



Dinette serves up a quaint and casual open-concept dining experience in Pittsburgh.

Simply Sustainable

Chef Sonja Finn, owner of Dinette in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, cooks with a love for clean foods and sustainable practices.

BY PETER AGOSTINELLI, PHOTOGRAPHY BY LAURA PETRILLA

Some chefs dazzle guests with colossal menus, highly styled dining rooms and fancy food presentations. After the first few bites, the big concepts that lured curious eaters often fail to meet high expectations.

Others in the hospitality business bank on a transparent appeal. They find ways to charm customers – and keep them coming back – with clean flavors, freshness and expressions of the seasons. These are chefs who wear their ingredient-driven hearts on the sleeves of their chef jackets.

Such clarity seems to lie at the heart of Pittsburgh chef Sonja Finn and her neighborhood restaurant Dinette. Finn's food is at once familiar yet engaging. It's also the visible core of her business. From vegetable-based starters and eclectic salads to incredibly light pizzas showcasing boldness through moderation, the 31-year-old chef serves an ever-changing menu that proves that simple is not necessarily simplistic.

Finn's deep respect for high-quality vegetables, fruits and other natural foods is immediately notable. It's a

lesson her parents taught her. "They believe strongly in 'wasted calories,'" she says. "But their idea is a bit different from most people. My dad won't eat a flavorless winter tomato, and neither will I, because that is wasted calories."

That's why Finn suggests that home cooks and chefs alike scout out the best seasonal produce and other high-quality components. "In the end you will be much more satisfied, and you will never find yourself at a drive-through for a fast-food burger or munching on reheated frozen hors d'oeuvres at a cocktail party," she says. "You will instead wait until you find something better. It keeps you fit without ever sacrificing anything you love."

Culinary and other beginnings

These convictions took root as Finn worked in California restaurants after earning degrees at both Columbia University in New York City and the Culinary Institute of America in New York's Hudson Valley. After an externship in North Carolina, her stint on the West Coast included kitchen jobs in San Francisco, where she refined a cooking approach packing big, bright flavors without the weight of common restaurant dishes.

But Finn missed life in the eastern United States. A few years ago she moved back east with her boyfriend (now her husband) to North Carolina's Durham/Chapel Hill area and later to Maryland's eastern shore, where she assisted a culinary school friend with the launch of a new restaurant. That's when Finn began to consider opening her own restaurant, a goal she had set as a culinary professional working her way up in professional kitchens.

Raised in Pittsburgh, Finn then decided to return to the "Steel City," which has enjoyed a successful civic reinvention as an old industrial city rebuilt on health care, technology and higher education industries. It's where she connected with others working in neighborhood redevelopment initiatives. Finn soon landed in the East Liberty, a once-blighted neighborhood in Pittsburgh's east end. She settled on a site near a new Whole Foods Market, a bookstore and other attractions and went to work.

After writing her business plan, the young chef secured small-business financing and launched the development of her new restaurant. She opened Dinette in October 2008 and hasn't looked back. (Finn did make one concession with a vacation this past summer after she and her husband celebrated their honeymoon in Italy.)

A focus on fresh foods

From its opening day, Dinette's small menu has focused on palate-friendly appetizers centered largely around fresh vegetables, herbs and cheeses. Diners may also find salt-cured salumi, Italian delicacies Finn sources from a local specialty shop. Seasonal salads are based on the best local greens and other vegetables sourced through Penn's Corner Farmers' Alliance, a partnership of producers in western Pennsylvania who sell through the cooperative to restaurants and members of a CSA (community-supported agriculture) organization.

Finn scours Pittsburgh for the best meats and specialty products she and her team can find for their open kitchen. She says home cooks can shop the same way when foraging for the best

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Top: Chef Sonja Finn serves a pizza with grilled radicchio, goat cheese, fresh mozzarella and a niçoise olive vinaigrette. **Above:** Finn harvests fresh vegetables and herbs in Dinette's rooftop garden. **Bottom:** Diners enjoy fresh starters like this watermelon salad with "rooftop" arugula, goat's milk feta, niçoise olive vinaigrette and mint.





Dinette chef
Sonja Finn's
exclusive recipe
for Clean Eating

Mixed Vegetable Farro Salad

WITH CHILE-MINT VINAIGRETTE

Serves 8.

INGREDIENTS:

FARRO

- 1¼ cups semi-pearled farro, rinsed
- 1 tsp sea salt
- 2 tsp extra-virgin olive oil

VINAIGRETTE

- ½ Thai bird chile, thinly sliced
- 1 tsp chopped mint
- 1 tbsp champagne vinegar
- 1½ tbsp low-fat buttermilk
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- Sea salt, to taste

SALAD

- 1 medium red onion, sliced
- 1 cucumber, peeled and sliced into half moons
- Sea salt, to taste
- 2 heads butter lettuce, washed and leaves separated
- 2 avocados, pitted, peeled and sliced

INSTRUCTIONS:

ONE: Prepare farro: In a 6-qt stock pot, bring 12 cups water, farro and salt to a boil and cook for 25 to 30 minutes, until tender. Drain farro and toss with oil. Spread out on a baking tray and let cool to room temperature.

TWO: Prepare vinaigrette: In a small bowl, combine ingredients and whisk together. Let rest in refrigerator for at least 30 minutes to meld flavors. (**NOTE:** Vinaigrette does not need to emulsify.)

