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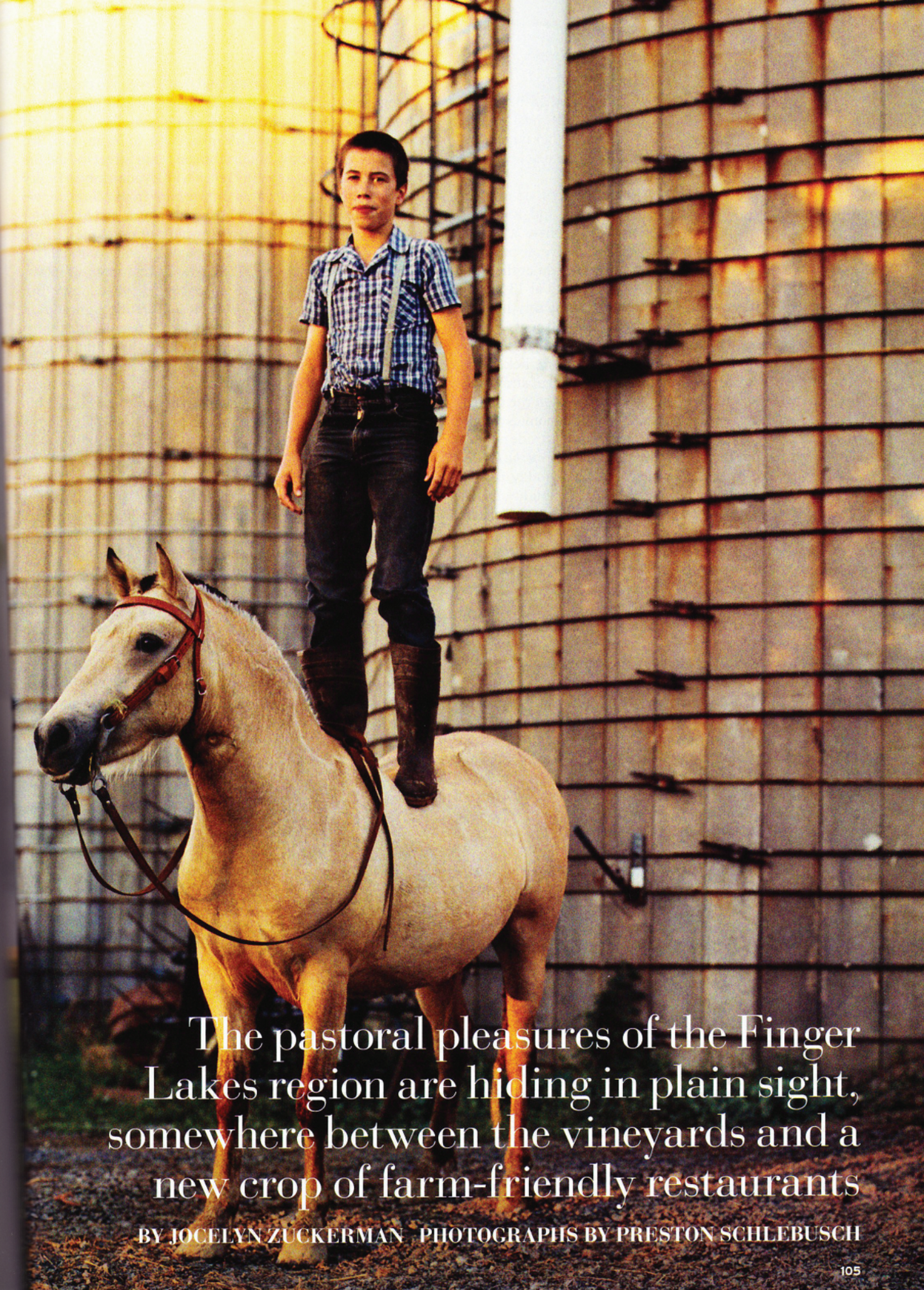
Fields and farmland outside the town of Skaneateles; Penn Yan resident Ethan Horst riding high.



The pastoral pleasures of the Finger Lakes region are hiding in plain sight, somewhere between the vineyards and a new crop of farm-friendly restaurants

BY JOCELYN ZUCKERMAN · PHOTOGRAPHS BY PRESTON SCHLEBUSCH

My sister returned from the bathroom and settled in before her plate of eggs. "It must've been the fried dough," she said, squelching a smile as she reached for her glass of juice.

It had been, of course, the Genesee on tap, and our grandmother surely knew as much. We weren't the first of her progeny to arrive at breakfast looking a little the worse for wear after a night at the Yates County Fair. It was the summer of 1979, and at 13 and 14, Joanne and I weren't much good at drinking anything, let alone that stuff they sold on the midway for 50 cents a cup.

