

## ISLAND DINING

Culinary Institute of America graduate John Farnsworth set a new record last Easter, serving 4,000 meals.

BY MICHELLE GENZ  BY BENJAMIN J. HAGER

John's Island executive chef John Farnsworth vividly remembers being allowed to slip into the kitchen of his family's country club in Connecticut, where he watched from atop a cooler while the staff scooped him up a strawberry ice cream cone.

Today, sending children back for ice cream is protocol at John's Island Club. "We're going to get a member from that one day," he jokes to staff.

Farnsworth's palate is still tuned to comfort food, though it has expanded well beyond strawberry ice cream. The man once named to Food and Wine magazine's Ten Best New Chefs in America has spent the past 18 years overseeing a staff of 127 at John's Island, Vero's most notable club community. He and his staff serve 3,000 meals a day in high season. Last Easter, they set a new record: 4,000, says Farnsworth.

"People on the outside don't have any idea of the size and magnitude of the operation here," he says.

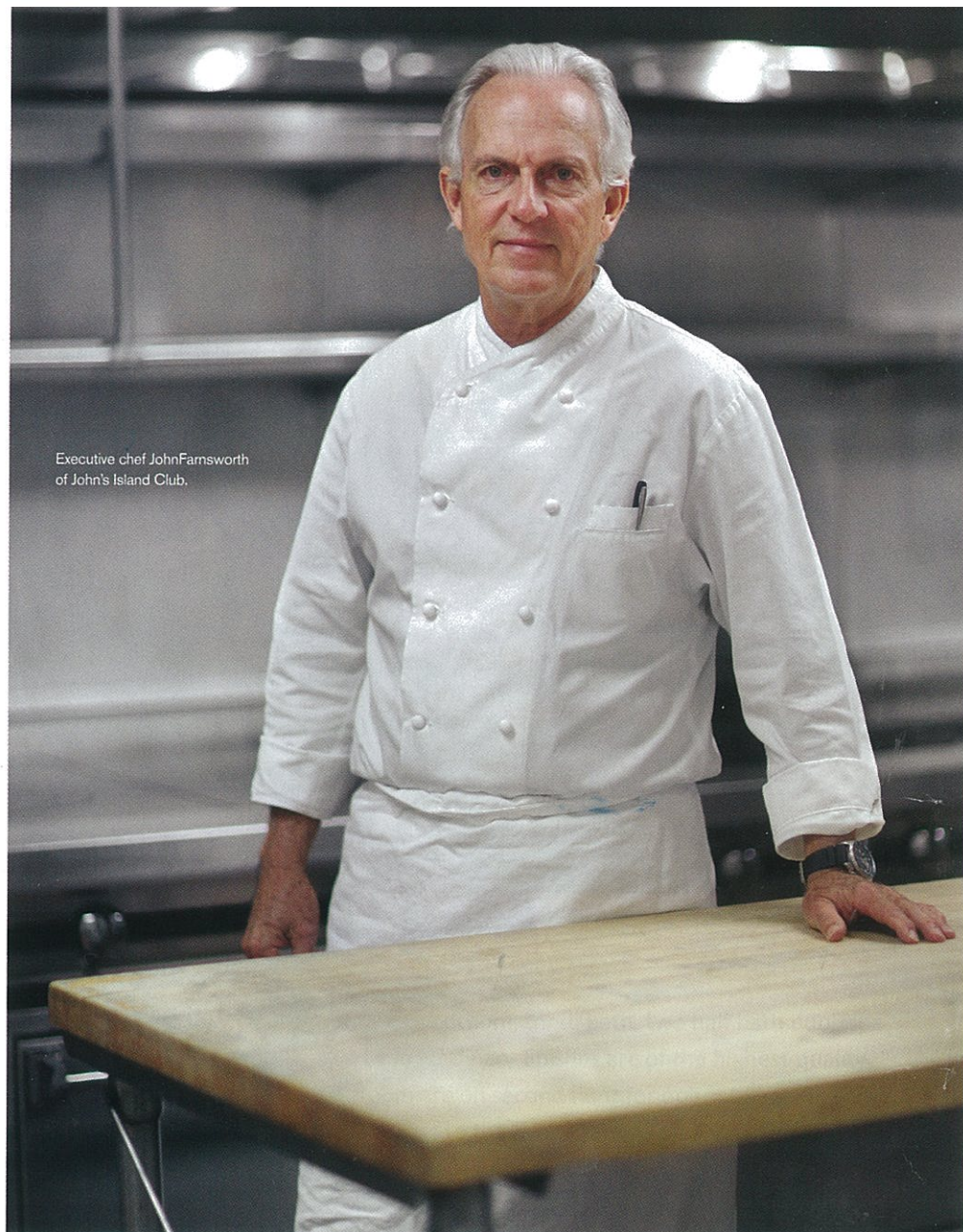
His vow to give his throng of daily diners an experience comparable to America's top tables includes not just innovative cuisine, but good sense. On Thanksgiving, chefs roast turkey breasts (they braise the legs) throughout the day so that when people wander in for dinner at all hours, the turkey is "plated fresh from the kitchen and not sitting in a chafing dish."

