

FARMER Chefs

Kitchen gardens take fine dining to a new level
by Cynthia Nims

“When are the carrots going to start coming in?” a customer recently asked Brian Scheehser, executive chef of Trellis restaurant, located in The Heathman Hotel in Kirkland, Washington. The chef tends 10 acres of hoop houses, row crops and fruit trees in his garden six miles from the restaurant, providing Trellis with heirloom tomatoes, berries, artichokes, corn, aromatic herbs and various squashes, among other bounties of harvest. The fact that customers get excited about something as humble as carrots perhaps best exemplifies the powerful impact a chef can have by filling the menu with fresh, homegrown ingredients.

“Every year is different,” Scheehser tells me. “One year it’s the ‘year of the tomato,’ next it’s the ‘year of the onion,’ followed by the ‘year of the melon.’” It sounds rather like a farmer’s zodiac calendar. But without any semblance of predictability, or any promise that next year will be the year of anything.

Scheehser’s garden harvest embellishes his contemporary interpretations of rustic fare in items such as pizza topped with squash blossoms and hanger steak with roasted root vegetables.

“I do some things here that other chefs might not have the nerve to do,” Scheehser says. “I just scrub carrots a bit, leave the green tops on and serve them on a wood plank with a blue-cheese sauce alongside for dipping.” These are carrots with a pure, sweet, earthy flavor that were plucked from the chef’s garden just hours earlier.

It doesn’t get any simpler, nor more profound, than that. This is “eating local” taken to a whole new level.

We’ve all heard the catchphrases that emphasize keeping the links in the food-supply chain as short as possible. “Farm to table.”

“Farm to fork.” “Locavore.” “Sustainable dining.” “The 100-mile diet” and its variations. There are many motivations for sourcing ingredients from nearby farms and producers. It’s good for the planet, reducing the carbon footprint of food transportation. It can provide chefs with unusual items—such as cinnamon basil or lemon cucumbers—not easy to source through traditional suppliers. It

JACKIE DONNELLY BAISA



Chef Shannon Galusha uses fresh greens from a rooftop garden to prepare the *salade verte* at Bastille in Seattle.



BOB PETERSON





can reduce the kitchen's bottom-line food costs. It adds gastronomic as well as emotional value to items on the menu.

Diners tend to connect with their meal in a different way when they know who grew and tended the food before it arrived in the kitchen. That desire to connect in a meaningful way is a human response, which, in the case of eating local, translates into benefits such as preservation of farmland and support of regional growing traditions.

One distinct benefit for chefs is that they can serve flavors of summer year-round thanks to garden harvests that are frozen, pickled, canned or otherwise "put up" to serve throughout the year. For example, it was early spring before Scheehser used the last of the 800 pounds of strawberries he'd frozen the previous

summer, cooking them up in a batch of berry cobblers.

It doesn't take the equivalent of Scheehser's 10 acres to allow a chef to add homegrown items to the menu. Folks strolling the theater district of Providence, Rhode Island, about 50 miles south of Boston, often look up at the beautifully restored Peerless Building and marvel at its 19th century architecture. What they might not realize is that on the seventh-floor patio is a restaurant garden that supplies ingredients for the contemporary-American menu at Gracie's restaurant two doors down the street. The patio where building tenants socialize and relax was originally adorned with ornamental plants. But the restaurant is slowly taking over those boxes and transforming them into beds for a kitchen garden. Chef Matt Varga



Brian Scheehser, executive chef at Trellis, cooks with ingredients grown on his 10-acre farm six miles from the Kirkland, Washington, restaurant. Chef Scheehser's creative menus shift seasonally based on the garden harvest.

himself carried many bags of rich soil up in the elevator to help with the transition, which began in May 2008.

The initial goal for adding a garden to the restaurant's to-do list was to shave some of the cost of edible flowers and tender baby greens from the restaurant's budget each month. "We have the space available, why not just go for it?" Varga says. Today about 1,000 square feet of beds



Chef Jeff Martinez at Fonda San Miguel in Austin, Texas, selects items from a garden just steps from the kitchen to use in authentic regional Mexican cuisine.



COURTESY: FONDA SAN MIGUEL

are planted. This provides not only plenty of flowers (bachelor's buttons, borage, pansies, Johnny-jump-ups) and greens for the kitchen, but also eggplants, peppers, tomatoes, summer squash, kohlrabi and different types of herbs. "Customers really appreciate knowing that we've grown some of the foods that they find on the menu," Varga tells me. "We have pictures of the garden framed on the walls throughout the restaurant, and guests are welcome to go up for a visit while they're here."

That contained rooftop space is surprisingly prolific and Gracie's staff sometimes

must harvest more than the restaurant can use right away. Eggplant gets pickled and bell peppers are made into relish to use throughout the year. Extra tomatoes and basil are left for the building tenants to enjoy. It's a great example of building community through food in an unexpected setting.

Up on another roof is where you'll sometimes find Chef Shannon Galusha. That's where the wood-framed beds and six small plastic pools are located that supply Bastille, in Seattle's historic Ballard neighborhood, with loads of lettuces and herbs year-round. This garden sees seasonal rotations, as well, which included brussels sprouts and cabbage this past winter, and is due to include rooftop tomatoes this summer. The garden beds were planted a few months before the restaurant's doors opened in June of last year, giving Galusha some time to try different plant varieties and get comfortable with the logistics before the doors of this tribute to Parisian cafe culture opened for the first time.

Its first summer season last year was



Chefs Duskie Estes and John Stewart, owners of Zazu Restaurant + Farm in Santa Rosa, California, use produce from their own garden as well as homemade olive oil in their cooking.



COURTESY: DNC PARKS AND RESORTS AT YOSEMITE

bountiful. Working with two types of arugula that have 30-day growing cycles, Galusha had a plentiful supply for the menu, used in a number of salads and *plats du jour*. The *salade verte* included such poetic lettuces as deer's tongue and flashy trout back. This summer's addition of tomatoes will bring yet more color and variety to the rooftop harvest of ingredients. Thanks to four beehives on the roof, the kitchen now has its own honey, as well. Dinner guests sample the sweet harvest in dishes such as pine-nut honey-brickle and mead-and-honey-braised pork belly.

"Having a garden on our roof sets the tone for everything that happens underneath it," Galusha says, adding that the restaurant is also committed to supporting local farmers and producers when it comes to supplementing what he grows.

A new restaurant such as Bastille can easily weave garden elements into the restaurant's philosophy and menu when starting fresh, building from the ground up. But established restaurants are also ramping up their local offerings by adding homegrown produce. Consider Fonda San Miguel in Austin, Texas. This venerable restaurant has been serving authentic

regional Mexican cuisine since 1975 and now counts itself among restaurants with their own kitchen gardens.

“Customers really appreciate the garden,” says Jeff Martinez, chef de cuisine. “I think they see that we’re not just resting on our laurels, but keeping the place fresh and up-to-date.” The 3,500-square-foot garden was put in two years ago, mere steps from the back door of the kitchen. Surrounded by ironwork fencing with a swing at the back, it is lit in the evenings so guests can take a stroll or enjoy the swing.

The well-tended rows include tomatoes, spinach, Swiss chard, leeks, onions and many types of chiles. As you can imagine, the restaurant uses a lot of cilantro, too—most of which is grown there. Swiss chard contributes the characteristic green to the signature chorizo verde, with a bright fresh flavor that complements the ground pork and melted cheese of the popular appetizer.

Martinez meets weekly with gardener Jeremy Walther to discuss the garden’s development. They talk about what’s ready to pick, what to plant next, what new varieties of this or that Martinez wants to try

BRINGING IT HOME

High on my list of simple pleasures in life is being able to step just a few paces out my front door and return with clip-pings from a few of the dozen or so different herbs I grow—an effortless but powerful way to add distinctive fresh flavor to whatever’s cooking. It might be chives for morning scrambled eggs, tarragon to go in my lunchtime chicken salad or fresh rosemary and bay leaves to braise pork for dinner. Vibrant flavor, easy to harvest. And a small but delightful dose of the same satisfaction that these chefs gain, growing their own produce to serve in their restaurants. Even if all you have is a window box with three types of herbs, it’s a valuable and delicious way to enhance your own recipes at home. Small planters can grow arugula or lettuces to be plucked for baby greens, or perhaps a couple of cherry tomato plants to provide a bright addition to that salad. —C.N.

out. Staff pop in and out of the garden daily, gathering ingredients for the kitchen. Sometimes they'll find a note saying, "Row five tomatoes ready to pick" or "Pick radishes in second row; I'll be planting spinach there next week." Owner Tom Gilliland occasionally helps out the kitchen by grabbing a basket and picking some herbs. That well-worn path from kitchen to garden and back keeps the chefs well stocked with just-picked produce to add panache to the menu.

Of course, farming and cheffing are two demanding jobs. Doing either well takes stamina and fortitude. Melding the two is a formidable endeavor, indeed. Chef Duskie Estes at Zazu Restaurant + Farm in Santa Rosa, California, says she's often up

GREG SILVA



CHRIS AYERS

Love Apple Farm provides David Kinch, chef of Manresa in Los Gatos, California, with about 300 different types of vegetables.

early. For example, one recent morning, she fed the pigs at 4:30 and, before the sun came up, was reviewing plans for the new orchard she and her husband are planting.

When Estes and her husband, chef and co-owner John Stewart, opened Zazu in 2001, they had five raised beds out back. "We'd try to plant and manage them our-

selves, but when it came to busy summers, when the garden most needed our attention," says Estes, "we had the least time to devote to it." After four frustrating years of their best efforts not coming to fruition, Estes and Stewart made some changes. In 2006 they hired a gardener to oversee the daily needs of the garden, and they added

“+ Farm” to their name.