Keg beer, fried dough, demolition derbies: It was all new to us, part of a world that also included flame-licked bass straight from the water and fields that smelled of strawberry jam where you could plop yourself down and gorge on fruit plucked right from the dirt. A world where Mennonites clopped down Main Street in smart black carriages and strode nonchalantly into the supermarket in their *Little House on the Prairie* hats. "The Lake" we called it then and still do today, a mythical place where the stars shot through the night sky, the hassles of suburbia melted away, and childhood, simple and sunny, enveloped us in its arms.

It was usually just after the Fourth that the seven of us would pile into our station wagon for the six-hour drive up to Nonny Kay's cottage, in Penn Yan. The wishbone-shaped part of the network that comprises central New York's Finger Lakes, Keuka Lake was just far enough from Manhattan to have avoided colonization by city sophisticates, and back then it felt like a little pocket lost to time. For my four siblings and me, it was pure heaven. (How my fastidious grandmother felt about those two-week visits, when her orderly redoubt disappeared beneath wet towels and bathing suits, is another question.)

By the time we were in junior high, Joanne and I were spending most of our summers with Nonny Kay. We'd wake to the sound of the waves gently lapping on the pebble beach below and sleepily make our way out to the dock, where we'd schlump our skinny adolescent bodies into inner tubes and tuck our sunburned noses into novels, emerging only for a dip or to check out some boys on a passing boat.

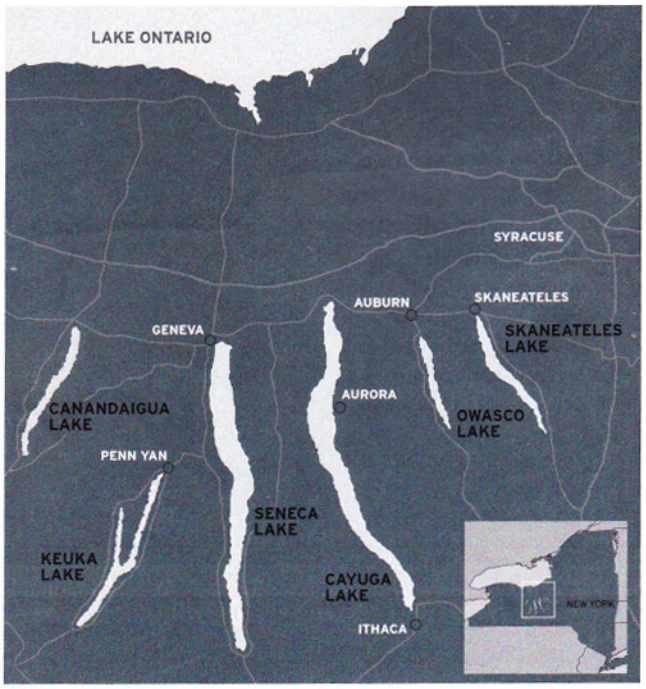
The quiet evenings were spent crouching over jigsaw puzzles and lingering over meals of pan-seared trout, sweet corn on the cob, and frenched green beans, all of it throbbing with personality out there on the sun-splashed porch. Nonny Kay would sip from her cut-glass tumbler of pink Catawba, then retreat to the kitchen to dish out juicy strawberries dolloped with sour cream and sprinkled with sandy brown sugar. We climbed into bed happy those nights, then would get giggling so hard in the wobbly double bed that we'd prompt a disciplinary knock from the other side of the wall.

Long after Nonny Kay had gone, my siblings and I still made annual visits to the Lake. But they were often tinged with disappointment. With each trip, it seemed, we'd be met by another McDonald's or Rite Aid; find a tacky pizza or video joint where there used to be a stately old Victorian. But the real problem was that we were outgrowing the place: Our own worlds had expanded and our tastes had matured, and the sidewalk sales and county fairs that once seemed so exotic now struck us as vaguely depressing.

In the past few years, though, all that's begun to change. To get a sense of just how much, Joanne and I say good-bye to our husbands and kids and climb into the car for an extended trip back. Our first afternoon in Penn Yan, we wander into the dumpy liquor store on Main Street to find the shopkeeper chatting away in French with a young guy in funky glasses. Raymond Knfo was drawn here from Morocco, we learn, by the region's burgeoning wine culture, and his hipster customer is interning at the two-year-old Ravines Wine Cellars, across the lake. There isn't a bottle of pink Catawba in sight.

