

Where Does Your Garden Grow?

By Andrea Pyenson for MSN Local Edition (2009)

Andrea Pyenson is a food writer and editor based in Boston

A handful of urban chefs are growing everything from exotic herbs to tomatoes and corn -- on the roof.

For a small but growing number of urban U.S. restaurants whose chefs are concerned about serving the finest, freshest local ingredients available, the distance from farm to table is shrinking. It can be as short as a flight of stairs; stretch several flights; or extend a few blocks away. But the distance is, increasingly, vertical, because in this latest iteration of urban farming, the gardens are on the roof.

Five years ago Rick Bayless, award-winning chef, owner of Frontera Grill, Topolobampo and Xoco in Chicago, cookbook author, and host of PBS' "Mexico - One Plate at a Time," installed a garden on the roof above his restaurants. A celebrated supporter of urban agriculture, Bayless says, "I think it's really important to prove to people it's easy to grow things even in an urban setting... even in downtown Chicago."

In 60 self-watering EarthBoxes, Bayless grows five varieties of chiles and 12 kinds of tomatoes and lemon verbena to serve Frontera Grill. He describes it primarily as a "salsa garden," explaining that he doesn't grow more herbs because herbs are more fragile, and "the garden gets 100 percent sun all day long."

Frontera Grill's "Rooftop Salsa," served with grilled fish, is on the menu from the first harvest through the end of the growing season. Usually, the tomato harvest begins in early July.

Bayless also has a production garden at his home, about 10 minutes away from the restaurants, where he grows all the greens and edible flowers used at Topolobampo -- roughly \$25,000 worth of produce annually. Bill Shores, who designs and manages urban landscapes and edible gardens, works at the production garden and visits the rooftop garden roughly once a week. Bayless and other Frontera chefs work in the rooftop garden, too. "It's also important for the chefs to have direct access to food at the source," he says.

At dbar, in Boston's Dorchester neighborhood, climbing a metal ladder and stepping carefully across a small, slightly pitched roof area are the only way to reach the flat, rubber blacktop above the restaurant where chef Chris Coombs grows 10 varieties of heirloom tomatoes, four kinds of corn, and 38 varieties of herbs and edible flowers. These, he says, form "the basis of my cuisine... very European influenced with American ingredients."

Coombs estimates that he and the rest of the kitchen staff go up to the roof 15 to 20 times a day during growing season to water, harvest or snip herbs. After spending hours in a hot, busy

kitchen, "It's great stress relief," he says. "We're doing something for the environment. The guests really get a kick out of it, too. They know where their food is coming from."

This is the fifth year for Coombs' garden. Limited by the northeastern climate, he can only grow outside for about six months. He begins all the plants under grow lights in the building's attic. "When I start seeds in January, I think about where I'm going to be with the menu" when the plants are ready to harvest.

While the garden does not produce enough to supply all the restaurant's needs, last year it yielded \$3,000 worth of produce and cost only \$600 - \$700. One of the current dishes, "Valencia style Mussels," with herb and tomatoes, is almost entirely rooftop sustainable. Only the mussels and wine do not grow upstairs.

Three years ago, when chef Matthew Varga was sous chef, he started a beautiful and productive garden with former chef Joseph Hafner on the roof of a residential building three blocks from Gracie's.

The roof already had recessed beds and a drainage system. Two years ago, they planted roughly half the beds and the garden has grown every year since. In a 900-square-foot and a 1,200-square-foot bed, Varga is growing several varieties of tomatoes, squash and peppers; eggplant, carrots, chard, shiso, five kinds of basil, lavender, fennel, Siberian watermelon, edible flowers, and more. Three small beds hold a variety of micro-greens.

For about two months of the year, the garden provides all of the restaurant's salads and cold foods. Over the course of the six-month growing season, it averages out to 30 percent.

Chris Cosentino inherited the rooftop garden at Incanto in San Francisco when he joined the restaurant as chef seven years ago, a year after the restaurant opened. The vision of owner Mark Pastore, the garden is maintained by one of the line cooks, who lives in an apartment above the restaurant. The rest of the kitchen staff pitches in to help.

The garden is focused on unique, specialty herbs, including nepitella (a minty herb that usually grows in Italy), bergamot, epazote, lovage, several varieties of thyme, several varieties of mint, and "lavender up the wazoo," according to Cosentino. There are also a fig tree, a bay leaf tree and a stinging nettle patch, and rose bushes to ward off pests. "We designed the garden to accommodate the menu," explains the chef. Incanto's garden is productive year-round, but because San Francisco has a short sunny season, Cosentino says he seeks out items that will grow well in fog. "Some things are heartier than others," he notes.

The staff recycles all the nutrient-rich potable water from the kitchen - pasta water, water that has been used to wash greens - to water plants. "It can be hard to schlep buckets of water up two flights," Cosentino admits, but it's worth it.

The garden "gets everybody outside for a little while. It's a fun change," he says. "It gives us some peace of mind and some sanity. Always having nepitella on the roof is a nice thing."

When the owners of Seattle's Bastille Cafe & Bar were planning their restaurant, which opened in June 2009, they thought the flat roof of the single-story building they were occupying would be perfect for a garden. "Few places in the city have the capacity to do this," says chef Shannon Galusha.

The rooftop garden, designed with the help of Colin McCrate of Seattle Urban Farm Company, started out at 5,000 square feet, with roughly half planted. In its first year, it has doubled in size and variety of produce. The beds are raised and heated, so the soil won't freeze in winter. According to the chef, McCrate helped "figure out the beds, and I built them." Cedar Grove Composting provided the restaurant's first compost blend. The company will make subsequent blends from the restaurant's own compost.

Galusha researched, then planted, items "that would be quick from seed to harvest." He is growing "every kind of herb," including lavender, rosemary, thyme, chervil and chives; tomatoes, rotating varieties of arugula and lettuce, beets, radishes, fennel, spinach, kale and more. The restaurant's "Salade du Toit" (rooftop greens in a hazelnut vinaigrette) has been very popular. With a weekly harvest of 60 pounds of arugula, "80 percent of our salad is coming off the roof," Galusha notes.

The cafe's cooks love the garden. Many of them "are into horticulture to some degree," says Galusha. "Being a chef in a busy restaurant is stressful. Being able to go up on the roof and get your hands in the dirt is great."