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WESTJETMAGAZINE

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CHEF INSIDER

California native Flynn McGarry—lanky and soft-spoken with a mess of curly strawberry-blonde hair—became so obsessed with cooking when he was 12 years old, he convinced his parents to install a makeshift kitchen inside his bedroom. He started hosting elaborate dinners for family and friends—using recipes inspired by *The French Laundry* and *Alinea* cookbooks—and, later, launched a supper club dubbed Eureka from inside his San Fernando Valley home.

By 16, he had taken his dinners on the road, staging them at some of the most prestigious kitchens around the world (Ray's in Los Angeles, Chicago's Alinea, Eleven Madison Park in Manhattan), and even cooked for the Obamas.

Earlier this year, McGarry opened his first brick-and-mortar restaurant, Gem, in New York City's Lower East Side. Now, just a few months shy of his 20th birthday, he is shaking off his teenage nicknames—*wunderkind*, prodigy, kitchen whiz—for the far simpler title of chef.

Divided into separate rooms, Gem is accented by vintage rugs, mustard-yellow banquettes and mid-century modern furniture, creating a warm, apartment-like atmosphere for diners.

"It's like a house, [rather than] a restaurant. The kitchen is in the din-



A GEM AMONG NYC'S FINEST

No longer a *wunderkind*, 19-year-old Flynn McGarry is now a chef

ing room. People are coming to see me and sample my food, so it's a personal [dining experience] in that way," says McGarry, perched on a wooden chair inside his restaurant. "Especially in New York, where you have such tiny apartments, everyone is looking for a sense of home and that's what we're tapping into."

By day, the Living Room space is abuzz with locals enjoying house-

made pastries and custom coffees made with beans from small-batch roasters; at night, the 18-person Dining Room opens for a prix-fixe reservations-only tasting menu, with seatings at 6 and 9 p.m. The US\$155 multi-course meal—with an optional \$100 beverage pairing—features between 12 to 15 dishes and focuses on seasonal ingredients sourced from a farmers' market.

Creating his signature aged-beet dish, which, at first glance, could easily be mistaken for slices of steak, requires McGarry to use a parade of techniques. The beets are first smoked and braised in their own juices, then dehydrated and roasted, and finally grilled. To serve, they are glazed in a rich brown butter-and-beet sauce and placed atop a bed of creamed beet greens.

"The food has become simpler in a lot of ways, with a focus on making delicious food versus impressive food," he explains. "I don't want the menu to feel too precise. We still want to be a little rough around the edges."

While his restaurant is still a fine-dining affair—McGarry has a pair of tweezers in his apron that he uses to place edible flowers onto smoky spring peas and set trout roe atop homemade tofu when he is plating dishes—there are no white tablecloths and classic Michael Jackson songs play in the background while bottles of wine sit on a vintage Danish bar cart.

After the savoury main courses, diners move into the more intimate café for dessert, a variety of light palate-cleansers such as alphonso mango sorbet and elderflower-infused strawberries.

"Cooking is my creative outlet, that's why I love it. There's always something new to learn or explore," says McGarry. —Patty Lee

MCGARRY'S LOWER EAST SIDE FAVOURITES

WU'S WONTON KING

"This is my go-to Chinese spot. I always get the salt and pepper squid, Peking duck or suckling pig."



CONTRA AND WILDAIR

"Innovative, youthful [menus like these] set a precedent for restaurants opening on the LES."



CERVO'S

"They have the type of food I love to eat—bright, clean flavours, lots of fish and seafood."