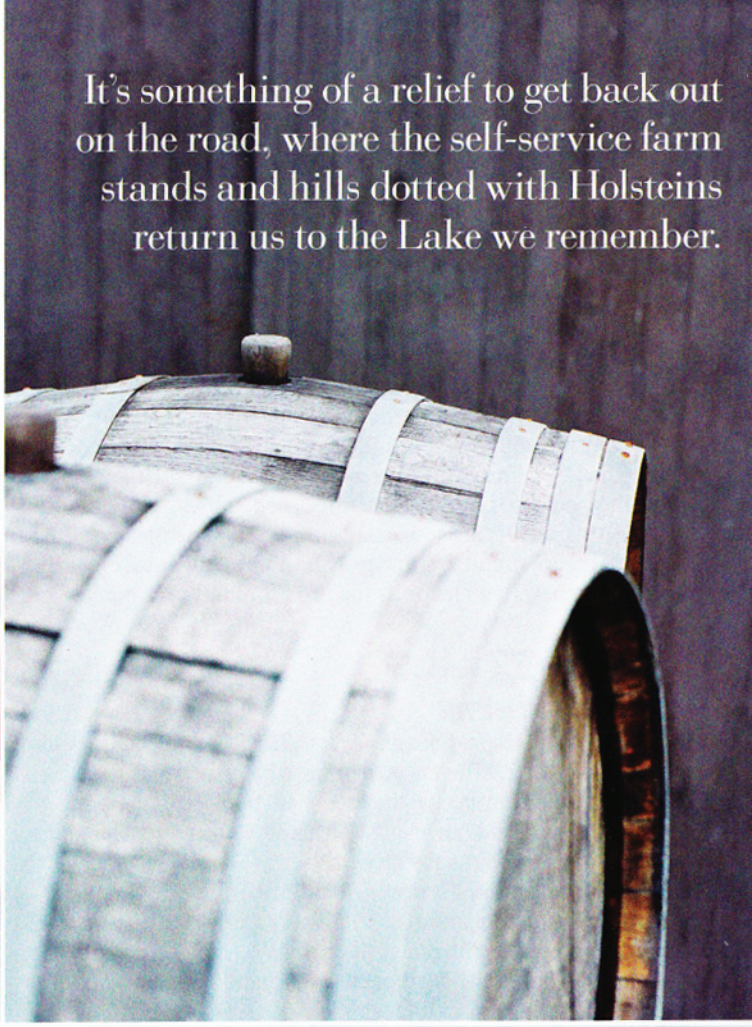
To be fair, winemaking in the Finger Lakes is nothing new—grapes have been grown here since the mid-19th century. But it wasn't until 50 years ago, when a Ukrainian immigrant named Dr. Konstantin Frank settled in the region, that things really got off the ground. Speaking little English, Frank took a job as a janitor at the New York State Agricultural Experiment Station, in nearby Geneva, but as soon as he could make them understood, the former professor of plant science shared his theories on viticulture with anyone who'd listen. Unlike his contemporaries, Frank believed that the region could do a lot better than the native *Vitis labrusca* (Concord, Catawba, and the like) then blanketing its hills. With its deep, glacier-carved lakes, the area was, he insisted, ideal for growing European varietals like Riesling and Gewürztraminer. Frank eventually planted some 60 varieties of *Vitis vinifera* in the hills above Keuka Lake, and by 1962 he had founded his own winery there. Today, Dr. Konstantin Frank Vinifera Wine Cellars, run by his son and grandson, produces some 50,000 cases a year, and the awards lining its walls number in the hundreds.

Others were slow to follow, but by last summer there were no fewer than 75 wineries dotting the shores of Keuka, Seneca, and Cayuga lakes, most of them—like the boutique Ravines, where the bespectacled intern helps Danish-born Morten Hallgren produce European-style Rieslings, Chardonnays, and Pinot Noirs—devoted to vinifera wines. Pulling into the leafy driveway at Seneca Lake's Hermann J. Wiemer, run by the scion of a family that's been making wine in the Mosel



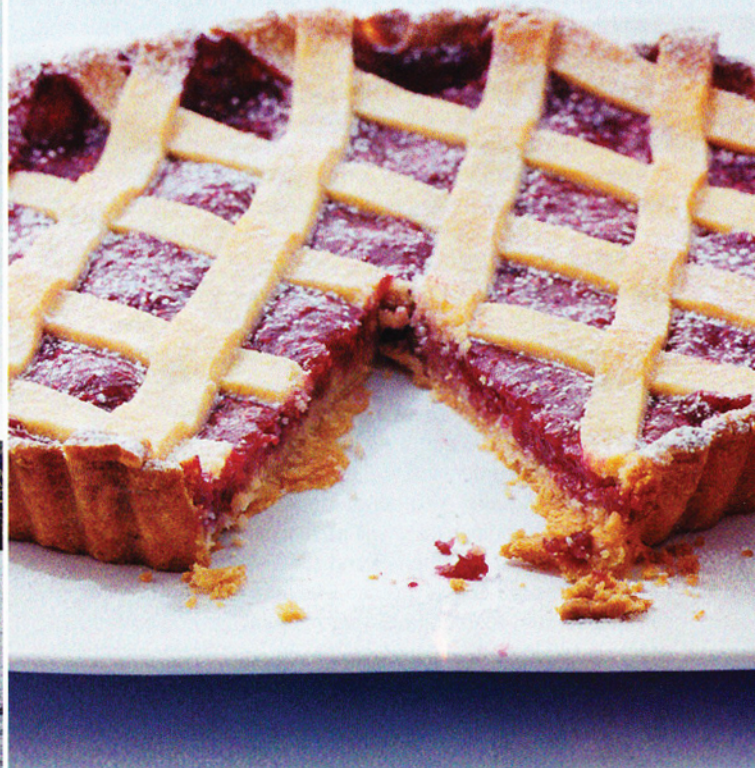
It's something of a relief to get back out on the road, where the self-service farm stands and hills dotted with Holsteins return us to the Lake we remember.





