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COVER STORY: Local Color

Ingredients that are a hop, skip, and jump from a restaurant's back door inspire out-of-this-world dishes. Chefs, farmers, and customers all reap the rewards.

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JUNE 15, 2005 -- Gary Robins sniffs, squeezes, and samples his way through New York City's Union Square Greenmarket, mentally transforming the raw ingredients before him into that night's menu for his three-star, 80-seat Biltmore Room restaurant. The mustard greens he bought last week are no more, but he bags several bunches of ramps and orders ten cases of asparagus from a farmer he's dealt with before. He adds a box of edible flowers and a couple pounds of tiny sunchokes. The ability to roll with the punches—or the produce—is key when your menu is comprised of as much as 90% local ingredients. "I see what the earth is providing and plan from there," Robins says.

Market-driven menus are not exactly new—Alice Waters pioneered the movement back in Berkeley, CA, a generation ago. What is new is the emphasis on immediacy. Chefs like Robins are relying on products solely from their neck of the woods, establishing relationships with nearby farmers, breeders, and artisans to source the freshest and most flavorful ingredients. Thanks to urban farmers' markets in cities large and small, these relationships are forming in every area of the country—no matter

what the growing season. Some enterprising chefs have even planted their own small plots with select crops—one even using the rooftop of a Manhattan apartment building near her restaurant, Counter, to grow dozens of varieties of vegetables, fruits, and herbs.

"The local movement has expanded twenty-fold over the past few years," says Bruce Sherman, executive chef-partner of North Pond restaurant in Chicago. Not only are more chefs sourcing local ingredients, there are more farms supplying a greater diversity of products, he adds. Sherman even has farmers calling him in January asking what he'd like them to plant for North Pond's spring and summer menus.

Chefs are handling raw materials differently as well. Many have traveled far and wide to learn their craft, and their culinary experiences and exposure to the world's cuisines informs their cooking. They're not content to boil a just-picked ear of corn and serve it alongside a piece of grilled fish; they'll more likely toss that corn with wild mushrooms and baby chive blossoms and plate it beneath Asian-spiced pan-seared duck raised down the road. They're sourcing locally but cooking globally—a trend that today's more sophisticated, flavor-craving patrons are demanding.

The Biltmore Room's Robins is a good example. Spring came late to Manhattan this year, so even though his customers were requesting asparagus and baby arugula in late March, Robins

resisted. "I never rush the seasons," he says while inspecting the bottoms of asparagus he can tell were picked the day before. "This is the size and color I want for my menu and I trust this particular farm to deliver top quality."

Later that day, he'll turn the tender green stalks into an asparagus and soba noodle salad to accompany rice-crisped, seared soft shell crabs with lobster uni butter and fennel orange salsa. Other peak-of-the-season dishes include Roasted Beet and Arugula Salad (\$15), a Crisp Squash Blossom stuffed with crab and served with mango-chili sauce (\$17), and Rosemary Scented Roast Organic Chicken with ricotta gnocchi, spring peas, braised morels, and pickled ramps (\$31).

Although farmers' markets eliminate the middleman, they don't always save a chef money. Robins can get his ten cases of asparagus for \$20 less from a supplier, but he prefers to hand-select them to assure quality and flavor. "You never know what will show up when you have produce shipped," he says. "Plus, buying direct supports the small farmer and encourages more of them to grow food for restaurants. We all win in the end."

Nevertheless, it takes some effort on the part of the chef and farmer to make the relationship work. The Chefs Collaborative, a national organization dedicated to encouraging local sourcing and a sustainable food supply, stresses the importance of cultivating trust and fulfilling commitment. Restaurants need to buy consistently when a product is in season and establish a predictable ordering routine.

