

[GOING OUT]

RESTAURANTS

BY MAGGIE KELLY
PHOTO BY TATE CARLSON



Lynn Gordon, owner of the French Meadow Bakery and Café, raises a glass to Saint Paul.

Over the River

The first certified organic bakery in the nation, French Meadow Bakery and Café has roots in Saint Paul.

FOR YEARS, Uptown Minneapolis enjoyed the distinction of being the only home to the French Meadow Bakery and Café, forcing Saint Paul residents craving organic, local dishes to jump across the river. But in 2014, many wishes were granted when its second Twin Cities location opened on Grand Avenue near Macalester College.

The move to the capital city was like a homecoming for owner and Saint Paul native Lynn Gordon, who started French Meadow Bakery in 1985 after years of researching healthy food options—and grieving.

When she was 15 years old, Gordon lost her mother to cancer and quickly became aware of the phrase, "You are what you eat." "I thought I was probably a candidate to follow in my mother's footsteps and perhaps not have the longest life we all desire and aspire to," Gordon says. "So I started [studying and] eating really healthy." She went on to study at the Kushi Institute in Massachusetts, became a macrobiotic cooking teacher (macrobiotic diets are generally vegetarian and cut out refined and processed foods) and worked specifically with individuals who had cancer.

While cancer was the reason for her introduction to cooking, the inspiration for the bakery came after attending the French Meadows macrobiotic summer camp in California in 1983, where Gordon started baking.

From there, she found a space on Lyndale Avenue in Minneapolis to open French Meadow Bakery, the first certified organic bakery in the United States.

At first exclusively shipping breads across the country, demand from customers led to Gordon opening the café in 1987, with used library chairs at the tables.

"We didn't even have a cash register," Gordon says, because she didn't want to invest much money into something she wasn't sure would work. But after just the first day it was clear people were interested in this organic café, even at a time when consumers didn't know what the word "organic" meant.

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—Lynn Gordon, owner

"I would do demos at the Byerly's, because we were selling bread [there] and people wanted to know what organic was," she says. "There were enough people [who] were so starved for good vegetarian food or good vegan food," and wanted to go out to eat with family members who maybe wanted options like salmon or free-range chicken. It was the first place where every diet could be satisfied—and the food was good.

Through the years, French Meadow gained a following across the country. Its bread is served in restaurants from coast to coast, and a few celebrities have brought it extra attention, Gordon says: "Jackson Browne calls me the rock star of bread," and Scarlett Johansson was caught raving about the café after she dated actor and Twin Cities native Josh Hartnett.

Today, aside from adding a dinner menu and the option of beer and wine, not much has changed at French Meadow. "We hand-roll our pasta, and make all our own dressings and sauces. We always have. We don't know any other way," Gordon says.

This dedication has created quite the following, and the Grand Avenue location was easily welcomed into the neighborhood.

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"We got a call from someone who was working at the coffee shop here," Gordon says. The owner of the shop said, "I think it would be perfect to have a French Meadow in this space."

Macalester College owns the building and, after Gordon approached them, they were excited to have the cafe as an addition to the neighborhood. "They're such lovely people," Gordon says of Macalester officials. "They're such good citizens, and they take good care of this neighborhood." And the college president is a fan of French Meadow's black and white cookie from the bakery.

Each week there are three new specials developed by the chef and added to the menu: one pasta dish, one fish or seafood dish, and one vegan dish. These can be counted among French Meadow classics, including Gordon's favorite: the Prince Edward Island mussels with a grilled baguette (\$14).

When it comes to French Meadow, the mission of organic and local doesn't stop at the food and 20 beers on tap. The chairs and tables feature details done by local iron artist Lisa Elias. The style contributes to the casual-yet-classy, rustic look of the restaurant, which manager Khristine Vannelli Leeman says is part of why French Meadow is such a good first-date spot. "[We get] a lot of blind dates here," Leeman says. The large front windows make for a beautiful night scene, and in the summer the back patio is perfect with its cozy booths—yes, booths on the patio—and twinkle lights on the trees.

Though the Grand Avenue location is just over a year old, its charm and reputation have cemented its status in the city. "I grew up in Saint Paul," Leeman says, "and this [location] really embodies Saint Paul." //

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