Clockwise from above: Chioggia beets with raspberry mint vinaigrette from The Restaurant at Elderberry Pond; on tap at Hermann J. Wiemer Vineyard; Elderberry Pond's raspberry almond tart; and the peaceful waters of Keuka, one of the 11 Finger Lakes.





Valley for 300 years, Joanne points to a sign informing limos and buses that they're welcome by appointment only.

Even with the wine scene exploding, though, the food in the Finger Lakes had lagged sorely behind. Over the years, we'd hear about one new restaurant or another opening and eagerly go check it out, only to be confronted with disastrous renditions of "Continental cuisine" lacking in either context or style. But on this trip, we find that this is changing, too.

Traipsing through his apple orchards with Louis Lego, you can't help but succumb to his enthusiasm for the region's culinary promise. Eight years ago, Lego and his wife, Merby, quit their jobs to farm full-time, and today they oversee a staggering variety of organic fruits, vegetables, flowers, and herbs on the 100 acres surrounding their home, near Auburn.

In his shorts and T-shirt, gray hair peeking out from under his straw hat, Lego leads us toward his elderberry bushes and Asian pear trees, rambling on about their merits like a nerdy kid showing off his stamps. We wander past the building that houses the year-old Restaurant at Elderberry Pond, and he segues into the tale of how, two years ago, he and his family bumbled their way into the enterprise. "We way underestimated how much this was gonna cost," he says, shaking his head as he recounts having to remortgage the 150-year-old farmhouse and invest all their retirement money despite having finagled a $60,000 grant from the Department of Agriculture.

And that was only the beginning. The kitchen equipment they'd bought on eBay broke down, and he was constantly being harassed by the chef—his 32-year-old son Chris—for failing to keep up with demand. "'I have to have a dependable supplier,' he'd say to me, 'or maybe I should just go to Sysco.' He knows all the hot buttons."

THE DETAILS

STAYING THERE

Aurora Inn *(391 Main Street, Aurora; 315-364-8888; aurora-inn.com; from $150)* The ten guest rooms in this recently renovated 1833 building are so chic they seem out of place in the blink-and-miss-it town. With elegant meals served on the porch, this newcomer epitomizes the modern face of the Finger Lakes.
Esperanza Mansion *(3456 Route 54A, Bluff Point; 315-536-4400; esperanzamansion.com; from $165)* This Greek Revival beauty has some of the best views around. Too bad the recent restoration falls so far short of the aristocratic 1838 bones. Drinks on the patio are a must, though you'd do well to eat elsewhere.
Geneva on the Lake Villa & Resort *(1001 Lochland Road, Geneva; 800-343-6382; genevaonthelake.com; from $194)* Set amid formal gardens, the suites at this 1910 Italian Renaissance–style resort are lovely places to spend a couple of days. The restaurant, unfortunately, doesn't live up to its prices.
Mirbeau Inn & Spa *(851 West Genesee Street, Skaneateles; 315-685-5006; mirbeau.com; from $295)* The faux-Monet vibe is a little over-the-top, but when the beds are this luxurious and the spa is this soothing, who's complaining? Chef Edward Moro's French-inflected cooking is arguably the best in the area.
Cottage Rental Our favorite way to experience the Finger Lakes is to stay right alongside one of them, waking to the sound of the waves and ending the day with a dip under the stars. We've had great luck booking through fingerlakesgetawaysinc.com.