Ryan Hardy, executive chef at the Coach House in Martha's Vineyard, MA, features native-grown vegetables, island-raised meats, and locally caught seafood on his menu, but it took time to get suppliers behind his commitment. "There's a bit of a small-town mentality here, and I had to overcome islanders' mistrust of outsiders like me," Hardy says. But once he proved he was serious, the chef was able to "customize" orders. Now he has one farmer growing salad greens he specs, another raising heirloom pigs, and another finishing lamb on highland grass to impart a special flavor to the meat. Neighbors also supply scallops, striped bass, eggs, and milk for cheeses.

Every single item on Hardy's menu uses at least one local ingredient, showcased in such worldly dishes as Sweet Potato and Mascarpone Ravioli with island guanciale pancetta and sage brown butter (\$10) and Smoked Cider Braised Pork Shank with butternut squash puree, Morning Glory Farm kale and lemon gremolata (\$24). "What I try to do is embrace all the island has to offer while throwing in my experiences from the far corners of this country to nudge diners along," he says. His background in French, Italian, and Spanish culinary technique also comes into play.

Hardy admits that local sourcing costs more, but it fulfills his mission to spend his money where it provides the most perceived value. "People will pay 20-30% more for a plate when they know where the ingredients are coming from," he says. To educate guests, he notes farmers' names on the menu. Coach House diners care more about fresh and local than they do about organic—a way of thinking that's taking root in other restaurants as well.

Executive chef-partner Edward Lee of upscale 610 Magnolia in Louisville, KY, feels that organic is now a moot point for market-driven menus. "I want something picked less than 24 hours ago," he says. "If it's organic and spends too much time on a truck, it loses its quality and flavor and is inferior." Plus, smaller farmers who don't have the resources to pass today's licensing requirements are foregoing the organic label, even though they're growing excellent, pesticide-free produce that meets Lee's high standards.

For his 80% local-ingredient menu, Lee not only contracts with nearby farmers, he grows his own at Magnolia Farms in Southern Indiana. 610 Magnolia staff member Mindy Wiseman actually purchased the six acres of land and Lee agreed to buy the fruits of her labor.

"We plant hard-to-find items that complement the more conventional offerings of other local farms," says Lee, citing such crops as heirloom tomatoes and beans, Japanese cucumbers and eggplant, chantenay carrots, and okinawa sweet potatoes. He's also cultivating rarer herbs like anise hyssop, purslane, meadowsweet, and shiso.

"The farm directs my menu; I follow its lead. There are so many cultures swimming around in my head, I always have new ideas to tap," adds Lee, a Korean-American who has worked in kitchens in France, Tuscany, Belgium, and New York. At first, his cooking was a little limited in Louisville because he didn't have access to all the ingredients in his repertoire, but now he's able to do fresher, more adventurous food. The result is a contemporary seasonal menu that blends "Asian, French, and heartland American" influences. An amuse like Miso Grilled Swordfish with Pea Shoots and an entree of Wild Red King Salmon baked in cedar paper with caramelized parsnip gratin and anise hyssop emulsion exemplify his style. Prix fixe menus run \$65.

Local sourcing is not limited to high-end indies that can make do with small quantities from "boutique" farmers, ranchers, and artisans to meet their demand. The Washington, D.C.-based Clydes Restaurant Group, a multi-unit, casual-dining concept, has been putting it to the test for over 20 years.

One of Clydes' founders, John Laytham, liked to stop at roadside stands on his way home from the beach, bringing back tomatoes, corn, berries, and other just-picked produce. Meanwhile, the tomatoes and melons he was serving customers were being shipped rock-hard from points far to the west and south. So Laytham decided to cart some of these tastier local fruits and vegetables into his restaurant kitchen.

That was easier said than done back in the 1980s, when the supply network made it simpler—and more cost effective—to ship produce from thousands of miles away rather than truck it 40 miles. And then there was the problem of sourcing enough volume to service a five-unit concept. But those roadblocks didn't stop Laytham. He and corporate executive chef Tom Meyer discovered a bustling farmers market in Arlington, VA, drove down weekly, and loaded up an old Ford Bronco with tomatoes, asparagus, beans, and whatever was at its seasonal peak.

