

PRODUCE SECTION seed to stem



# Seed to Stem

EVER-RESOURCEFUL  
CHEFS ARE EMBRACING  
THE WHOLE VEGETABLE.

BY MAGGIE HENNESSY

**a**t farm-to-table restaurant Homestead On The Roof, Chicago, diners share the outdoor rooftop patio with a sizeable garden. They watch the fleeting Upper Midwest growing season unfold around them, starting with tiny lettuces and young turnip tops poking out of the beds and boxes bursting with micro-greens and lemony sorrel.

In summer, they eat beneath climbing tomato vines, which makes executive chef Chris Davies wonder how long it will be until a ripe tomato falls on someone's head. As fall approaches, the garden becomes heavy with gourds and maturing root vegetables. Inside, every inch of available space in the dining room fills up with a rainbow of pickles and preserves as storage space dwindles.

"It seems that the dining scene is evolving to be more produce-focused," Davies says. "Ultimately, it has to, because we can't sustain this level of meat production. For us, it's really easy to sell somebody on a plate of nicely prepared vegetables when they're sitting out there in a garden. When we're packed, and the cook is in the garden trimming some lettuce, the whole restaurant is watching."

Homestead's interpretation of farm-to-table dining is a literal one, but it represents a shift in the industry in recent years toward a more sustainable, produce-heavy way of cooking, eating and thinking about food. Waste minimization is nothing new for restaurants, which strive for efficiency above nearly all else, and vegetables create little waste. But resourcefulness has become an increasingly trendy way to do business in a nation that lets 31% of its food go to waste.

Sustainability and minimizing food waste both ranked among 2015's top 10 trends for restaurants, according to the National Restaurant Association's annual chef survey. That coupled with increased calls among health advocates for Americans to eat a more vegetable-heavy diet is moving produce from the side to the center of the plate. Ever-resourceful chefs are embracing the whole vegetable—seeds, knobby ends, roots, stems and all. They're no longer relegating them to stocks or the compost pile.

## SATISFYING, MEATY OR DOWNRIGHT WEIRD

Rich Landau, chef/owner of upscale vegan restaurant Vedge in Philadelphia, says vegetables can be bold, satisfying and even meaty when given the right attention. "Chefs will give plenty of love and attention to the different cuts of meat, but I find there's a tendency to be overly precious with vegetables, like they're these pretty little flowers," Landau says. "They're actually full of deep, great textures and bold, meaty flavors. You just have to know how to bring them out."

Landau grills shiitakes, smokes leeks and eggplant, and chars fennel on hot coals to make ash. He uses fibrous kale stalks, dried shiitakes and seaweed to make a richly flavored, vegan dashi. He saves broccoli stems—which have more concentrated flavor than the trees—to make a verdant consommé. He roasts turnips with Middle Eastern spices until lusciously creamy, and serves them over the turnip greens, which exude a collards-like flavor when sauteed with garlic in olive oil.

Because turnip roots tend to be bitter, Davies likes to candy or ferment them. During fleeting ramp season, he purees the leaves for an unexpected filling for chicken confit falafel, plating

OPPOSITE: Chioggia beets and their greens, from *Vedge: 100 Plates Large and Small That Redefine Vegetable Cooking* (The Experiment, 2013).



them with the bulbs (pickled in an Egyptian marinade) and deep-fried tips. He confits hulking wild mushrooms in duck fat before finishing them on the grill for a steak-like texture and flavor.

Leaving vegetables whole makes for dramatic presentation but requires attention to the oft-varied cook times of each part, Landau says. Bok choy's stems, for one, require longer blanching times than the tender leaves.

One menu staple at Vedge is the smoked carrot kimchi "Reuben" featuring whole smoked carrots over sauerkraut white bean puree with fiery gochujang, served with pumpernickel bread. But the entire dish hinges on getting the texture of the carrot just right, Landau says. "The dish is presented with steak knives, and the knife has to glide though that carrot with little resistance," he says. "Being a vegan restaurant, the last thing we want is to serve a crunchy carrot. But we also can't give them baby food. Because carrots are tapered naturally, we do a trick where we put half on the grill and let the tops cook through first."

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**CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT:** 1) At Trellis Restaurant, carrot cake with grated carrot and carrot tops is topped with candied carrot peel and served with carrot juice caramel. 2) The Greens Salad at Trellis Restaurant, with whole-leaf herb flowers, cherry tomatoes and herb vinaigrette. 3) Scallop crudo with blood orange vinegar jam, Piment d'Espelette, pickled fennel, borage flower, salsify puree, chive and chive flowers at Homestead On The Roof.

## MAKING TIME FOR EXPERIMENTATION

As more and more chefs embrace the untapped potential of produce, requests have gotten more obscure for Nichols Farm & Orchard, Marengo, Illinois, which supplies dozens of Chicago's top restaurants.

"Someone will get their hands on an old cookbook, or see something on someone else's menu, and suddenly, an idea will spread," says second-generation farmer Nick Nichols. Recent off-beat requests include baby sunflowers (used in place of artichoke hearts), fava bean leaves (for sauteing), and the now-famous corn fungus, or huitlacoche. "More and more we're seeing restaurants wanting obscure ingredients, but we're also seeing them use more common produce in creative ways."

When it comes to the latter, necessity is often the mother of invention. Such is the case for Brian Scheehser, executive chef at Trellis Restaurant at The Heathman Hotel in Kirkland, Washington, who also tends the restaurant's 18-acre farm. Experimentation is key, he says. "You won't know what corn silks or carrot tops taste like deep-fried unless you fry them."

He also overplants certain crops, such as heirloom tomatoes, to ensure he'll have enough beautiful, impeccable ones to hold raw for slicing and plating. Then he cooks and pickles the gnarly ones into soup, purees, relishes and sorbets.

Or, when faced with an overabundance, he likes to create multiple expressions of a single ingredient—such as radishes—celebrating the different stages of growth and range of flavors through various preparations. “I’ll take all different radishes—tiny, huge, milder to spicy—and I’ll shave some really thin into a beautiful raw salad,” Scheehser says. “I’ll cut others in half and roast them to get this rich, intense flavor. Some I’ll smoke then saute in butter. You end up with all these different components of the same ingredient, which the guest looks at and says, ‘This is a radish?’”

But to allow time for experimentation, this chef-farmer has also learned the importance of processing vegetables the moment they arrive in the kitchen. “We pick, clean, sort, separate and wash everything the moment it arrives, because everybody gets busy, and then you end up with product that you’re pulling hair out over, saying, ‘Now what?’”

### FOSTERING A LOVE OF PRODUCE

During the busy, bountiful summer months at Homestead, Davies adds two morning shifts for his cooks each week, dedicated solely to weeding and harvesting and processing produce. To

foster excitement and creativity about preservation, he sets up idea boards each season where cooks can write down canning projects they plan to tackle.

“By the end of summer, I had my guys, instead of having to direct them, they would stay late,” he says. “I’d be leaving at 2 a.m., and they’d all be in our little room down there canning. And I’d say, ‘Are you guys off the clock?’ They’d say, ‘Yeah, we’re off the clock. We’re just doing this.’”

That’s partly why he often hires staff with an unmistakable love for and curiosity about gardening and produce. “I tend to go for people who are passionate, who want to see the garden and are asking questions about it. Or even when you bring somebody who doesn’t know what’s up there, I love to see their eyes light up.”

In the same way that our culture has embraced nose-to-tail dining, Landau says the evolution of dining toward a more veg-heavy future ultimately depends on the passion and efforts of individual restaurants and chefs to push it forward. “Anyone can top some cooked asparagus with Parmesan and a fried egg,” he says. “I want to see chefs rise up and showcase what vegetables are capable of.” ■

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**BELOW:** Early-spring sugo at Homestead comprises pappardelle tossed in beef short rib sugo with smoked green garlic and king trumpet mushrooms.

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