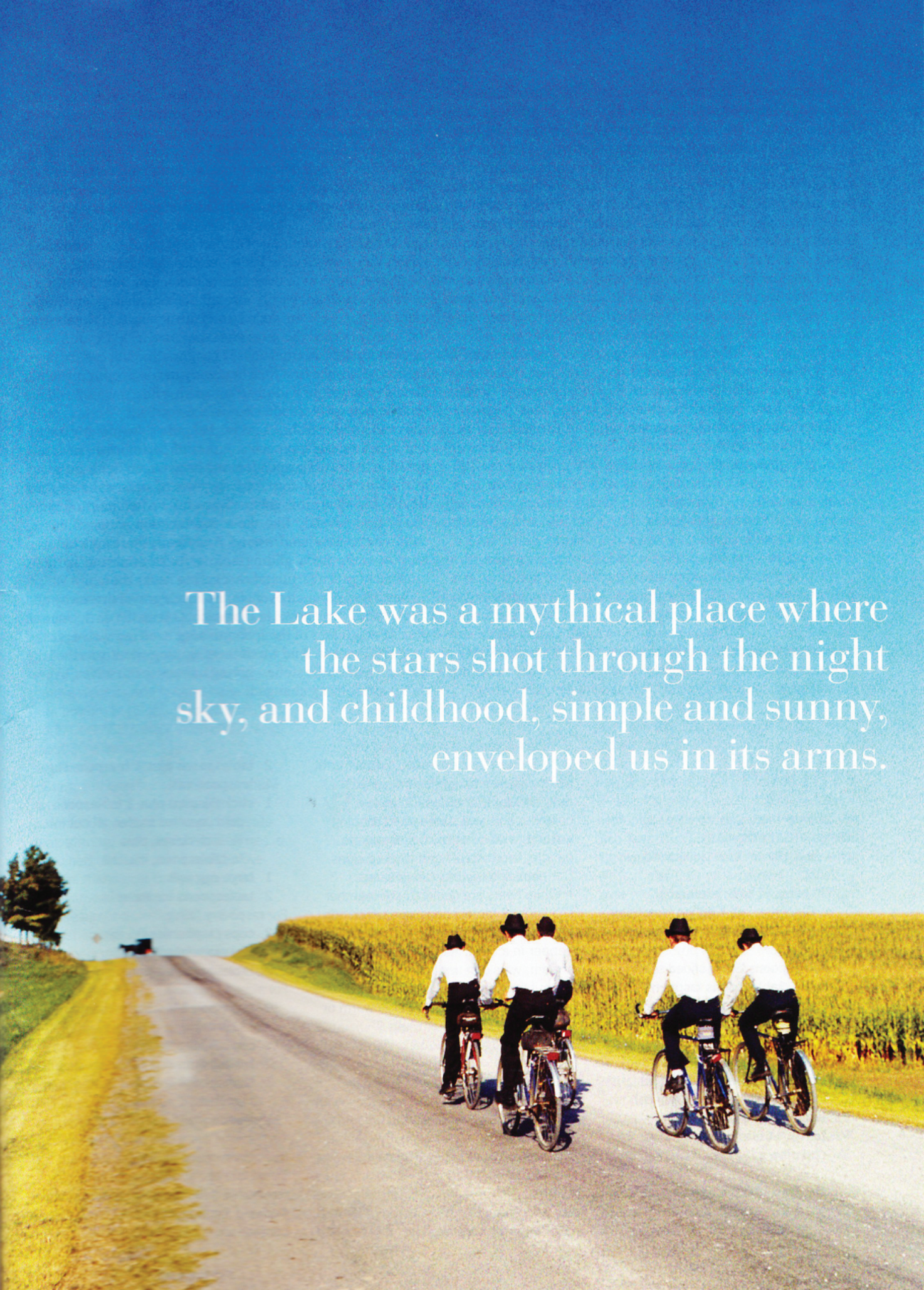
EATING THERE

The Bistro at Red Newt Cellars *(3675 Tichenor Road, Hector; 607-546-4100)* In summer and fall, 90 percent of Debra Whiting's salads, sandwiches, and wraps are locally sourced. Enjoy lunch on the deck overlooking vineyards or come for Wednesday dinner, when live music adds a festive element.
Doug's Fish Fry *(8 Jordan Street, Skaneateles; 315-685-3288)* Crowds have been flocking to the wooden booths at this casual hot spot for 23 years. A dinner of fried Boston scrod with thick-cut fries and traditional slaw will run you about seven bucks.
The Restaurant at Elderberry Pond *(3712 Center Street Road, Auburn; 315-252-6025)* Opened less than a year ago, this farmhouse-cum-restaurant is a sign of things to come. With gracious service, organic ingredients, and straightforward food from Culinary Institute of America alum Chris Lego.
Simply Red Village Bistro *(53 East Main Street, Trumansburg; 607-387-5313)* South African native Samantha Izzo opened this spirited place two years ago, and it's been packed ever since. With vegetarian-friendly comfort food and live music.
Suzanne Fine Regional Cuisine *(9013 Route 414, Lodi; 607-582-7545)* In a farmhouse high above Seneca Lake, Suzanne Stack serves French-accented meals based on what she gets from local farmers and from the 100 organic acres she cultivates herself.