With more time available thanks to the new gardener, they were able to devote more attention to the chickens that provide eggs for the restaurant and the fruit and olive trees at their home (yes, the two also make their own olive oil).



GRACIE'S RESTAURANT

Matt Varga, chef of Gracie's in Providence, Rhode Island, harvests produce from a nearby patio garden.

Guests enjoying the wine-country road-house fare at Zazu can not only stroll the garden before or during dinner, but they also can take an active role in feeding themselves from it. Depending on what's

DETAILS

BASTILLE CAFE AND BAR

5307 Ballard Avenue N.W.
Seattle, Washington
206-453-5014
www.bastilleseattle.com

FONDA SAN MIGUEL

2330 West North Loop Boulevard
Austin, Texas
512-459-4121
www.fondasanmiguel.com

GRACIE'S

194 Washington Street
Providence, Rhode Island
401-272-7811
www.graciesprovidence.com

MANRESA

320 Village Lane
Los Gatos, California
408-354-4330
www.manresarestaurant.com

TRELLIS

The Heathman Hotel
220 Kirkland Avenue
Kirkland, Washington
425-284-5900
www.trellisrestaurant.net

ZAZU RESTAURANT + FARM

3535 Guerneville Road
Santa Rosa, California
707-523-4814
www.zazurestaurant.com

ripe, the menu may have a u-pick item featured. Perhaps squash blossoms are at their peak: If a diner so wishes, he can get a few pointers from Estes about which blossoms to pick and where, clip them and return moments later to hand her four or five blooms that she'll cook to order. You can't take a restaurant patron much closer to the source of their meal than that!

One of the common themes for a number of these chefs is the great deal of effort and the amount of time each personally has invested to establish substantial harvests. As they learned how to grow vegetables, many were in the gardens daily, often spending long hours weeding, digging, planting, harvesting, watering—building value with their own sweat equity. But as the gardens took shape and grew larger, the chefs often turned to gardeners for their help and expertise, in the same way they have typically relied on sous-chefs and others in the kitchen to help bring their culinary visions to life. In other cases, chefs have looked to well-established farms for local ingredients rather than growing their own.

For example, at Manresa in Los Gatos, California, Chef David Kinch and Cynthia Sandberg, owner and farmer of nearby Love Apple Farm, have formed a strong alliance. Sandberg established her biodynamic farm as a premier source of tomatoes 10 years ago and began operating it exclusively as the kitchen garden for Manresa five years ago. It's a relationship that grew out of his having been a customer of her farm, and of her having experienced an inspiring meal at his restaurant. Together they imagined how custom crops from Love Apple Farm could give Manresa's inventive, European-influenced cuisine an even more distinctive edge.

Kinch, who won this year's James Beard Foundation award for Best Chef of the Pacific region, is proud of having established a rhythm and plan for crops that are in tune with the restaurant's needs and that are calibrated for a working kitchen. "We're not just growing a lot of different vegetables," he explains. "We're growing them in a conscious manner, in amounts that we perceive we're going to need."

Among the staple products that are readily and consistently available are onions, leeks, carrots, fennel and spinach. During the course of a year, as many as 300 different types of vegetables are grown on the farm, from celery root to red sorrel, not to mention lettuces of all types and 40 different kinds of herbs growing in protected hoop houses. “Even in February, the farm produces 75 percent of what we serve in the restaurant,” Kinch says.

He spends quality time in the garden two or three times a week, taking in the cadence of the garden. For instance, he will walk by a bed of savoy cabbage a few times a week while the plants develop. In doing so, he’s reminded that the cabbage will be ready in eight weeks, five weeks, two weeks. Kinch says the idea for how he’s going to use that cabbage germinates over those weeks the way the cabbage itself does. This creative process illustrates the deep connection with food that a chef gains by being so involved in its production. It’s a connection that doesn’t start when the box of tomatoes or Thai basil or apricots lands on the counter. It’s one that starts with choosing and planting the seeds, and continues as row crops are maintained, berry vines trained and fruit trees trimmed. Each such action sets in motion the synergy that will, in time, play out in an explosion of vivid, inspiring flavors on a diner’s plate.

Kinch says that having the garden has “upped our game,” a sentiment expressed in various forms by many farm-focused chefs. And he points out that the garden-kitchen connection is, for him, less a political statement than about bringing more pleasure to the table.

Diners today care more and more about where their food comes from. Whether the motivation is ecological or gastronomic or a bit of both, restaurant patrons are beginning to ask more questions. “Is that salmon wild?” “Is the asparagus local?” “Are any of those cheeses from around here?” It may not be long before we get in the habit of adding to that list, “Did the chef grow this?” ▲

Cynthia Nims is a food writer living in Seattle.