

Cape Cod's dining scene is on fire. It's not making the housing crisis any easier.

By **Andrea McHugh** Globe correspondent, Updated July 20, 2026, 5:30 a.m.



Dishes at Leonessa in Yarmouth Port, which opened in 2023. It's one of several ambitious restaurants changing the dining scene on Cape Cod. LIDIA HRISTOVA

Cape Cod's culinary reputation may have been built on [lobster rolls](#) and chowder, but a new wave of chefs and restaurateurs is ushering in a more sophisticated era.

While clam shacks and [ice cream stands](#) still line the roadside, those no longer tell the whole story of the Cape's dining scene. Recently, restaurants have opened across the Cape, many by acclaimed chefs who have moved here from other US cities, with tasting menus, sophisticated wine lists, and high-octane cocktails. Though polished, the energy at these newcomers isn't pretentious; the attire is more boat shoes than jacket and tie. It's still Cape Cod, after all.

But this increasingly refined dining scene comes with its own set of complications. For hospitality workers, the [Cape's growing housing crisis](#) is making it more difficult to find a place to live. And these restaurants' higher price tags coincide with an ever-more-unaffordable cost of living, especially when it comes to food costs. The Consumer Price Index for May 2026 reports that menu prices nationwide are up 3.5 percent since last year, while the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports average menu prices increased 31 percent between February 2020 and April 2025.

The rise of elevated but approachable dining is emblematic of many of the changes that Cape Cod has undergone in recent years. The pandemic era saw an influx of [second homeowners](#) becoming full-time or longer-term residents, bringing with them demand for more dining options.



Kim Prokoshyn, who previously led high-profile wine programs at New York restaurants, conducts a wine class at Dunn & Sons in Yarmouth Port. DUNN HOSPITALITY

The pandemic also saw a talent redistribution throughout the nation. In an industry known for embracing “the grind,” many chefs and restaurant workers relocated to places like Cape Cod in order to prioritize quality of life.

That was the motivation for Diego Mota and Taylor Amara, who met working in Boston restaurants — he as a chef, she as a manager — and considered opening a place of their own there. Mota had risen through the ranks at Towne Stove and Spirits in the Back Bay under chef Lydia Shire and sharpened his skills at The Bancroft in Burlington. But Amara, a Chatham native, said wanting to be near aging parents brought them to the Cape. The husband-and-wife team sensed an unmet demand for a sophisticated, year-round, Mid-Cape restaurant.

“We noticed that there weren’t a lot of year-round restaurants open, and there was really nowhere to go,” said Amara. “As locals ourselves, we were craving that.”





A server grates cheese over pasta at Leonessa in Yarmouth Port. LIDIA HRISTOVA

The couple opened [Leonessa](#), a 96-seat restaurant in Yarmouth Port, in 2023 with 33 employees. It feels like a historic home, cozy with exposed beams, wainscoting, and a small but vibey bar. Remaining open through the winter allows the kitchen to be consistent while staff can pursue year-round housing inventory.

In March, when Robert Rando landed the executive chef position at [Cuvée Bistro](#) at Chatham Inn, his first priority was securing a place to live. “Housing is always very scarce, and I experienced that a lot when I was on Nantucket. I knew what I was getting into,” he said.



Dessert at Cuvée Bistro in Chatham. ANDREA MCHUGH FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Under Rando's leadership, the restaurant has unveiled a more approachable concept, trading its former multicourse tasting menu for à la carte "elevated coastal" cuisine. Dishes include lobster ricotta cavatelli and bouillabaisse with littlenecks, shrimp, scallops, mussels, and cod cheeks in saffron-tomato broth. Relatively few goods are brought in from afar, Rando said. A fish and lobster purveyor is just down the road, and local oysters have been crowd pleasers. The local sourcing "gives a guest a really good idea of what we're putting in front of them and puts them in touch with where they are, and the terroir," Rando said.

Two of the Cape's highest-profile new restaurateurs, Mick and Charlotte Formichella, honed their craft at lauded restaurants in Portland, Ore. When they returned to Charlotte's native Cape Cod, they enjoyed plenty of clam chowder and lobster rolls, but they also quickly sensed a growing appetite for boundary-pushing fare. "For the longest time, the Cape hasn't been a foodie destination, but I felt like it deserved something a little bit higher, pushing the envelope a little bit," Mick said.

The kitchen at Lune in Dennis Port. ANDREA MCHUGH FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The couple opened [Lune](#) as a pop-up in 2023 before opening a brick-and-mortar in Dennis Port in 2024. Less than a year later, the restaurant was a [James Beard Award Best New Restaurant Northeast](#) semifinalist — the first Cape Cod restaurant recognized by the awards.

"People are seeing now that there is a market for a higher experience," said Mick. In Lune's small, century-old building, diners sit just steps from the open kitchen preparing the eight-course, \$145 tasting menu. (The Formichellas offer an à la carte menu a few nights a week.) Dishes change nightly and highlight seasonal ingredients like locally landed halibut that they confit and serve in a buttery sauce with braised greens and mussels.

