

About L'Etoile's Founder

Odessa Piper grew up in a large family on the New England coast. She gained an early appreciation for local eating through her family's gardening and foraging traditions. During her last year of high school she moved to a subsistence farm where she learned how to gather wild edibles, garden and root cellar, and put by most of their food for winter consumption. This was followed by a year in Wisconsin's Kickapoo River valley where she joined a diverse group of young people to graze animals and grow crops on one of the region's first farms to attempt conversion to Organic practices. In 1972 she moved to Madison to help that farm's visionary owner, Joanna Guthrie, open a restaurant that would be supplied by the farm.

Following this, in 1976, at the age of 23, Odessa joined a co-worker to open a restaurant on Madison's capital square, which they named L'Etoile. Following the departure of her business partner Odessa began to draw on her unorthodox education to cultivate a network of local innovative organic farms and artisans to supply her restaurant. She linked her creativity to their output, and acknowledged their role by naming and locating them on her menu. At a time when there was no local supply infrastructure for sustainable agriculture, Odessa finely tuned her menus daily to reflect the growing season. She encouraged cutting edge farmers to build their brands, pool their efforts and diversify their markets with winter hearty greens from solar hoop houses, organics and pasture grazed meats. By the end of the 1990's, these combined efforts enabled L'Etoile's menus to remain regionally reliant even through the winter months. In 2006, in recognition of her contribution to the region's artisanal and sustainable agriculture, the University of Wisconsin-Madison awarded Odessa an honorary doctorate in humane letters.

Odessa's recipes and philosophy have been profiled in a variety of media including the New York Times, The Washington Post, Bon Appétit, Wine Spectator, Food & Wine, the Art of Eating and Gourmet. L'Etoile's practices have been studied and written about by visiting chefs and food writers including Joan Gussow, Deborah Madison, Alice Waters, Ann Cooper, Michael Ableman, Jeremiah Tower, J.R. Apple, and Jonathan Gold. Amy Trubeck uses a chapter to document Odessa's work in a study on terroir for her book titled a Taste of Place. In 2002 the Beard Foundation awarded Odessa Best Chef for the Midwest.

In 2005 Odessa transferred ownership of L'Etoile and its farmer networks to her chef de cuisine, Tory Miller, and his sister, Traci Miller. She relocated to the Mid Atlantic to make a home with her husband, the wine importer Terry Theise, with whom she frequently travels to wine producing regions of Europe. In addition to her restaurant work, Odessa built a scholarship program for Women Chefs and Restaurateurs. Odessa served on the board of Chefs Collaborative and stays active in a wide number of organizations. Odessa's cooking and writing continue to be inspired by the artisans and sustainable practitioners she meets in the course of presenting at Farmers Markets, Universities and Culinary Schools. She works as a teacher, writer and consultant and is distilling her culinary ideas for the next generation of cooks and farmers.