BEING THERE

The Finger Lakes region is home to more than 75 wineries. Among those we wouldn't miss are Keuka Lake's **Ravines Wine Cellars** *(14630 State Route 54, Hammondsport; 607-292-7007)*, owned by Morten Hallgren, who grew up in the south of France; nearby **Dr. Konstantin Frank Vinifera Wine Cellars** *(9749 Middle Road, Hammondsport; 607-243-7971)*, named for the Ukrainian immigrant who started it all; Seneca Lake's handsome **Hermann J. Wiemer Vineyard** *(Route 14, Dundee; 800-371-7971)*, whose owner's family has been making wine in Germany's Mosel Valley for 300 years; and the intimate **Silver Thread Vineyard** *(1401 Caywood Road, Lodi; 607-582-6116)*, where Richard Figiel uses biodynamic farming to make his much-lauded wines.

In addition to more established tourist attractions like the **Corning Museum of Glass** *(One Museum Way, Corning; 800-732-6845)*, the **Women's Rights National Historic Park** *(136 Fall Street, Seneca Falls; 315-568-2991)*, and the **Finger Lakes Performing Arts Center** *(1 Lincoln Hill Road, Canandaigua; 585-222-5000)*, here are our favorite places to visit:
Lively Run Goat Dairy *(8978 County Road 142, Interlaken; 607-532-4647)* Mingle with the pigs, rabbits, ducks, and goats at Susanne and Steve Messmer's ten-year-old cheesemaking operation, and stock up on chèvres, fetas, and blues.
MacKenzie-Childs *(3260 State Route 90, Aurora; 315-364-7123)* High on a bluff overlooking Cayuga Lake, this former Victorian dairy farm is home to the store beloved by Upper East Siders for its whimsical ceramics and tableware. With a charming café and a shop full of (very expensive) treasures.
New Hope Mills *(5983 Glen Haven Road, Moravia; 315-252-2676)* A rickety shack on the shores of Skaneateles Lake, crammed with sacks of fresh-milled corn and buckwheat flours, old-fashioned candies, and relishes. The mill dates from 1823.
Weaver-View Farms *(1190 Earls Hill Road, Penn Yan; 315-781-2571)* Chat with the Mennonite owners of this dairy farm while shopping for handmade quilts, cheeses, and preserves. —*J.Z.*


The Lake was a mythical place where
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Sitting beneath the exposed beams in the handsome dining room, you'd never know the restaurant had got off to such a rocky start. The young servers move confidently among the Craftsman-style tables, their manner as down-to-earth as the food on the plates. An heirloom Chioggia-beet salad and red-skinned Norland potatoes with peas and mint sing of the surrounding soil, and the flavors of a raspberry almond tart are as clear and bright as the garnetlike fruit peeking from beneath the crust. Lego wanders the wide-plank floors, stopping to chat and infecting everyone with his easy laugh.

In their modern kitchen sipping a local Cabernet Franc after the Saturday-night rush, Suzanne Stack and her husband, Robert, are no less ebullient. The New Jersey residents were vacationing three years ago when they saw a "For Sale" sign on a 1903 farmhouse, high above Seneca Lake. "I totally blew it with the realtor," says Suzanne, describing how her eyes welled up the minute she stepped inside. "It was like I'd been waiting for this place all my life."

Modeled on the country inns she's long admired in Europe, her year-old restaurant, Suzanne Fine Regional Cuisine, highlights the organic produce that Stack grows on the 100 acres that came with the house, as well as on what she gets from area farmers, vintners, and cheesemakers. Sharing honest, finely wrought dishes like a smoky late-summer chowder sweet with just-picked corn, Joanne and I find it hard to believe that this is the Finger Lakes we grew up with.

We have a similar reaction emerging from the luxurious spa at Skaneateles's Mirbeau Inn, where we'd been wowed the night before by the cooking coming from Edward Moro's kitchen. Opened in 2000, Mirbeau has done as much as any establishment to raise the profile of the region, and despite its slightly bizarre conceit (it's a re-creation of Monet's Giverny, down to the arched bridge and lily pads), it is absolutely transporting.

A night at the Aurora Inn is no less disarming. An 1833 building that reopened two years ago with ten chic rooms wired for high-speed Internet, this Federal-style stunner on Cayuga Lake is the brainchild of Pleasant T. Rowland, the founder of the American Girl doll company and an alumna of Aurora's Wells College. Over the past decade, Rowland has poured millions into revitalizing the tiny town, and the tourists are starting to take notice.

It's actually something of a relief to get back out on the road, where the self-service farm stands and hills dotted with Holsteins return us to the Lake we remember. Windows down and stereo up loud, we fly through the undulating landscape, marveling at the years gone by and the details that flood back: the year we dated the guys with motorcycles ("Couldn't you find some nice lakefront boys?" my grandmother had inquired mildly, not for the first time betraying her disappointment that her eldest son—our dad—had ended up with a townie), and the time Joanne got stranded out in the rowboat. We breeze by silos and satellite dishes, braking behind a slow-moving tractor and again as we approach a group of Mennonites pedaling uphill in their stiff suspenders and hats. Green fields give way to six-foot walls of corn, orderly rows of squat cabbage, and finally the vineyards themselves—mile after mile of vines splayed out sweetly like those construction-paper chains of children standing hand in hand. And finally there's our beloved Keuka, white sails gliding across its shimmering surface, brown and green farmland checkering its far shore.