The dining room at Lune in Dennis Port. JOE NAVAS

Charlotte leads Lune's beverage program, pairing dishes with organic and biodynamic wines she hadn't previously seen on the Cape. (The tasting menu's optional wine pairing costs \$75.) "My motto is small producers, unspoken grapes, unspoken regions, looking for highly sustainable practices," she said, "but also wines that are pushing the boundaries of what is possible with nature right now," citing the impact of climate change on the wine industry. Examples include Osmote, a low-intervention producer from the Finger Lakes, and Charlopin Tissier, a small estate in Marsannay, on the northern tip of Burgundy's Cote de Nuits.

To sustain the local hospitality pipeline, the Formichellas work with culinary arts students at Cape Cod Community College and Cape Cod Regional Technical High School. But in the meantime, [hiring can have its hurdles](#). Earlier this year, they were set to hire a chef from California, but despite tapping into their network of friends and family, they ultimately lost the candidate when they couldn't secure housing.

Adam and Erica Dunn opened [The Pheasant](#) just ahead of the pandemic. Previously, Adam owned a wholesale seafood and raw bar restaurant in Brooklyn, but the two were eager to settle somewhere new.

"We were coming up to the Cape all the time and we were looking for restaurants ... with a high bar for food and hospitality, and felt like it wasn't here," said Adam. "There were a lot of restaurants that were nostalgic places, been around for a long time, but they're heavily seasonal, and you have a captive audience in the summer, but they weren't necessarily delivering on what they could be."

Erica and Adam Dunn, who own a handful of bars and restaurants on Cape Cod. DUNN HOSPITALITY

Encouraged by the reception to The Pheasant's wine list, which touted small producers, the couple opened [Dunn & Sons](#) wine shop in Yarmouth Port in late 2022. Last year, they opened [Baleine Wine Bar](#) in Dennis Port.

“A couple of our key team members were New York City and Boston transplants that during the pandemic left their hospitality jobs in pretty serious food and beverage positions and had family on the Cape,” said Adam. “I think we found a little community of like-minded folks who left the cities ... and I think we started finding each other.”

Chef Jason Montigel, who opened [Clean Slate Eatery](#) in West Dennis in 2016, has seen new talent swell over the past decade. “There’s definitely more people taking a chance to elevate the dining scene, but I feel like there’s always been talent here,” he said. “They just kind of get drowned out by the lobster rolls, the fried clams.”

At just 16 seats, Clean Slate feels more like a private dining experience than a restaurant. Seasonal produce and local fish, shellfish, and courses like Wagyu sirloin constitute the \$135 six-course “plus surprises” tasting menu. But like all chefs, Montigel is navigating fluctuating food costs and their implications for his restaurant’s price point. He used to pay around \$16-\$18 a pound for scallops, “which I thought was expensive,” he said. “Now I pay \$38-\$52 a pound.”

Montigel acknowledges that housing challenges are significantly affecting the local restaurant industry, but argues that it’s not unique to the Cape. “Staffing is an issue everywhere, and I think it goes beyond just the housing crisis on the Cape,” he said. “As far as restaurant workers go, I think people just realize the business is not as appealing as it used to be.”

But there’s no denying the severity of the crisis on the Cape. One in 10 homes here is a short-term rental, [according to the state](#). The median household income of Barnstable County is under \$100,000, the [Cape Cod Commission reports](#), while the annual median sales price of a single-family home here was \$789,500 in 2025 — an 82 percent increase since 2019.

Love Farms has a brewery-type feel. LOVE FARMS

One restaurant group took housing challenges into its own hands. Since 2019, John McCarthy and his business partners have grown Pelham Hospitality into a local empire with three hotels and five restaurants employing more than 400 workers, including the newly opened [Love Farms](#) in West Dennis. As the company expanded, it bought and renovated a hotel with kitchenettes and rented additional properties to provide seasonal workforce housing. “We would not be able to operate anywhere near the level we do without that place,” McCarthy said. “It would be a humongous struggle.”

Spanning 10 acres, Love Farms feels like a brewery, with live music, fire pits, and an indoor-outdoor flow. But just beyond the 10,000-square-foot patio, a regenerative farm grows vegetables and herbs alongside heritage-breed pigs and chickens. Love Farms hosts monthly harvest dinners where guests tour the growing fields and executive chef Kevin Curtin, formerly of Chatham Bars Inn, commands a five-course meal showcasing the farm’s bounty.

“People are being really considerate with where they spend their money. You’ve got to dial in and offer something a little bit different,” said Pelham’s managing director, Heather McCarthy. Across the Cape, “everything’s getting a little spruced up, and there’s more energy and capital improvement locally that we did not see for a long time. For so long, the Cape just didn’t change.”

A meal at Love Farms in West Dennis. LOVE FARMS

It’s certainly changing now, thanks to newcomers like [Baedega](#) in Provincetown, a speakeasy-style cocktail lounge with small plates. Chef Christina Scifo said longtime fixtures like The Lobster Pot and The Mayflower Cafe absolutely have their place, but she saw an opportunity to bring an ingredient-driven experience to Commercial Street.

“It’s not stuffy. We call it ‘fine dining technique,’ but super casual and fun,” Scifo said. Filled with antiques, Baedega feels like an eclectic dinner party. “It’s all about creating a space where nothing else is important in that moment but the people that you’ve gathered around your table,” said cofounder Tracy Foley.

The beloved clam shacks aren't going anywhere, but Cape Cod is making room for a new generation of chefs and restaurateurs who are reshaping what it means to dine here.

[Show 29 comments](#)

©2026 Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC