

# OUTSTANDING IN THE FIELD

**TABLE-TO-FARM CULINARY ADVENTURES**

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PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF EMILY HAGEN - OTTE / PALETTE PHILIPOTT



Rather than wonder about the origins of your entree, why not whisk your dining table away to discover the source for yourself? For Peninsula farm-to-table enthusiasts, Outstanding in the Field's *table-to-farm* events are the ultimate foodie experience. Attend an Outstanding event in the summer or fall, and you might find yourself in the middle of a pear orchard or oyster farm. Or raising a toast to the harvest in a lush vineyard row, clusters of grapes enhancing your al fresco meal. Or savoring a fisherman's catch at a pier, beach or dockyard.

Founder Jim Denevan and his team have collaborated with farmers and chefs to create next-level dining experiences since 1999. After its modest launch with a trio of NorCal dinners, the event has grown at an astounding rate. Over 1,400 meals later, the roving res-

taurant has brought four-course culinary adventures to all 50 states—and 20 countries. It's even attracted the interest of documentarians along with a slew of media coverage. The meal has an unmistakable energy about it. But what ingredients make it magic?

Heading to Markegard Family Grass-Fed, a coastal ranch in Half Moon Bay, I spot Jim's bus all the way from the Cabrillo Highway. It's hard to miss the barn-red vehicle, roosting atop the nearby hill like a call to adventure. I arrive as the first guests begin mingling over appetizers—but when I join Jim inside his bus, sheltered from the sea breeze, our conversation doesn't feel at all rushed. Jim has an unhurried, almost zen-like, calm about him and settles in for a chat about what sets Outstanding in the Field apart.





## CHARMINGLY UNREPEATABLE

It makes me smile when Jim mentions that his repeat guests return “ready for an adventure.” Out the window, I see our “dining room” one hill over. The 150-guest table unfolds in the distance, its crisp white tablecloth contrasting with its earthy surroundings. Jim likes to cause a stir, and this staging is the ultimate anticipation-builder. It’s also a reminder that, unlike the polished, streamlined consistency of brick-and-mortar restaurants, Outstanding meals and their many moving parts are unrepeatable. And that’s exactly the point.

“The art of it is to not decide

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PHOTOGRAPHY: PAULETTE PHILIPOT

too far ahead about what you're exactly going to do," Jim shares of his choice to engage with the land when determining table placement. He also enjoys teasing out the flavor of each event by pairing chefs with farmers, who work together to tie the menu to the local produce and livestock. Frequently, vintners, brewers, cheesemakers and fishermen join in the culinary collaboration.

Tonight, Indonesian chef Siska Silitonga will weave Markegard cattle and poultry throughout her menu. "We want to honor their land by allowing them to tell us their story through their food," Jim explains. The ranch's grass-fed beef lends itself to daging

kalio, a heavenly coconut curry; chicken finds its way into yam sambal kemangi, served with stir fry egg noodles, peanuts and a spicy sauce that includes lemon basil from the nearby College of San Mateo Farmers' Market.

Chefs and farmers are encouraged to flex their personalities and interests. "I tell my staff, when we're doing opening remarks, 'Let the rancher talk about what they have experienced and what they know,'" Jim shares. "Doniga Markegard has a very powerful story about regenerative agriculture and the work to preserve the land. That's specific to her. It's her area of expertise."

**Chef Siska affirms to me later, "It's the best**

**collaboration I've had yet. In Indonesian and Thai cooking, we use a lot of shrimp paste and fish sauce. I was worried that they were maybe targeting folks who are not too excited by these flavors. But they're the opposite. They said, 'No, Chef, go crazy! You do you!' It's just so heartwarming to be allowed to cook whatever you want—the way you cook for your own people."**

It's Jim's mission to instill in diners a deeper connection to the "culture" part of agriculture—a sentiment explicitly expressed on the Outstanding website: "We

aim to connect diners to the origins of their food while celebrating the hardworking hands that feed us."

Over a decade after Outstanding's launch, Jim still cherishes a memory from his very first feast. He recalls the farmer's expression of satisfaction as he lingered at the table long after the guests had gone. It's a reaction Jim has witnessed many times since. "We're celebrating the place they work every day," Jim remarks as he leans down to pull on his boots. These farmers experience what "you might call an invasion of interested people," he chuckles, doffing a weathered cowboy hat before heading for the bus door.