Our wheels crunch over Nonny Kay's gravel driveway and we make our way down to the beach. Out on the dock, Joanne pours two glasses of the Johannisberg Riesling we've picked up at Dr. Frank's. And we sit there sipping silently as the lake laps softly over the stones, giving us back to ourselves, everything and nothing changed.

CHIOGGIA BEETS WITH RASPBERRY MINT VINAIGRETTE

Adapted from The Restaurant at Elderberry Pond

SERVES 4 (FIRST COURSE)

Active time: 15 min Start to finish: 40 min

- **1 lb beets (4 to 6; preferably Chioggia; see Kitchen Notebook, page 129), 1 inch of stems left intact**
- **3 tablespoons thinly sliced scallions**
- **2 to 2½ tablespoons raspberry vinegar**
- **2 teaspoons fresh lemon juice, or to taste**
- **2 tablespoons chopped fresh mint**
- **1 tablespoon finely grated fresh orange zest (from 2 oranges)**
- **½ teaspoon salt**
- **½ teaspoon black pepper**
- **¼ cup olive oil**

Garnish: **fresh mint sprigs**

▶ Cover beets with water by 1 inch in a 2- to 3-quart saucepan and simmer until tender when pierced in center with a fork, about 30 minutes. Drain in a colander and rinse under cold running water. Let stand until cool enough to handle, then slip off and discard skins. Cut beets into ¼-inch-thick slices.

▶ While beets are cooking, stir together scallions, 2 tablespoons vinegar, lemon juice to taste, mint, zest, salt, and pepper in a bowl. Add oil in a slow stream, whisking until combined. Add warm beets and toss with vinaigrette and vinegar and salt to taste. Serve warm or slightly chilled.

RASPBERRY ALMOND LATTICE TART

Adapted from The Restaurant at Elderberry Pond

SERVES 8 TO 12

Active time: 50 min Start to finish: 6½ hr (includes cooling)

For pastry dough

- **1½ cups all-purpose flour**
- **2 tablespoons plus 1 teaspoon sugar**
- **¼ teaspoon salt**
- **1 stick (½ cup) plus 1 tablespoon cold unsalted butter, all cut into ½-inch cubes, plus ½ tablespoon, melted**
- **1 large egg yolk**
- **2 tablespoons ice water**

For raspberry filling

- **2 cups raspberries (½ lb)**
- **½ cup granulated sugar**
- **2 tablespoons all-purpose flour**

For almond mixture

- **⅓ cup whole blanched almonds (1¾ oz)**
- **¼ cup all-purpose flour**
- **2 tablespoons confectioners sugar**
- **3 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted**
- **¼ teaspoon almond extract**

Special equipment: **a 9- to 9½-inch fluted tart pan (1 inch deep) with removable side; pie weights or raw rice**

Garnish: **fresh raspberries; confectioners sugar for dusting**

Make pastry dough:

▶Pulse together flour, sugar, and salt in a food processor until combined. Add butter cubes and pulse until most of mixture resembles coarse meal with some small (roughly pea-size) butter lumps. Whisk together yolk and water in a small bowl, then drizzle into flour mixture and pulse until dough just forms a ball. Divide dough into 2 balls, one slightly larger than the other, then flatten into ½-inch-thick disks. Chill, each disk wrapped in plastic wrap, until firm, at least 1 hour. ▶Put oven rack in middle position and preheat oven to 375°F. Brush tart pan (including sides) with melted butter. ▶Roll out slightly larger disk of dough (keeping remaining disk chilled) between 2 sheets of plastic wrap into a very thin 11-inch round. Remove top sheet of plastic wrap and invert dough into tart pan, pressing gently to fit. Roll over top edge of pan with rolling pin to trim edge, then remove plastic wrap and discard trimmings. Prick all over bottom of shell (but not sides) lightly with a fork, then chill in freezer 30 minutes. ▶Line chilled shell with buttered foil (buttered side down) and fill with pie weights. Bake until edge is pale golden and pastry is set underneath weights, 20 to 25 minutes. Carefully remove weights and foil and bake shell until bottom is golden, 7 to 10 minutes more. Cool completely in pan on a rack, about 30 minutes.

Make raspberry filling:

▶Stir together raspberries, sugar, and flour in a 1- to 1½-quart heavy saucepan, then simmer over moderate heat, stirring, until liquid from berries is thickened, about 5 minutes. Remove from heat and cool completely.

Make almond mixture:

▶Pulse almonds with flour and confectioners sugar in a food processor until finely ground. Add butter and almond extract and pulse until mixture forms clumps.

