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# EATER AT LARGE

BY BRIAN HALWEIL

## HANDS-ON CHEFS

Theresa Dilworth has a dream. Ms. Dilworth, the owner and wine-maker at Comtesse Thérèse, is converting a 1830s farmhouse in Aquebogue that used to be the Jamesport Saddlery Shop, into a restaurant. The living room and parlor will be the dining rooms. The upstairs bedrooms will host private dinner parties.

Sounds quaint enough. But here's the revolutionary part. Nearly all of the items on the menu will be grown and made on Long Island. The wines will come from the owner's vineyard as well as some neighboring estates. The beer will come from Blue Point Brewery, the Southampton Publick House, and the Brooklyn Brewery, which "is technically on Long Island," Ms. Dilworth noted. Free-range ducks will come from Jurgielewicz Duck Farm in Moriches. Ms. Dilworth will grow garlic, rosemary, oregano, parsley, and other herbs on part of her vineyard, and keep chickens for eggs.

The menu will revolve around ingredients that are available year-round, including potatoes, cabbage, garlic and onions, duck, and assorted fish and shellfish. (To conquer seasonal limitations, she'll dry peppermint for tea and freeze garlic-parsley butter.) Items like apples or tomatoes, available only for a few months will turn up as seasonal specials. "I want to have simple, quintessential dishes," said Ms. Dilworth. "I'm not looking for potatoes with foie gras or caviar. I just want really good Long Island potatoes. Maybe with chives."

Ms. Dilworth is still completing the permitting process and hopes to be open in 2006, but the mantra for the menu is set. "The closer, the better," she said. "Homegrown if possible."

The concept—have a farm, start a restaurant—isn't completely new. When Ed Tuccio bought the historic Tweed's restaurant and hotel in Riverhead, he converted it to Tweed's Restaurant and Buffalo Bar to serve steaks and burgers cut from the animals on his 500-acre bison farm nearby.

Only time will determine the feasibility and demand for such cuisine, but Ms. Dilworth and Mr. Tuccio are not alone. Part throwback to a time before intercontinental shipping and part revolution in local cuisine, they are two of many East End chefs who are not just building menus around local fare, but growing, catching, and even hunting some of their own ingredients. (Any chef worth his salt should at least be able to plant a small herb garden.)

"You can't beat fresh fish," said Arie Pavlou, chef at Coeur des Vignes on Southold's Main Road, who bolsters his menu with fish he catches "whenever I can get up in the morning." Freshness is a common motivation for hunter-gatherer chefs, but there are also practical considerations. For instance, when striped bass (the only fish Mr. Pavlou is not allowed to catch, but which he buys from commercial fishermen) are eating bunker, they have a fishy, pungent smell that lends itself to certain dishes. But, later in the season, when bass are eating shrimp, the meat is incredibly sweet. "You can't serve the one

fish with the same sauce all the time," Mr. Pavlou said. "Being a fisherman and one with nature and a chef, I'm more in touch with creating dishes that are from nature."

John Yashinowsky, chef at Fresno in East Hampton and an avid surf fisherman, also waxed philosophic. "I realize it's a limited resource and we have to take care of it," Mr. Yashinowsky said recently, as he sliced up some weakfish from Montauk. "If there's no habitat, there are no sand eels, there is no bunker, and there are none of the fish we feed on." Mr. Yashinowsky, who fishes around the tides before and after work starting in late summer, compared his own situation to the story of French Laundry chef Thomas Keller asking one of his suppliers to send him 11 live rabbits and then forcing himself to render them by hand. "I know what's involved in catching that fish," said Mr. Yashinowsky.

Hands-on contact can also give a chef access to unusual, if not superior, ingredients that aren't available commercially. Among Mr. Pavlou's favorite catches is sea robbin, a frightening looking, spiny creature that is so misunderstood that many cruel fishermen still pierce them through the skull before tossing them back into the water. "I'll catch buckets of them," said Mr. Pavlou, who knows that the fish are revered in the Mediterranean, where they form the main ingredient in bouillabase. "They eat shellfish, lots of mussels, baby lobsters and shrimp," he said. "They eat better than I do sometimes."

