



Ever-smaller vegetables, along with sprouts, greens and blossoms, bring a fresh face to well-known varieties.

ANDREW SPURGIN / WATERS FINE CATERING



Seaweed imparts a taste of the wild ocean to a soba noodle and enoki mushroom salad at Cal-a-Vie in San Diego.

CHRIS WOOLLEY

THE *Fresh* FRONTIER

Younger, wilder, super-small and multipurposed: the many ways menus are upgrading produce

BY LINDSAY STERLING

If you're worried that there's nothing new under the sun, it's time to get out of the kitchen and into the garden, where the first green growth of an onion might inspire an entire tasting menu. Or head to the market, where a pioneering farmer could cultivate new ideas and ingredients for your kitchen.

In the process of seeking and experimenting with new ingredients, chefs do more than find something for the daily special or the latest trend. By getting to know the ins and outs of a new ingredient, like the pollen of the fennel plant, chefs explore entire territories of modern American cuisine. Very often, the produce category is where new ideas take root.

OLD PLANTS, NEW PARTS

Pea tendrils and squash blossoms are one way traditional produce is staying fresh in the hands of creative chefs and growers. Using all parts of the plant does more than show respect for food sources; it's also a means of innovation. Celery leaves, for instance, most often end up in the trash, the stockpot or, at their most useful, as an old-school garnish for a bloody mary. However, Steve Johnson, executive chef of Rendezvous in Cambridge, Mass., uses the leaves' tender bitterness to contrast with the mildness of potato gnocchi and the sweetness of lobster.

"They're used a lot in Latin American cooking as a last-minute addition on the top of beans," notes Johnson. "They are a bitter counterpoint and definitely an underutilized source."

Celery leaves show up on chef Champe Speidel's acclaimed menu at Persimmon in Bristol, R.I. Speidel adds them to a warm salad of roasted, native baby beets, toasted almonds, green apple and navel orange dressed with honey and orange-blossom vinegar. He also makes full use of the

QUICK-TAKE

THIS STORY TAKES A LOOK AT:

- ▶ How chefs are using new parts of familiar plants
- ▶ Micro-greens, shoots, blossoms and other signs of a youth movement on menus
- ▶ The chef-farmer connections that are changing produce supplies and menus



WANNI IZAKAYA

FESTIVAL OF FRESHNESS

Produce Marketing Association's recent foodservice event puts produce front and center

The Produce Marketing Association's (PMA) Foodservice Conference & Exposition has grown into an invaluable resource for operators looking for the latest produce trends and the freshest menu ideas. This year's event, held in Monterey, Calif. in July, was the most exciting yet. The lineup included cooking demonstrations by two of the nation's most notable chefs, Travel Channel star Anthony Bourdain and former White House chef Walter Scheib. Other activities included field tours, where attendees saw tender spinach leaves hand-cut for harvest; educational sessions; trend talk; and interactive menu-development sessions led by *Flavor & The Menu* contributor and chef Robert Danhi. He explored how industry buzzwords like "sustainable," "local" and "heirloom" will play out and examined unexpected produce opportunities that are emerging from restaurant bars. Carrot colada, anyone?

One product highlight from this year's show was fresh garbanzo beans, showcased by Califresh of California. Fresh garbanzos can be wok-charred for great flavor and eaten right out of the pod as a snack, or shelled and added to salads or other dishes, much like edamame. The event also showed how the right packaging can make or break a product in foodservice. Earthbound Farms introduced a new plastic case with a shallow profile for easy storage of mixed lettuces. Bob Engle from Gourmet Mushrooms showcased a two-pillow-pack case option for handling mushrooms, including the company's Trumpet Royales, Forest Namekos, Velvet Pioppini Albas and Brown Clamshells. This simple idea will bring a greater variety of mushrooms to restaurant kitchens, and with little waste.

The show attracted more than 1,500 industry professionals, including chefs, restaurant operators, menu developers, grower-shippers, distributors and suppliers. Next year's Foodservice Conference & Expo is scheduled for July 25-27, 2008, in Monterey, Calif. For more information on this and other PMA events, visit www.pma.com.