Assemble and bake tart:

▶Crumble almond mixture evenly over bottom of cooled pastry shell. Stir raspberry filling and spread evenly over almond mixture. ▶Roll out remaining disk of dough between 2 sheets of plastic wrap into a 10-inch round (less than ⅛ inch thick) and transfer to a baking sheet. Remove top sheet of plastic wrap and cut dough with a pastry wheel or sharp knife into 12 (½-inch-wide) strips, then freeze strips on baking sheet 5 minutes. Lay 6 strips across raspberry filling (1 inch apart), discarding plastic wrap and pressing ends onto edge of crust. Arrange 6 more strips diagonally across first strips (1 inch apart) to form a lattice with diamond-shaped spaces. Repair any broken pieces of dough by carefully pressing them together. Trim edges of all strips flush with top edge of pan.

▶Bake tart until lattice crust is golden, 25 to 30 minutes. Cool in pan on rack 10 minutes, then remove side of pan and cool tart completely, about 3 hours.

Cooks' note:

• Dough, formed into disks but not rolled out, can be chilled up to 1 day.

• Raspberry and almond fillings can be made 1 day ahead and chilled separately, covered. Bring raspberry filling to room temperature before using.

CORN CHOWDER

Adapted from Suzanne Fine Regional Cuisine

SERVES 8

Active time: 40 min Start to finish: 1¼ hr

- **½ cup diced (¼-inch) slab bacon (2 oz; rind discarded if necessary)**
- **2 cups diced (¼-inch) sweet onion (14 oz) such as Vidalia**
- **2 large carrots, cut into ¼-inch dice (1 cup)**
- **1 celery rib, cut into ¼-inch dice (¾ cup)**
- **1 red bell pepper, cut into ¼-inch dice (1 cup)**
- **½ lb yellow-fleshed potatoes such as Yukon Gold (2 small), peeled and cut into ¼-inch dice**
- **½ lb sweet potato (1 medium), peeled and cut into ¼-inch dice**
- **5 cups reduced-sodium chicken broth (40 fl oz)**
- **2 fresh thyme sprigs**
- **3 cups corn (from about 6 ears)**
- **1½ cups heavy cream**
- **1 teaspoon fine sea salt**
- **1 teaspoon black pepper**

Garnish: **2 plum tomatoes, seeded and diced; finely chopped fresh chives**

▶Cook bacon in a wide 6- to 8-quart heavy pot over moderate heat, stirring frequently, until crisp, about 5 minutes. Transfer with a slotted spoon to paper towels to drain, then add onion, carrots, celery, and bell pepper to bacon fat and cook, stirring, until onion is softened, 8 to 10 minutes. ▶Add all potatoes, broth, and thyme and simmer, covered, until potatoes are just tender, about 15 minutes. Add corn and cream and simmer, uncovered, 10 minutes. Add sea salt and pepper, then stir in bacon.

LEMON SOUFFLÉ PANCAKES

Adapted from Mirbeau Inn & Spa

SERVES 6 TO 8

Active time: 1 hr Start to finish: 1 hr

- **2 cups cake flour (not self-rising)**
- **¾ cup sugar**
- **¼ cup bread flour**
- **1 tablespoon baking powder**
- **1 teaspoon salt**
- **½ teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg**
- **2 tablespoons finely grated fresh lemon zest (from about 5 lemons)**
- **5 large eggs, separated**
- **1½ cups whole-milk ricotta (11 oz)**
- **1½ sticks (¾ cup) unsalted butter, melted and cooled slightly**
- **¼ cup fresh lemon juice**
- **¾ cup well-shaken buttermilk**
- **½ teaspoon vanilla**
- **Vegetable oil for brushing griddle**
- **Confectioners sugar for dusting**

Accompaniments: **berries; butter; pure maple syrup; sliced almonds, toasted**

▶Preheat oven to 200°F.

▶Whisk together cake flour, sugar, bread flour, baking powder, salt, nutmeg, and zest in a medium bowl until combined well.

▶Whisk together yolks, ricotta, butter, lemon juice, buttermilk, and vanilla in a large bowl until combined. Whisk in flour mixture until incorporated.

▶Heat a griddle or large heavy skillet over moderate heat until drops of water scatter over surface, then brush with oil.

▶While griddle heats, beat egg whites with an electric mixer at medium speed until they just hold soft peaks.

▶Fold one third of whites into ricotta batter until combined, then fold in remaining whites gently but thoroughly.

▶Working in batches and using a ¼-cup measure for each pancake, pour batter onto griddle and cook, turning over once, until golden, 2 to 4 minutes per batch. Transfer to a heatproof platter and keep warm in oven. Dust with confectioners sugar before serving.

Cooks' note:

Batter can be made 1 hour ahead and chilled, covered. Bring to room temperature before using.