THREE: Assemble salad: In a large mixing bowl, add farro, onion, cucumber, salt and vinaigrette. Toss until everything is well coated. Add lettuce and avocados and toss a few more times. Taste and adjust seasoning, if needed. Divide among 8 salad plates and serve.

Nutrients per ¾-cup serving: Calories: 269, Total Fat: 15 g, Sat. Fat: 2 g, Monounsaturated Fat: 11 g, Polyunsaturated Fat: 2 g, Carbs: 28 g, Fiber: 6 g, Sugars: 2 g, Protein: 6 g, Sodium: 642 mg, Cholesterol: 0 mg

The hidden gems in this meal

Thai bird chile: Capsaicin, the fiery phytochemical in chiles and peppers, is believed to increase metabolic rate. According to the *International*

Journal of Obesity, a diminished appetite and increased energy levels were observed in participants who ate hot peppers.

Farro: High in protein, fiber and antioxidants; rich in magnesium, niacin, zinc and iron. (Often tolerable for people with gluten allergies, too.)

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JODI PRUDGE, FOOD STYLING BY MADELINE JOHARI, PROP STYLING BY MADELINE JOHARI



Left: Finn cooks for Dinette's guests in an open kitchen. **Above:** An appetizer of grilled homegrown shishito peppers, goat cheese, fried almonds and sea salt is one of the chef's favorite appetizers to prepare and enjoy.

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products. For example, Finn sources the cured meats at Pittsburgh's Parma Sausage Company, a butcher shop in the Strip District wholesale market, and specialty ingredients through Pennsylvania Macaroni Company (known to locals simply as "Penn Mac"), which teems with spices, specialty olive oils and cheeses from European and domestic producers. And coffee roaster La Prima Espresso Company, a local success story also in the Strip District, supplies Dinette with fresh beans for espresso.

But the main star at Dinette may be the fresh pizzas Finn bakes to order in her energy-efficient pizza oven. The single-serving pies are thin yet satisfying and offer the goodness of simplicity found in traditional Italian pizzas – seasonal toppings used sparingly to achieve a balance that enhances a crust without subtracting from its lightness. (A light hand can produce fine results with quality foods, Finn says. Witness any simple dish with big flavors from fresh herbs and a squeeze of lemon juice.)

Finn strives to reach another sort of balance with energy consumption. The oven that cranks out Dinette's signature pizzas has an efficient stone design that consumes less power while still hitting the high temperatures critical for baking the pizzas and Finn's *grissini*, the slender breadsticks she makes daily.

It doesn't stop there. Finn recently installed a "green" rooftop garden to

supplement her produce stock. Dinette also bypasses bottled water, a product often cited as an enormous waste of fossil fuels and packaging materials. Guests instead enjoy water filtered through an in-house system and reserved in the restaurant's recyclable glass bottles. Guests can order "still" water or bubbly water carbonated with an in-house carbonation unit.

"A lot of things we do – using recycled paper products, installing an on-demand water heater, bottling and carbonating our own water – are actually more expensive, but we choose to spend the extra money because it is the responsible thing to do," Finn says.

That philosophy for the most part sums up the model Dinette has implemented from day one: Use high-quality whole foods for dishes based on simplicity and lightness. Adhere closely to seasonality and offer flavor combinations that respect tradition while cultivating new ground. Take time to partner with local farmers who share similar values in producing natural foods of the highest quality possible.

"It's not easy, but it's simple," Finn says. "I find the best ingredients I can and treat them with respect. I treat our team with the same respect. And we work together to serve the best food we know how to our customers."

Fortunately for Finn and the entire Dinette team, it's an approach that pays off. Bite by bite, guests continue to return for more.

Web Bonus! Chef Sonja Finn shares her how-to tips for cooking with fresh, seasonal ingredients. Visit cleaneatingmag.com/whatsfresh.

Other Places to Eat Clean in Pittsburgh

Pittsburgh – despite its industrial past – is a contemporary city with many options for adventurous clean eaters. Here are three more restaurants to consider when exploring the "Steel City."

LEGUME BISTRO

WHERE: Pittsburgh (Regent Square)

CHEF/CO-OWNER: Trevett Hooper

Legume's proprietors call the Regent Square restaurant "a little family-run bistro," and that's as good of a description as any. The difference at Legume is a frequently changing menu that's small in size but big on local produce and meats. They even offer vegetarian menu options.

legumbistro.com

SALT OF THE EARTH

WHERE: Pittsburgh (Garfield)

CHEF/OWNER: Kevin Sousa

Pittsburgh chef Kevin Sousa and architects/co-owners Doug and Liza Cruze launched Salt of the Earth in 2010 to further enrich the city's eclectic dining scene. Chef Sousa focuses on local and seasonal products that he forages as much as possible from nearby sources. Salt's menu features a few recurring staples but offers guests a rotation of foods and preparation styles, including some vegetarian dishes. The environment is minimalist and modern with options for communal seating as well as reservation-only tables for small parties on a separate mezzanine level.

saltpgh.com

THE CAFÉ AT THE FRICK

WHERE: Pittsburgh (Point Breeze)

CHEF: Jeremy Waybright

The Café at the Frick is a solid lunch and afternoon tea option on the grounds of the Frick Art & Historical Center in Pittsburgh's Point Breeze neighborhood. The Café at the Frick offers salads, sandwiches and other light fare, plus special tea blends and house-crafted desserts. The Frick's onsite greenhouse provides seasonal crops for the cafe and several area restaurant kitchens.

frickart.org/start/cafe.php ©