



Kyle and Katina Connaughton in their greenhouse.

**ON A SPECTACULARLY** beautiful September afternoon in Healdsburg, Kyle Connaughton is standing on a roof, talking about pencils. More specifically, he's talking about the pencil that will be used in the guestrooms of Single Thread, the restaurant and five-suite inn being constructed beneath our feet. "We've had multiple conversations about the pencil," he says. "We look at these pencil samples and test-write with them and sharpen them, and we'll compare the lead on different pencils, and the feel and the eraser. And it's like, you know, does anyone care so much about pencils?"

It doesn't matter; Kyle—along with his wife, Katina, and their team of 44—cares deeply about every detail that goes into Single Thread, no matter how deceptively small. There are no afterthoughts here, only extended meditations on how to make their brainchild, as Kyle says, "more than the sum of its parts." And given its many parts, that sum is substantial. When Single Thread opens in late October, it will bring to Sonoma the kind of experience more often associated with Napa: a \$225-tasting-menu restaurant (wine pairings begin at \$155) from a world-class chef, attached to both its own farm and a boutique hotel whose rooms start at \$700 a night. Since Kyle, the chef in question, and Katina, a farmer, announced the project in January 2015, it has generated great interest; last November, *Eater SF* went so far as to declare it "the Biggest Opening of 2016." "You can't control what other people say, but you don't want to overhype something that you aren't doing yet," Kyle says of the media's attention. "All of that big external stuff doesn't really mean anything if the people who come here aren't happy."

On its face, the concept behind Single Thread isn't that unusual. It's a fine-dining farm-to-table restaurant, a breed that grows like an edible weed here in Northern California. But dig a little deeper, and the shape of its ambition begins to reveal itself. Inspired by *kaiseki*, the traditional, highly seasonal Japanese

# The 72-Season Restaurant

At Single Thread, Kyle and Katina Connaughton are bringing microseasonality, extreme hospitality, and a better breed of pencil to Healdsburg. By Rebecca Flint Marx

Katina and Kyle Connaughton stroll their farm, a five-acre plot located on the San Lorenzo vineyards, in Healdsburg.



multicourse meal, the offerings of the 52-seat restaurant take the notion of seasonal cooking and split it like an atom: Each of Single Thread's three 11-course tasting menus (vegetarian, pescatarian, and omnivore) will evolve every five days according to the 72 microseasons that Katina observes on the farm, a five-acre parcel located at the nearby San Lorenzo vineyards. The rotation is based on the Japanese "farmer's almanac system" of prescribed dates that here begin annually in February, Kyle says; whereas a "season" describes a months-long gap in which produce experiences varying degrees of ripeness, Single Thread's system functions as a kind of instant-messaging device between dirt and kitchen. "We're always looking for what in Japanese is called *shun*, the moment when the product is at its best," Kyle explains. "I think that's what the chefs in Japan are so brilliant at: capturing the essence of that moment in time and just, like, celebrating that moment."

If there's any American chef who's equipped to translate these ideas to the Bay Area, it's Kyle Connaughton. Enamored of Japan since he was a kid growing up in Los Angeles, where he and Katina were high school sweethearts (the couple has two young-adult daughters, one of whom works on the farm), he began his career apprenticing at Kishi, a vaunted Japanese restaurant. In 2003, he got an offer to work across the Pacific as a chef at Michel Bras Toya Japon, the esteemed French chef's restaurant

in Hokkaido. While Kyle worked in the kitchen—and did informal stints in sushi, soba, and kaiseki restaurants—Katina, who later studied sustainable agriculture and horticulture, worked on a strawberry farm. In 2006, Kyle was offered the position of head chef for research and development at London's Michelin-starred Fat Duck following a meeting with chef-owner Heston Blumenthal. During the family's tenure in England, the Connaughtons used their vacation time to fly back to California. They were inspired by the restaurants and inns that they'd visited in Japan, and "the more time we spent over here, the more we were like, 'This feels right,'" Kyle says. The family relocated to Sonoma County in 2011; three years later, Kyle cofounded Pilot R+D, a culinary research kitchen, to develop dishes for Single Thread. Pilot also consults on projects like the unnamed robot burger restaurant that Momentum Machines is building in SoMa. Kyle has stepped back from Pilot to focus on Single Thread; he and Katina are running the restaurant, inn, and farm without any outside partners or management, although they have a steadfast business partner in Tony Greenberg, a New York City real estate developer. Greenberg, who met Kyle a few years ago when he was looking for a chef to consult on a project in Manhattan, says Single Thread has about 50 investors who include tech and hospitality entrepreneurs and Sonoma winery owners. "It's really all about Kyle and Katina's

vision," Greenberg says of the project, whose cost both he and Kyle decline to disclose. "We want to get out of the way. Everything is about providing the infrastructure for their vision."

**THE RESTAURANT** is a testament to endless research and development; like seasonality, Kyle takes the process to an extreme that's typically associated more with laboratories than kitchens, even those of the fine-dining variety. Consider, for instance, his work to perfect the duck that will appear on the restaurant's menus, which incorporate global influences and feature *donabe*, or Japanese clay-pot cooking. The chef and his team are working with Mendocino's Oz Family Farm to breed Duclair ducks to the restaurant's exact specifications, a process that has entailed conducting trials with numerous types of duck to deduce their best qualities.

"Within that, we're looking at the techniques of aging and brining and slow cooking, and we're scoring all of these things," Kyle says. After serving duck dishes at a series of test dinners, "we turn around and eat the individual pieces, so every time we do it, we do it differently." Single Thread's first group of specially bred waterfowl won't be ready until December, so the restaurant won't actually have duck on the menu when it opens. "And we don't know if that first group is even going to be good, so we might have to go back and feed them differently, raise them longer, hang them longer," Kyle says. Even if the even-

tual result is a success, there will be no resting upon laurels. "You can't be like, 'The duck project's over, let's move on.' That's one of the greatest lessons I learned working for Heston Blumenthal—to be committed to that development process all the time, and to really drill down on all these little details and side-by-side trials."

This approach has a way of attracting fellow travelers. "The depth of thought that goes past taking something you've already done and tweaking it" is unusual in the fine-dining realm, says Matt Siciliano, Single Thread's pastry chef. While much of Siciliano's career has been in high-end restaurants, most recently at Michael Mina, he says he hadn't previously been exposed to Kyle's level of thought and interaction. "It's a very methodical approach, which I find very refreshing," Siciliano says. "It's not just people cooking by the seat of their pants; you go through a process, and then you do it again."

Not that Kyle needs—or even wants—you, the diner, to be aware of all of this. It's not imperative that you realize that the handwoven screens in the redwood-lined dining room are geometric representations of the DNA sequences of 12 seasonal ingredients, or that the clay tiles lining the sliding paneled door between the kitchen and dining room were sourced from the Connaughtons' farm and glazed and fired in a gradient pattern representing the research and development process. Instead, Kyle would like you to know that you're free to enter the kitchen, even during service, and that your every need is being attended to, even before you know you need anything. "You want people to feel so comfortable," he says. "Luxury isn't the right word, but you want there to be the feeling that you're kind of transported, like you can come out of your daily life for a while but not just be, like, opulent."

Up on the roof, Kyle looks at where Katina's greenhouse will soon be installed, along with a bar, a kitchen, and a trellis to cover the ventilation equipment. There's still a lot to do, but even when it's done, nothing will be done. "You can't have that mindset that something's complete, ever," Kyle says. "You say, 'Everything is as good as it can be at this moment, and tomorrow will be better.' We'll find a better pencil if we need to." ■