurant inside southwest Detroit's Vernor Coney Island for renovations, Azar spent nearly two months cooking with the team of Noma — one of the world's best restaurants — during their pop-up in the beachside paradise of Tulum, Mexico.

Azar is now back in Detroit and basking in the glory of his restaurant being named No. 3 on the Free Press' annual Best New Restaurants list, as well as one of GQ's Best New Restaurants in the country. Azar's early success cooking out of an old Coney Island proved a bit surprising — and unsustainable for the tiny kitchen. Flowers of Vietnam is now in the midst of serious renovations, so for Azar's Top 10 Takeover dinner on Aug. 20, he has chosen the grounds of Zingerman's Cornman Farms in Dexter.

Tickets are \$78 (includes taxes, gratuity and donation to Forgotten Harvest), and go on sale Friday at noon at freep.com.

When you cook for 300 people, you can't do that, and it's not as much fun."

He looked around the kitchen of the nearly 200-year-old house and said: "You couldn't have said I would land in Michigan when I was starting my job. When I was 13, and just starting out, I wanted to be a Michelin-star chef known by chefs. I didn't care about anyone else; I just wanted to be respected by my peers. So I was traveling, working, heading to that goal."

But now, Michigan is home. "Some of the things we do at this place is celebrate some of the quirky or weird things that people don't think about," Hales said. He loves bringing flavors from around the world and melding them to create new dishes.

"It is a melting pot, and we have the ability to reintroduce some traditional English things to get bastardized over the next 200 years," he said. "It's more ideas, more fun memories in food."

He pointed at the plate of chipolata on the counter.

"That is a fun memory sausage," he said, smiling. "It is."

And that's the goal at Zingerman's Cornman Farms. It's an idyllic country setting where memories are made, and where the food is meant to stand out just as much as the scenery.

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