### MORE AND MORE MEMBERS ARE OPTING TO DINE AT THE CLUB

Farnsworth's attention to detail is proven out by the numbers. More and more John's Island members are opting to eat at the club.

"We've almost doubled our cover counts since I arrived in 1995 with the same number of memberships," Farnsworth says. Memberships, couple or individual, stand at 1337.

Farnsworth's job expanded greatly when John's



Executive chef John Farnsworth of John's Island Club.

## JOHN'S ISLAND EXECUTIVE CHEF HAS EARNED RAVE REVIEWS

Island built a new 50,000-square-foot Beach Club in 2008. With a rumored price tag of \$32 million, the space includes seating for 250 plus 130 on the oceanfront terrace. Others opt for casual dining at Rafters, a café by day and tapas bar at night.

"Some people balked" at the size of the new Beach Club's state-of-the-art kitchen, with its stainless steel tables stretched out like lanes in a bowling alley.

"It has proven to be a tremendous success," says Farnsworth. "Not only can we do 300 covers, we can do a wedding for 300 out of the same kitchen."

Brian Kroh, J.I.'s general manager for 14 years, calls Farnsworth "among the best in the country."

"He's the best chef I've ever worked with," says Kroh. "His personality, his people skills, his technical skills and his administration skills – he has the whole package."

Farnsworth's tenets date to the early 1990s, when he was heading up culinary operations at Laurence Rockefeller's Rockresorts in the Virgin Islands and Hawaii.

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Accolades poured in from national press. Gourmet called Farnsworth's imagination "almost as vast as the organic garden that supplies the kitchens of his hotels." Food & Wine declared him "one of the most gifted chefs of his generation."

When he worked at the celebrated Mayflower Inn in Washington, Conn., the New York Times ranked his food "excellent."

Today, Farnsworth weaves the more creative elements in his cuisine around a core of comfort food.

"First and foremost, we're a country club," he says. Even with the classics, a modern sensibility prevails in that he buys all that he can locally. "The buzz word is 'zero kilometers,'" he says.

"Our membership is changing as newer members come in and their expectations are a little different than some of our founding members," he says. "They're a little more health conscious, and they appreciate the seasonality of the food. They've gotten on the bandwagon of less red meat and more green vegetables."

John's Island was just added to a list of America's healthiest clubs, and while meat loaf and mashed potatoes still rule, the club uses Creekstone beef raised without hormones. Seafood is delivered six days a week. "Fish sales are extremely high and rising."

He deals with a range of dietary restrictions and



The John's Island Club

"lifestyle" requests like low-fat or low-carb. Recently he introduced gluten-free bread.

Bread is baked on site in 24 varieties, some of it twice daily. "A baguette or a levain is meant to be eaten three or four hours after it's baked," he says. "There is nobody that has a bread program like us."

#### THE MENU IS BASED ON WHAT IS AVAILABLE ON OR NEAR THE ISLAND

Farnsworth's sous-chefs write daily menus – no large, laminated menus here.

"The menu is based on what's available," he says.

Most of the fish comes from Pelican Seafood in Fort Pierce, which daily sends over a list of available seafood.

Dover sole served with a brown butter sauce

and deboned at table is the most popular offering. It's flown from the Netherlands to New York to Vero.

"It's as good as at Le Bernardin in New York," says Farnsworth, citing the 4-star seafood restaurant where Chef Eric Ripert made his name.

Farnsworth monitors food trends closely. He makes a carrot, barley, and green pea risotto using carrot juice and chicken stock. Sometimes he mixes quinoa, millet and barley together as a side dish. One of Farnsworth's most popular items for weddings is a breast of Guinea hen with farro risotto. "It's great for large groups, not like rice risotto. You can't hold true risotto. But farro, you can."

Raised in Connecticut, Farnsworth graduated in 1975 with high honors from the Culinary Institute of America; two decades later, at the school's 50th anniversary, he was nominated for an "Augie," an award named for the great French chef Auguste Escoffier.

Today, Farnsworth is a walking advertisement for the healthful living. As slender as the day he walked through the main club's Georgian façade, he shares meals at home with his wife Jean; their two daughters, barely school age when they arrived in Vero, are now 25 and 22 and out on their own.

As for his own regimen, Farnsworth avoids white flour, white rice and white sugar. "I'm a firm believer in the Mediterranean diet," he says. "It makes the most sense: anything and everything in moderation." ❖

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