



# FARMHOUSE CHICAGO

NORA GAINER

This farm-to-table craft tavern provides a true taste of the Midwest

BY SARAH OSTERMAN • ASHTON RAY HANSEN PHOTOGRAPH (ABOVE)

**W**armth. Salvaged wood. Grass-fed burgers. Wisconsin cheese curds. A Flywheel beer by Metropolitan. To Nora Gainer, co-owner of Farmhouse Chicago, that's what it feels, looks and tastes like to be Midwestern.

While she's now a "green foodie," Nora Gainer admits to earlier days when she'd be at her office desk ensconced behind 12 Styrofoam cups of coffee. Two children and a lot of research later, she's altered her lifestyle to revolve around everything local and organic.

Apparently, Ms. Gainer's also mastered the art of time management since she's director of tourism marketing at The Art Institute of Chicago. After graduating from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign with a degree in art history, Ms. Gainer worked on special exhibitions at The Art Institute for a year, spent time in the hospitality business from

1995 to 2010 and eventually returned to her initial employer. "I love Chicago, so being at the most iconic museum and having it be my job to get other people to go there is fantastic," she reflects.

Growing up on the Southside as one of six children, Ms. Gainer seems the appropriate person to launch a Midwestern-based craft tavern. Since opening in September 2011 at 228 West Chicago Avenue, Farmhouse Chicago's "farm to tavern" concept connects regional farmers, brewers, distillers and vintners to Chicagoans.

"What's so exciting about Farmhouse is that we take the desire to support local farmers and create a business around it," says Ms. Gainer, who's one of Farmhouse's four owners, which include her husband, Ferdia Doherty, and another couple, Molly McCombe and TJ Callahan.

Inspired by places like Lula Cafe and Uncommon Ground, and wanting to support local producers such as Harvest Moon Farms, the couples



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1. Pan Roasted Lake Superior Whitefish, Forest Mushrooms, Fava Bean & Nueske's Bacon Beer Ragout. Ashton Ray Hansen Photograph
2. House Cured Beef Jerky and Farmhouse Roasted Nuts. Kevin Anderson Photograph
3. Chicken Pot Pie Pastie with Nueske's Smoked Ham, Root Vegetables, Wilted Chard and Herbed White Country Gravy. Kevin Anderson Photograph

decided to move forward with their Midwestern concept, focusing on Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin and Indiana. "Our mission is to provide a platform where local products and people meet, and to do it in a friendly, non-hipster, accessible environment," shares Ms. Gainer. "We don't take ourselves seriously except when it comes to customer satisfaction."

It's true – the servers and bartenders are extremely knowledgeable about the menu, whether they're describing a rare vegetable or recommending a New Holland Black Hatter craft beer. The staff also takes pride in the historical décor, 85 percent of which is from Chicago and salvaged, including stained glass windows from an old "Charlie's Ale House" and an authentic Bevador from the 1930s that holds 500 bottled beers.

To improve her own product familiarity and gain ideas, Ms. Gainer embarks on exploratory trips with her co-owners and Farmhouse's chef, Eric Mansavage, to places like Traverse City, Michigan, and Bloomington, Indiana, where they learn about local history and food. After gathering ideas, they host dinners at the restaurant based on each location's culinary traditions.

"We work with these Midwestern destinations and figure out a way to spread the regional education," says Ms. Gainer, who believes this will

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increase awareness and people's involvement, especially when the farmers are in trouble, as they've been during the drought crisis.

One of those struggling is Harvest Moon Farms, where Farmhouse buys land each season for produce. In August, Farmhouse hosted "Drafts for Drought," during which Chicago breweries, notably Red Street, donated barrels and 50 percent of every sale went toward Harvest Moon Farms.

Sitting in a booth at Farmhouse, sipping a sparkling water, Ms. Gainer's calm demeanor juxtaposes her stories of scheduling chaos. If anything, her two jobs have imbued her with an obvious gratitude toward life. After tasting a fresh cherry tomato from Farmhouse's new rooftop garden, Ms. Gainer exclaims, "It tastes just like candy," leaving genuine delight hovering in the air. ■

Ms. Gainer is wearing apparel by Roberto Pesce Chicago. Hair by Marina/Fuga Italian Escape Salon & Spa. Makeup by Valencia/Fuga Italian Escape Salon & Spa