

EXECUTIVETRAVEL

Advice and insight for—and by—today's executive

Homegrown and great

restaurants

by Barbara Damrosch
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How forward-thinking chefs are taking the idea of fresh produce to heart.

EVERYBODY LIKES TO BE SPOILED A BIT WHEN THEY go out to dinner. Once this meant ingredients flown in at great expense, and maybe a strolling violinist. But the idea of luxury is changing. Restaurants that still offer white linen and candlelight are throwing a different kind of magic into the mix—salads that were picked just moments ago in a garden right outside the door, lamb from the flock you saw as you drove in, a rooster crowing as background music.

Ever since Alice Waters opened Chez Panisse in Berkeley, Calif., in 1971, the idea of using fresh, high-quality local ingredients has won over both chefs and the dining public. This means foraging, as Alice did, for small farmers close to home—or even growing food to supply the kitchen. For restaurants that take this step, the garden is the heart and soul of the place. The menus that result are happy collaborations between gardener, cook and the changing seasons.

The Ryland Inn, Whitehouse, New Jersey

Box 284, Route 22 West, 908/534-4011

For Chef Craig Shelton, the moment of truth came when he returned to America after cooking in France. “France is still the nation of artisanal agriculture,” he says. “French cuisine is all about its vegetables.” It was partly because he found American produce so tasteless that he bought the Ryland Inn. Shelton has gone on to win awards and raves for his sophisticated, seasonal cooking. Why western New Jersey? “The soil there is to die for,” Shelton explains. “After all, it’s the Garden State.” And it was near New York City. There was space for a garden, one that has since grown to several acres, supplying even more vegetables, fruits and herbs than the restaurant can use.

Visitors quickly get the point. If they ask about the white garlic chive blossoms floating atop their soup, someone will take them out to inspect the plant. According to head gardener Chip Shepherd, “It enhances the experience of dining to see the beets and baby lettuces beforehand.”

Blue Hill At Stone Barns, Pocantico Hills, New York

630 Bedford Road, 914/366-9600

Just north of New York City, near Tarrytown, a chef named Dan Barber is also cooking from the land. Having

supplied his Manhattan restaurant, Blue Hill, with produce from his grandparents' Massachusetts farm, he was excited to come aboard David Rockefeller's plan for a new farm, restaurant and education complex—now called The Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture—at the Rockefeller family's estate, Pocantico. At its heart are the magnificent Norman-style barns where John D. Rockefeller once raised Jersey cows, now a memorial to David's late wife Peggy, herself a hands-on farmer.

One of those buildings now houses Barber's new venture, Blue Hill at Stone Barns, as well as a small cafe where hikers in the adjoining Rockefeller State Preserve can refuel. At Barber's disposal is a half-acre, four-season greenhouse in addition to outdoor vegetable fields, pasture-raised sheep and poultry, and black Berkshire pigs foraging in the woods above the wine cellar. All this bounty seems to complement the chefs' cooking style, in which the personalities of the ingredients are intensified, never muddled together.

"The farm accentuates something that the chefs can't add in their seasoning," Barber says. For him, the memory of seeing the cauliflower planted and weeded, of watching it grow into the best he's ever tasted, is the point of the story. "If I can communicate that to the waiters, and then to the customers, I think it makes the food taste better." And for a bride saying her vows in rustic splendor or a corporate group taking a break from a seminar in the former hay barn, the sight of a tractor driving by is part of the fun.

Brix Restaurant, Yountville, California

7377 St. Helena Highway, 707/944-2749

In the heart of the Napa wine region, the popular Brix restaurant is blessed with a setting in full view of the Mayacaymus mountain range. Where a city restaurant might cater to a pre-theater crowd, for Brix it's "post-tasting." Pilgrims along the wine trail can relax among the owner's own cabernet vines and stroll through the production beds that supply the evening's meal. They can order the "tomato tower," made with concentric circles of tomatoes in contrasting hues, grown along with the basil that tops them and sprinkled with olive oil from Brix's own trees.

The 28-year-old chef, Ryan Jackson, says that the garden lured him to the job. "I grew up in a fruit farming family, so I know what it's like to pick a peach, a fig or an orange off the tree." Brix has fruits aplenty, including the pomegranates he uses to flavor sauces. He "builds the menu around the garden," in consultation with Sherylle Frank, who tends the crops year-round.

The Herbfarm, Woodinville, Washington

14590 N.E. 145th Street, 426/485-5300

At the Herbfarm, a restaurant 17 miles from Seattle, the produce comes from a combination of local growers, the restaurant's 6,000-acre display garden, and its two-acre mini-farm a mile up the Sammamish Valley—one of the most fertile valleys in the nation. It's winery country, but not grape country. (Those are grown in the eastern part of the state.) This is former dairyland, now largely planted to turf farms or tree and shrub nurseries.

Owners Carrie Van Dyck and Rob Zimmerman are doing their best to preserve a bit of the region's food-producing past. It doesn't hurt that their chef, Jerry Traunfeld, won a James Beard Award for his seasonal Northwest cuisine, and the gardens provide him ample inspiration. Angelica adds its strange pungency to rhubarb dishes in spring, and the needles of indigenous Douglas Fir perfume the sorbet served as an intermezzo between courses. Meals are a leisurely pleasure, capped by peaceful rest at the Willows Lodge next door. Cooking and gardening classes offer another reason to return.

Primo, Rockland, Maine

2 S. Main Street (Rt. 73), 207/596-0770

Primo, just over an hour north of Portland, is the brainchild of another James Beard winner, Melissa Kelly and

her partner, pastry chef Price Kushner. Kelly's cooking makes good use of the coast's fresh seafood, not to mention the resident pigs that keep her in homemade prosciutto, and food gardens far larger than you'd expect at a restaurant the size of a modest home. These supply most of the vegetables in summer, and two all-season greenhouses continue even during the cold Maine winter.

The minute you get out of the car, signs and paths encourage you to explore the growing areas. And clearly people do. "When they see it, they order it," Kelly notes, especially the salads or unusual crops like artichokes and cardoons. There is a feeling of excitement at this little spot, staffed with people who are young and forward-looking. And Primo already has a sister restaurant at a very different destination spot—the JW Marriott Grande Lakes in Orlando, Fla. The hotel chain gave Kelly free reign in setting up a restaurant with recycling and greens from its own organic garden. A similar collaboration is underway for the JW Marriott in Tucson.

I was curious to know whether growing their own food made any of these businesses more economical. Usually the produce barely pays for the labor, though Craig Shelton says that having his property assessed as farmland offsets what he spends on his garden staff. Typically, it's the value-added aspect of a beautiful, productive garden that makes the formula work. Gardens draw people in.

And it is clearly a growing trend. Melissa Kelly reports that the culinary students she meets are in love with the idea. And they're the voice of the future.



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