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SIX DOLLARS MAY/JUNE 2011

Mar'sel's Michael Fiorelli prepares a dish with fresh produce from the restaurant garden designed by Geri Miller.

the gardening chef

It's funny how fads come and go in restaurants. Once upon a time, the measure of a restaurant's success was its ability to procure the most foreign and out-of-season exotica possible. In the era of the carbon footprint, however, quite the opposite is true. Featuring only local and seasonal produce is now the real standard for a chef; if you aren't photographed personally prowling your neighborhood farmers market in kitchen whites, you might want to consider a new PR firm.

WRITTEN BY BONNIE GRAVES



Clockwise from far left: Patio dining at Eveleigh; Chef Toft's butter lettuce salad; freshly shucked oysters



Dining al fresco at the long table on Tiato's sunlit garden patio.

he *locavore* movement gets even more hyper-local with the advent of the gardening chef. Worried you don't have enough time to make that early morning market run to secure herbs and veggies for the weekend? Try planning a season ahead and growing the goods yourself, onsite at your restaurant.

That's exactly what a select group of SoCal chefs is boldly trying to do. While no one has the luxury of a lease that accommodates parking and simultaneously challenges Oxnard's fields-of-plenty, ambitious chefs are nevertheless growing more and more of their goods in their own backyards.

Let's be realistic for a moment here. If you're doing 300+ covers on Saturday night, you're never going to have the acreage to grow enough lettuce, let alone enough workhorse carrots, onions and celery for your most basic mirepoix. The gardening chef is more about supplementing than supplying; products that thrive in containers with limited maintenance are key. Citrus trees, herbs, artisanal berries and accent veggies are space-friendly choices that augment the diner's experience, with produce grown just a few feet away from their table.

Mr. Sexton and I recently dined at two relatively new restaurants with chefs who show commitment not just to working with local farmers but to growing and using their own stuff when possible. At Tiato in Santa Monica, we were startled to realize that the House of An restaurant family (of Crustacean in Beverly Hills) had opened this huge new outpost in what was formerly the Lionsgate/MTV commissary. Alas for my husband ... as the long years he put in at 2700 Colorado Avenue featured substantially less tasty food choices!

Daughter Catherine An is the mastermind behind Tiato, which showcases some of her mother's classic dishes, like garlic noodles, in what is otherwise a thoroughly modern setting. The Tiato Market Garden Café takes its name from the Vietnamese "tia tô" herb, which

Chef Helene An uses in dishes like rice noodle chicken salad and "Mama's Eggplant Tofu." This gorgeous purple and green leaf features a minty-cinnamon flavor, which we tried muddled into a Prosecco-based cocktail that was off-the-hook yummy.

Catherine was in the house when we visited Tiato and was kind enough to give us a quick tour of the capacious outdoor patio ringed by organic herb, pepper and citrus tree plantings. She mentioned casually that she had spearheaded the eco-chic design that is part of Tiato's allure. (I loved her use of recycled Wyoming snow-fence wood set against raw concrete floors.)

Unsurprisingly, Chef Helene's pho was phenomenal, and her signature Euro-Vietnamese fusion food fuses beautifully with the market-garden feeling at Tiato. What this location offers is space, space, space. It's far and away the largest outdoor patio on the Westside and is increasingly a draw for private events. Happily, the An family is wisely allocating a good portion of that space to a fruitful restaurant garden that other chefs can merely covet from afar.

Over at Eveleigh on Sunset Boulevard, Chef Jordan Toft is also getting dirt under his fingernails. With considerably less space to work with, this cheerful young Aussie manages to harvest a surprising amount of produce from this stretch of shop-til-you-drop Los Angeles.

Eveleigh (pronounced "everly," or so I am told) is like a surrealist oasis amidst so much conspicuous consumption. What used to house thoroughly pedestrian Kenneth Cole footwear now feels like a retro speakeasy, with salvaged wood everything, mismatched flea market chairs and a striking chandelier above the bar made from repurposed cow skulls.

The bar is where the action begins at Eveleigh. I liked their fancy-pants, large-format ice cubes made in a special machine for a "hard freeze" that keeps your cubes from splintering upon shaking, and which

take longer to melt in the glass and thus dilute your poison of choice. Really.

Herbs and peppers freshly picked from the restaurant's small garden complement boutique spirits like cloudy aromatic gins and smoky mezcals. They've even sourced an amazing line-up of handcrafted bitters made right here in Los Angeles. This place could (and might) convert me to cocktails, though the wine list is expertly curated in its own right.

Mr. Sexton and I had dinner in the partially enclosed patio at Eveleigh on a wild and windy night of torrential rain. While I sensed the anxiety of employees looking up, we remained dry and happy in a banquet room that abutted a planter filled with young strawberries, mini peppers and savory herbs. Food highlights from Chef Toft's menu included a pitch-perfect hamachi crudo with lemons freshly picked from the patio's trees and a tasty and weather-appropriate entrée of beef cheeks.

A word on water—the casualness with which servers bring you filtered "tap" without dialogue of any sort confirms for me the death of the bottled water industry. It's so not a good time to be Evian, don't you think?

I want to talk about vegetable side dishes. About delicious Brussels sprouts and chunks of roasted butternut squash that I am craving again instead of the lame, microwaved popcorn that currently accompanies my writing. I've traveled extensively in Australia, and Chef Toft's food reflected for me the same casual confidence that Aussies, notorious for self-deprecation and brutal competitiveness, display as a national trait.

Eveleigh was great, really great on all levels, and makes me wish that I were a decade younger and still living in WeHo so I could make a fun for a cocktail right now. Sigh. I will have to make do with the popcorn.

Tiato
2700 Colorado Avenue
Santa Monica
310-866-5228, tiato.com

Eveleigh
8752 Sunset Boulevard
West Hollywood
424-239-1630, theeveleigh.com

Yes, You Can

Five things everyone should plant at home

WRITTEN BY BONNIE GRAVES

The old REM song "Gardening at Night" has new meaning when I think about trying to make time in our busy family schedule for growing veggies. I am also cursed with a notorious black thumb that might just be related to my casual approach to watering. I recently asked Master Gardener Geri Miller for some help. Geri has designed commercially viable gardens for super resorts like Terranea and for smaller restaurants like Four Daughters Kitchen. Here are her recommendations for the top five things even a novice can grow in SoCal.

HERBS like rosemary, oregano, thyme and mint (mint is invasive, so grow it in a pot) "In addition to being useful in the kitchen or bar and easy to grow, these herbs are great companions in the edible garden, repelling rodents and damaging insects."

LETTUCES "Although they don't like it when it's very hot, we can grow lettuces throughout the year here on the coast by giving them a bit of sun protection. Many beautifully colored varieties are now common in the better nurseries. Try varieties like Lolla Rosa, Red Sails, Freckles, Red & Green Oak Leaf, Salad Bowl and Mesclun Mix."

RADISHES "Well...of course. That's why we all grew them in elementary school. Up & out in 30 days!"

ZUCCHINI "The big, burly workhorse of the garden. Fairly trouble-free and very productive. There's a reason we end up making dessert bread with it."

CARROTS "They require a bit more patience and loose, well-draining soil but are very rewarding. Favorite variety of Chef Fiorelli's of mar'sel at Terranea: carnival carrots. All the colors (well almost) of Mardi Gras beads!"

For more expert advice from Geri, check out her website at groedibles.com or read her excellent blog at huffingtonpost.com/geri-miller.



PHOTO BY TIA PHOTOGRAPHY

Geri in the garden at Four Daughters Kitchen.