The idea didn't make sense logistically or economically at first, but the pair felt strongly enough to keep at it. "We were working with small farmers who had only sold on the retail level so we weren't getting any price breaks," says Meyer, now executive VP of Clydes. "But we wanted to carve a niche for ourselves in the casual dining segment, using quality ingredients to fight against the influx of the big chains." Since quantities were small, they turned the produce into menu specials, taking out newspaper ads urging customers to "come in for asparagus salad" or "blackberry pie so good, it will make a dog break its leash." Traffic built, as did relationships with farmers, and soon the restaurant group was able to capitalize on these relationships to work out better prices.

With 13 locations now operating in the Mid-Atlantic states and a network of farmers stretching from Virginia to Pennsylvania, it's no longer possible to visit with every vendor to place orders. But by sourcing from south to north, the growing season is long enough that the Clydes menus can offer 40-60% local ingredients. The cooking has also grown in scope, breaking through its all-American boundaries to include items like Asparagus Ravioli with grape tomatoes, tapenade vinaigrette, and goat cheese (\$14.95) and Grilled Monkfish Spiedini with dandelion greens (\$15.95).

Meyer says margins have improved. "We try to work with farmers who have a chef's mentality, sometimes even giving them the seeds to plant," he says.

Even fast-casual concepts are getting into the local sourcing movement. Although high food costs can be a deterrent, some QSRs get volume discounts from farm cooperatives; others get concessions for publicizing the producers. At the new Sellers Market, a fast-casual spot in San Francisco, founders Deborah and Jim Sellers are committed to promoting sustainable agriculture and local products. Free-range chickens and turkeys come from California poultry farms, cheeses from nearby creameries, and produce from local farmers. Bread and pastries come from an artisan bakery.

These are made into fresh sandwiches, salads, pizzas, soups, and hot specialties—none topping \$10. Best sellers include the BBQ Rotisserie Pulled Chicken Sandwich with smoked mozzarella, roma tomatoes, caramelized red onion & cabbage slaw (\$6.95) and the Pancetta Cobb Salad (\$7.95). More "international" fare is also available, including a Smoked Salmon & Fromage Blanc Tartine (\$7.95) and a Fennel Sausage & Cheddar Flatbread Frittata (\$6.95).

"The local providers love our approach," says Deborah. "It gives them the opportunity to sell to the masses, and they can't wait for our 'vendors day' when they offer samples to our customers and share their stories." With one location, it's not a challenge for these purveyors to meet demand, but the Sellers hope to expand. "We want to grow slowly—and 'organically,' she says with a laugh. "This way, we have the time to find local, sustainable producers who are hooked into distributors and can keep up with the volume." With Whole Foods Markets fueling the movement, Sellers believes there will be enough suppliers out there to keep up with expansion.

But local sourcing doesn't always work seamlessly. Small farmers are vulnerable to natural disasters, and bad weather or blight can significantly impact availability and price. While the profusion of local ingredients is a chef's paradise in spring and summer, winter months offer slim pickings in the Midwest or Northeast. Operators committed to the movement are forced to find creative ways to track down producers and develop menus.

Regina Mehallick of Rbistro in Indianapolis admits it's a struggle in the winter. Go to her restaurant's web site and you'll find her motto: "We only use ingredients fresh from the farmer, so the menu has to change every week. As much as we'd like to be different, you just can't grow a great tomato in January." Still, she has discovered local purveyors of lamb, duck, chickens, turkey, pork, rabbit, pink lady apples, and mushrooms—grown nearby and available year round. She even uses a local coffee roaster and buys artisanal chocolate truffles from a neighbor.

"The proportions of my menu change in the winter," Mehallick explains. "I focus on using more protein and less produce." As her reputation has grown, she has also attracted additional small producers—some of whom sought her out. "After I appeared on a local TV show, a fellow who raises tilapia and bass called me up and asked if I wanted to buy from him," she says. When you show a commitment to sourcing local, it snowballs."

In the end, the effort benefits everyone—farmer, customer, and chef.

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