## MOMENTS OF WONDER

Before the meal begins, the horseback-riding Markegard kids demonstrate their herding skills by wrangling the family's Belted Galloway cattle. Little moments of wonder (planned and unplanned) are characteristic of Outstanding events. "It's just being whimsical," Jim explains as we take our seats at the loooong table. Soon, big family-style bowls of rujak salad brimming with papaya, jicama, cucumber, mango, pineapple and a sweet tamarind/shrimp paste dressing begin circulating. "We're just playing with the circumstances of the day," Jim notes. "What kind of fun thing can we do?" His con-

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tagious seize-the-day attitude is one of the reasons regulars keep coming back: They want to find out what happens next.

At times, a farm tour or short trek to the dining area sparks that sense of adventure. Or perhaps it involves a night of glamping after the meal. Always, it incorporates the placement of the table. At an oyster farm in Quilcene, Washington, Jim's "table reveal" was particularly memorable. "The guests came around the corner from the parking area and they were presented with a table that's 'floating' in the water," he recounts. Diners slurped shellfish in the shallows of the Puget Sound, their meal literally raised around their chair legs. The guest chef wore wellies.

"I have scouted for a table on an iceberg in Greenland," Jim adds. "It'll probably happen someday."

At a past dinner along this same stretch of Half Moon Bay, Jim recalls a group of spouting whales making a guest appearance. **"Nature's part of the event, which enhances the meal," he affirms. Occasionally, he also situates a beachside table at the edge of high tide—just to see what happens. In the documentary, *Man in the Field*, the camera captures a wave crashing over the end of the table during the fourth course, soaking delighted guests. Undeterred, the farmer continues**

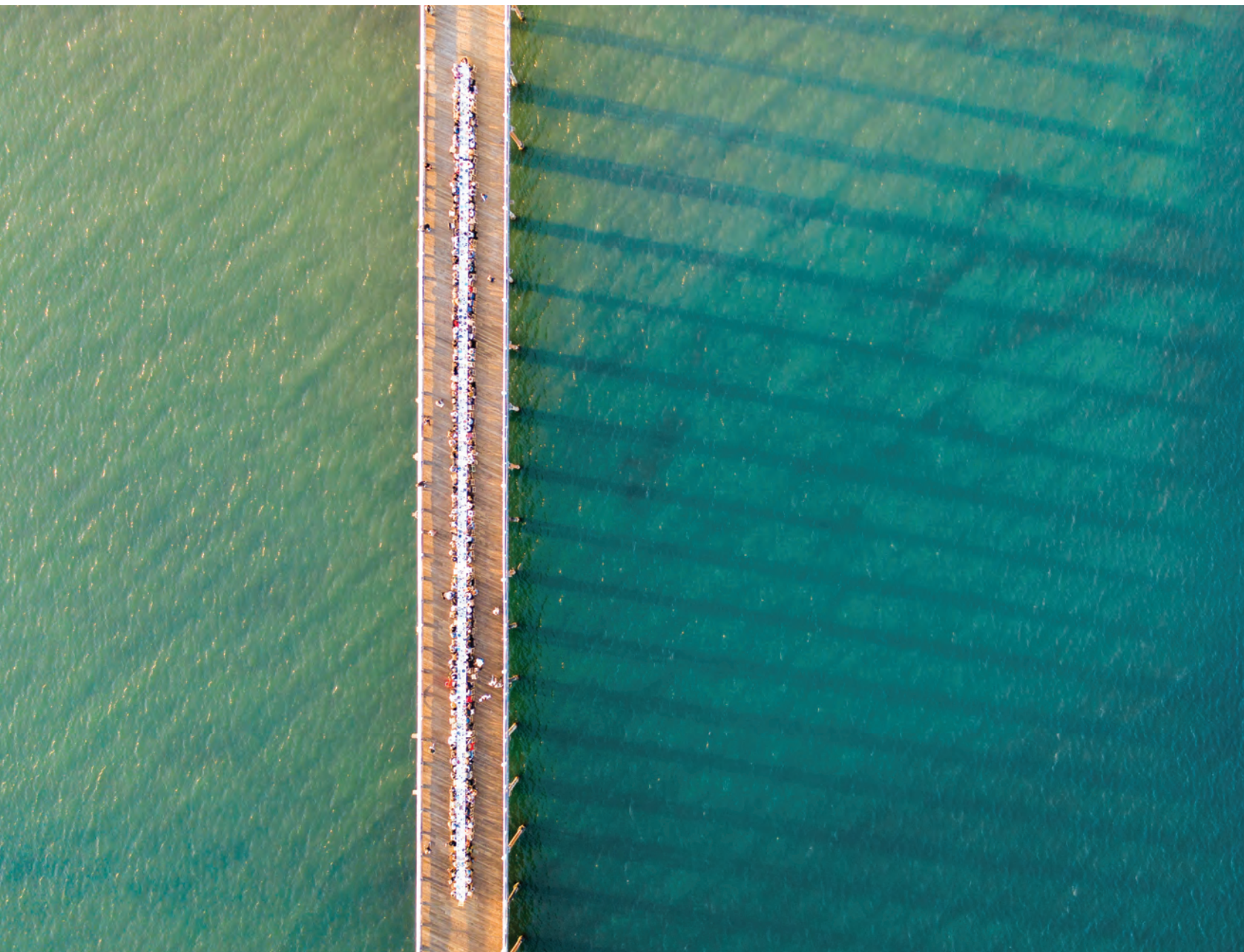
**to pour from a bottle of red. "He's not fazed," Jim recalls of the man. "He's like, 'This is life, you know? I just got hit by a wave, but I'm just gonna enjoy this glass of wine.'"**