Produce demos, menu strategies and presentations by high-profile chefs like Anthony Bourdain and Walter Scheib (right, with PMA President Bryan Silbermann), made the PMA Foodservice Conference & Expo a stand-out event.



PRODUCE MARKETING ASSOCIATION

chive and pea plants, sprinkling the blossoms as well as the greens.

MULTIPURPOSED PRODUCE

Corn is another vegetable that's being multipurposed. Sous Chef Jason Graham of Cal-a-Vie in San Diego simmers de-kerneled corncobs in water and blends the resulting sweet corn water with vegetable stock. He finishes this healthy corn-chowder base with just enough light coconut milk to give the soup body and creamy consistency. He rounds it all out with purple, red and yellow marble-sized potatoes and adds kernels of Scarlet Red

Sweet Corn at the last minute, so it retains its unusual color.

This trademarked red corn, grown by Salinas, Calif.-based Colorful Harvest, is a traditionally bred hybrid that contains 20 percent more protein than yellow or white corn and 250 percent more antioxidants. It also introduces an exciting new color.

Andrew Spurgin, executive director and chef of San Diego-based Waters Fine Catering, gets excited when thinking about the possibilities of fennel: the bulbs, the fronds and, particularly, the pollen, which he uses as a finishing spice on an heirloom-tomato salad



PERSIMMON

Often overlooked, tender celery leaves crown a warm, roasted-beet salad at Persimmon in Bristol, R.I.

with burrata, a fresh, soft Italian cheese. He gives the salad a finish of blood-orange oil.

“Fennel pollen is powdery, with a little crunch, like little seeds. It enhances flavor like salt would,” Spurgin explains. As with salt, he cautions against overdoing. “[The pollen] has a fennely, anise kind of flavor. Tarragon, fennel, fennel pollen, anise seed — they’re almost in the same group, but they’re different.”

Spurgin also uses fennel pollen in a dish featuring polenta with Gorgonzola, black Mission fig and crisp pancetta.

YOUTH MOVEMENT

Other chefs are going even further with fennel parts. For instance, the micro-green of the fennel plant, the first couple inches of growth, is just one of more than 200 varieties of young, edible plants David Sasuga grows at Fresh Origins in San Marcos, Calif.

Spurgin likes Sasuga’s trademarked Micro Tangerine Lace, a lacy green that tastes like a blend of tangerine and orange. He uses it

to top a dish of wild Alaska halibut layered with deeply smoky Spanish chorizo cooked with rice beans, delicate beans the size of rice grains.

Without the bitterness often found in mature greens, micro-greens of onion, cabbage, dill, beet and other herbs and vegetables can add new shades of flavor, texture and color.

“Any plant consumed as a vegetable has the potential to be a micro-green,” Sasuga points out.

This guideline gives chefs a lot of leeway and has prompted many to try their own green thumbs, raising favorite plants under grow lights or on light-filled kitchen windowsills and plucking them as soon as they sprout. To keep pace with the demand for the newest and coolest micros, Sasuga and the many San Diego chefs he supplies are mixing flavorful blends.

Sasuga’s trademarked Micro Mirepoix Mix contains the micro-greens of celery, carrot and onion plants, an entertaining play



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on the traditional vegetable trio that begins so many recipes.

OTHER YOUNG THINGS

A growing number of small U.S. farmers are harvesting the uppermost young leaves and tendrils of the pea plant, a delicacy Rendezvous' Johnson buys from Nesenkeag Cooperative Farm in Litchfield, N.H.

"They taste more like peas than peas do," observes Johnson. He likes to sauté them with garlic. Other chefs use them in mixed salads and as garnishes.

Likewise, some chefs aren't always waiting for fist-sized bulbs of garlic to develop. Many also use green garlic, the whole young garlic plant harvested in spring when the bulb is still undeveloped and looks more like a scallion. As an alternative to traditional bread service, chef Kendal Duque at Sepia, a new fine-dining venue in Chicago, offers flatbread sprinkled with chopped, sautéed green garlic and maitake mushrooms.

"I haven't seen green garlic much on menus in Chicago, except for at Blackbird, but it's prevalent in menus out West," notes Duque. "Chez Panisse made a green-garlic and semolina soup. It's got the mild, almost sweet flavor of garlic but none of the harshness."

