

WHEN A CHEF IS ON THE PATCH

BY GINA MALLET

If there's a minty smell in the air, blame the newest, hottest, most passionate restaurant trend: chefs growing their own herbs and veggies. It's the ultimate organic high. A chef simply needs a roof or a nearby patch, raised beds or big pots with perfect soil, a watering system and an enthusiastic and/or tolerant landlord. You don't even have to be patient because a garden blossoms so fast. Customers are mainlining fresh 'n' local, anguishing over carbon miles and they love the idea of biting down on a parsley wand or zucchini flower picked moments ago a mere 100 feet away.

The locavore phenomenon is like a tsunami. For years, organic was a cloud on the horizon. Eighteen years ago, Jamie Kennedy founded the Feast of Fields organic celebration (this year, it's on Sept. 16 at Everdale Organic Farm). There was foodie buzz but it was still in the margins. George McNeil, the food and beverage manager of the Royal York Hotel, was another pioneer when he began gardening on the hotel's roof in 1998. But it wasn't until the public was turned on by three recent books, *Omnivore's Dilemma*, *Animal Vegetable Miracle* and *The 100-Mile Diet*, that the idea breached the mainstream.

But where do I find my gardener-chef? Here is the pick of the crop.

Perfect parsley at 360 Who's that picking the basil at the base of the CN Tower? A big guy with a trug in chef's whites and a black skullcap — Peter George is executive chef of 360, the tallest revolving resto in the world and the biggest restaurant complex in Toronto. So, what's he doing down here, strolling and sniffing the herbs in two long raised beds? Indulging a passion.

George started planting two 85x7-foot beds three years ago and is now producing all the herbs he needs for the CN Tower's three restaurants — 360, Horizon, a brasserie, and the fast-food Market Place — which together serve in the neighbourhood of 1,500 meals a day. George says proudly, "We're a scratch kitchen," which means everything is freshly made, even the sandwiches, which include stuffings like herb-flavoured home-smoked turkey.

George bites enthusiastically into a sour, sharp sorrel leaf that looks like a big green rabbit ear. "I use it



Peter George, executive chef at 360, harvesting fresh herbs in his garden at the base of the CN Tower. "We're a scratch kitchen," he says.

as a chiffonade with my spinach and artichoke ravioli dusted with fennel pollen." I taste French tarragon which is like eating licorice. Giant basil leaves for pesto. He frowns on the invasive chocolate mint. "Taste it," he commands. It tastes like Cadbury's. He waves a branch

of flat-leaved parsley. "I only use Italian; you put it in any dish and it makes that dish better. Thyme and rosemary, they sit on the palate and you have to be very careful when you use them — but parsley brings out the naturalness of food." He inhales French lavender blossoms

and notes, "I make chicken glazed with lavender honey." Success breeds empire building. George has taken over a patch of hillside for a fine show of Sweet 100 cherry tomatoes and a potato plot. He digs out a big white potato. Next year, he's going to plant Klondike

Rose, a red-skinned yellow potato, and fingerlings. An apprentice is now hovering over the scotch bonnet peppers. George smiles. Some young cooks raised before the organic buzz don't know chervil from oregano. "It's important to know how food is grown

and where it comes from," says George. Now his mission is to pass on his passion.

Paola's peach tomatoes at George "It's a pride thing," says Lorenzo Loseto, executive chef of George, the restaurant in Verity, the professional women's club on Queen Street East. "You're so proud to be growing your food."

Three years ago, Loseto started a small pot garden on the sun-drenched terrace above the restaurant and since then he's been picking tomatoes, zucchini flowers, Vietnamese coriander, chili peppers, lettuces for the kitchen all summer long. Arugula grown without pesticides. "Sure, the arugula had little holes, but who cared?"

The pot garden fluctuates. Last week, the tomato crop was so heavy that "We didn't have to buy cherry tomatoes." Other times he turns to his secret weapon — Mama Paola.

Loseto grew up learning the difference between fresh-picked and supermarket listless from his mother's Brampton garden: "I got

sushi chefs asked for.

And there's so much more. Hops trailed on lattice and Vidal and Cabernet Franc vines covering a wall. Garcelon has even more ambitious plans. As he strolls through his garden, he's begun noticing his fellow creatures, the ladybugs, butterflies and bees. "Starting next month," he says, "we are going to put in beehives — imagine how the honey will taste!"

Cowbell's roof — for the loveage Mark Cutrara started planting long before he opened the all fresh 'n' local Cowbell in Parkdale. The first challenge was getting to the restaurant roof. "I had to climb a ladder and go through a hatch." Quite undeterred, Cutrara lugged up 50 16-litre pails (recycled cooking-oil containers), sacks of purest top soil, a hose for watering and put in "mostly herbs I can't find at the market." That means chervil, a rejuvenating herb that has a faintly antiseptic flavour. Borage is another herb rarely found in markets, and then are the chilis and edible flowers such as marigolds.

And what on earth is loveage for? It reminds me of celery without celery's outrageous assertion. Cutrara combines loveage with parsley and his own home-cured ham to create a unique dish.

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an understanding of when to eat what and an appreciation for what quality is."

Today, his mother sends him organic lettuce, cucumbers, tomatoes of all kinds — heirloom, Italian Roma and peach tomatoes. A peach tomato! I bite into this small translucent yellow fruit and — bingo — it tastes peachy. Then Loseto offers one of his mother's amazing skinny green beans which he can't do without. "I use them with cherry tomatoes for a sashimi dish."

Anyone for Cabernet Franc on the Royal York Roof? David Garcelon, the executive chef of Fairmont Royal York, is stepping with élan into George McNeil's gardening clogs. Catching the zeitgeist, he's taking tours of guests around the roof garden. It's all part of the Centennial Tea package celebrating the hotel's 100th anniversary.

The beds burst with kale, black basil, eggplant, Japanese parsley, lemon verbena. Garcelon gives me a sweet little orange cape gooseberry and urges me to munch stavia, which tastes like saccharine — he uses it for desserts for diabetics.

Great bushes of alicia-blue borage flowers, essential garnish for Pimm's No. 1, are matched by the pinkly spectral cosmos that the

The tomatoes didn't make it through the heat this year, but Cutrara says, "I've definitely plans to expand it; next spring's plantings are wide open."

Black Dog's gone crazy for herbs Kelly Childs and Ken Rueter used to have a great pub in West Rouge. Now, they've gone green with a herb garden and upscale organic dining. This year they bought 20 big pots and planted them with rosemary, thyme, tarragon, mint, parsley, basil, oregano and marjoram. Chef Woody Sell gets that fresh-cut intensity into dishes like rooftop herb-marinated wild salmon.

Rueter reports that his customers "are just gobbling this up. The plain fact is that people are looking at a sustainable environment. *The 100-Mile Diet* inspired me — everything we buy is chosen to lessen carbon emissions. Gaia is our bottled water; it comes from Caledon and the bottles are recycled, much better than buying plastic from Fiji."

Bob's lemon verbena ice cream The best moment of the day for chef Barbara Gordon is watering the flower and herb boxes on the terrace. Among the flourishing plants are lemon verbena, black fennel, kale, nasturtium, parsley, sage and a cardoon, a type of Victorian artichoke.

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