At the Inn Spot on the Bay in Hampton Bays, guests marvel at the view of Shinnecock Bay from the dining room. But few realize that owners and chefs Colette Connor and Pamela Wolfert dig clams and oysters from those same flats. "Our shtick at the restaurant is we really want to know who touched it," said Ms. Connor. "We want it to be fresh and wiggling when we get it." And when a curious guest noticed Ms. Wolfert clamming before dinner, she invited him to scratch for his own meal. In fact, the couple has developed such a rep-



A few chefs who like to get their hands dirty. **Left:** Colin Ambrose of Estia's Little Kitchen, who raises herbs and fruit trees behind the restaurant, and vegetables on a plot in Amagansett. **Opposite, from left to right:** chef Joe Realmuto in Nick & Toni's garden, Arie Pavlou, chef at Coeur des Vignes, and Pamela Wolfert and Colette Connor of the Inn Spot on the Bay.

Photographs: Stephen Munschin



utation for self-sufficiency (they make preserves from plums, tomatoes, and rhubarb from their family garden in Quogue and they grind clam and oyster shells into fertilizer with a glass crusher at their art gallery), that many of their customers come in demanding off-the-menu herbs and veggies they know are ripening in the Inn Spot's garden. "We have herb scissors hanging up in the kitchen," said Ms. Connor. "That's the way it should be."

**"Nothing ever touches the refrigerator. Straight from the ground to the plate."**

Chefs fortunate enough to have access to some nearby land can also take matters into their own hands. For the last nine years, Joe Realmuto, the chef at Nick and Toni's in East Hampton, has drawn ingredients from a shy acre plot behind the restaurant. He chooses from asparagus, onions, and an array of heirloom eggplants which he roasts in the restaurant's wood-burning oven. But matching up plantings with menu items hasn't always been easy. "The first year there were so many tomatillos that we were throwing them at each other and having tomatillo wars," Mr. Realmuto remembered recently. "Now, we walk outside at two in the afternoon to pick the basil and tomatoes. Nothing ever touches the refrigerator. Straight from the ground to the plate." Scott Chaskey of Quail Hill Farm, who was pushing a dibbler over the field to create holes for tomato plants, stopped to proclaim. "Everyone loves a garden." The chef responded, "Especially when someone comes in and takes care of it for you."

As the notion of self-sufficient restaurants catches on, chefs are rais-

ing the bar even higher. Colin Ambrose, chef and owner of Estia's Little Kitchen in Sag Harbor, recently planted 20 blueberry bushes between his restaurant and the road. The bushes compliment his existing menagerie of apple, peach, and pear trees, Asian wine berries, and kiwi vines. (Mr. Ambrose also grows an acre of mesclun, leeks and assorted vegetables and herbs on a neighbor's property in the heart of Amagansett.) "It all makes its way to the plate," Mr. Ambrose said in late May as he inspected the blueberry blossoms. He usually has enough peaches to make a handful of pies and run pancake specials for two or three weeks. "Does that mean we don't have to buy blueberries?" he asked. "No. But we make specials with it. We have fun with it."

Right now, his biggest priority is setting up compost bins to feed his expanding gardens and make use of the 100 pounds of coffee grounds, 300 dozen eggshells, and an untold amount of potato skins, carrot peelings and other food waste the restaurant generates each week during the summer. He hopes to supplement his "black gold" with manure from the pheasant farm up the road.

When the garden is exploding in the summer, customers at Estia's look for roasted carrot purée made with tofu, soymilk and a little ginger, and two-hour salad, made from greens harvested at most two hours before service. The menu becomes not only an expression of Mr. Ambrose's work in the kitchen, but his sweat in the field. "When I can tell the customers that I seeded them, and I weeded them, and I picked them," he said. "That's something I find great pride in." □

*This article is the last in a series on chefs who favor local ingredients.*