CHEF-GROWER CONNECTIONS

In 1995, before the term "micro-greens" even existed, Sasuga was running a seedling-production facility. One day one of his chef clients came by to check on his tomato seedlings and spied inch-tall basil seedlings. Sasuga recalls the chef saying, "Wow, is that basil? If you were to cut that, it's something we would really like in the restaurants." And thus began Fresh Origins' foray into micro-greens.

Bob Harrington, the president and owner of Specialty Produce of San Diego, which supplies restaurants with Sasuga's greens, reports, "Seven years ago, we sold \$200 to \$400 worth of micro-greens a week. Today, we sell \$10,000 worth a week."

New varieties of micro-greens, like the Micro Tangerine Lace chef Andrew Spurgin uses to complement wild Alaska halibut, heighten interest in the next great green.



CALIFORNIA AVOCADO COMMISSION

Blossoms and sprigs add a “get-them-while-they’re-young” vibrancy to familiar dishes.

Duque has developed similarly fruitful relationships with Chicago-area growers, explaining, “What we’re trying to do is be more particular about what we use and showcase what we find with our farmers. We have a good relationship with them. They’ll grow something particular for us. They’ll direct us to what would grow best. We talk about what they think I should use. David Cleverdon, a farmer from Kinnikinnick Farm [in Caledonia, Ill.] at Green City Market, is always picking my brain, looking for a challenge.”

Larger-scale growers like Colorful Harvest also bring new varieties to menus, growing colorful heirloom carrots, purple artichokes, violet broccoli and orange cauliflower for produce buyers at high-volume restaurants. The largest seed developer in the world, Seminis, has expressed interest in developing relationships with chefs to better understand what they’d like to see in their kitchens.

TAMING THE WILD

Increasingly, wild produce is called upon to bring unique flavors and a refined-yet-rustic aura to the menu. Chefs looking for even wilder forms of inspiration are building relationships with foragers. And where foragers lead, growers often follow.

The presence of wild rocket at restaurants like Sepia and Rendezvous is an interesting take on the wild phenomenon, because the variety, also known as Sylvetta, is not

foraged but cultivated and available for sale from U.S. growers.

Sylvetta tastes different than regular arugula, says Johnson: “It’s greener, the leaves are as thick as two or three sheets of paper and meatier; it’s less hot-mustardy and more peppery than arugula. It’s fantastic stuff.”

Johnson grew his own once with seeds from Johnny’s Selected Seeds of Winslow, Maine. “A certain portion went to seed, and it came back seven straight years,” he notes.

A similar phenomenon is miner’s lettuce, or winter purslane. The wild green, native to the Sierras, is now appearing under the name Claytonia in upscale mixed-green salads in a number of Northeast restaurants during winter and spring.

Seaweed is another once-wild ingredient that’s now being cultivated, or aquacultured, on these shores. From red ogo seaweed, grown off the shores of Carlsbad, Calif., and available through Specialty Produce, to dulce, kelp, alaria and other varieties harvested by the Franklin, Maine-based Maine Coast Sea Vegetables, seaweed comes in chips, flakes and ready-to-use kelp noodles. Whether in traditional Japanese preparations or as a salad element, seaweed has a lot to offer a chef: dramatic colors, textures, brininess, depth of flavor and health benefits.

Back at Cal-a-Vie, Graham makes a wakame seaweed and soba-noodle salad with sesame, chile and a little soy sauce and serves it with a chilled lobster spring roll.

“Customers love it,” he reports, cautioning that seaweed may not be ready for prime time quite yet. “It’s an acquired thing. People who love seaweed swear by it; others could care less.”

Graham toes a fine line familiar to chefs: trying to expose customers to new foods without forcing the issue. As Sepia’s Duque explains, the point of serving new produce is not necessarily to educate people, “but just to expose them to it.” ☞

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- ▶ **WALK ON THE WILD SIDE:** Try a foraged ingredient or two for that refined-yet-rustic appeal
- ▶ **JUST A DASH:** Make a big impact with a sprinkle of fennel pollen or slivers of seaweed