A few times a season, Jim adds an art component to the meal. Not only an orchestrator of epic feasts, he's also a renowned sand artist (as is his son Brighton Denevan). By molding or raking the ground into geometric patterns, Jim elevates his already photogenic events to the next level. "With each artwork, I am creating a temporary place," he comments on Instagram. "The place didn't exist in the morning and doesn't exist after the tides come in." The same fleeting,

ethereal quality permeates his dinners—reminding guests to savor the present before it's swept into the past.

Even sunsets are an intentional affair for Jim. He's got an app to track the sun's path, allowing him to align the event so that the sun disappears behind the barn or sets at the table's head so every guest can enjoy it. "There's some subtlety about those things," Jim confides. "The guests don't know that it's been considered. They *feel* that it's been considered, rather than it being super overt." Tonight, the sun sinks into the Pacific just before dessert, bathing guests in honey-gold hues as silhouetted seabirds pinwheel overhead. Yet another flawless show by Mother Nature.





## Outstanding Tidbits

- + During the earliest events, Jim himself served as the chef. His brother, a farmer of organic apples and pears, hosted one of the first meals in his orchard.
- + Legend has it that Jim's iconic vehicle once acted as one of Elvis' old tour buses.
- + *Man in the Field: The Life and Art of Jim Denevan* was submitted for Best Documentary consideration at the 2022 Oscars.

## HUMANIZING MEALS

Even beyond the environment, it's the people who make each event special. Like the chef and the farmer, guests play an essential role in the evening. On the Outstanding website, Jim notes that, **"Conversation at the table evolves naturally—each person contributing organically (to use the word) to a destination that is not predetermined. To get to the place of surprise**

**and whimsy, we seek it out and give it room to happen."** Guests are encouraged to participate in the meal by bringing their own decorative plates. **The result is a colorful tablescape and a representation of fellowship.**

The long, family-style table also stands as a symbol. After experiencing an unsafe childhood, Jim feels an undeniable pull to these kinds of intimate gatherings. "I think probably for myself—or anyone who's been through some





PHOTOGRAPHY: LANA PULDA - OITF / COURTESY OF LLANA FREDDYE

challenging circumstances—I see the healing nature of a communal table and how people can connect and trust each other,” he muses. “They share the family-style platter and then consider, ‘Has everyone had enough? Are we sharing appropriately?’ There’s something really sweet about that.” That instinctive caretaking extends through the evening. It’s why, as the sun slips beneath the ocean, the Outstanding team goes around bundling chilly guests in blankets.

Jim sees this as a space to pro-

mote empathy, encouraging guests to “lead with their humanity.”

**“It’s easier for people to find common ground,” he observes. “They’re at a common table. Their food comes from a common place.” It’s this kind of vision that keeps Outstanding’s authentic celebrations of life unfurling across vineyards and mountaintops, caves and creameries, farms and fishing docks.**

By the end of the evening,

conversations and wine have flowed. Plates have been emptied, stomachs filled. Jim serenely watches over diners as they bid new friends farewell and follow the trail of twinkling tea lights through the long grass and back to their cars. With the tip of his hat, he returns to his bus, thoughts already beginning to drift to the next feast. **P**

### Al Fresco Adventure

[outstandinginthefield.com](http://outstandinginthefield.com)