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WESTCHESTER

Where the Salad Travels Less Than You

By [ALICE GABRIEL](#)

ON a sweltering day in early August, in a community [garden](#) near the Home Depot in Brewster, Vicky Zeph is on her knees, rustling among prickly zucchini vines in search of perfect male blossoms.

When she rises to her feet, sporting a carnation-pink shirt and clutching a nosegay of golden trumpet-shaped flowers, she looks like an offbeat bridesmaid.

Indeed, Ms. Zeph, who for nearly two decades has won praise for her inspired and beautifully executed menus at Zeph's Restaurant, in Peekskill, has long been attendant at a marriage of cultivation and cuisine. In a mission to bring heightened flavor to her cooking, she tends not one but three gardens — in Brewster and at her farmhouse in Kent in Putnam County and at the restaurant itself. "I weed on my days off," she says dryly.

The squash blossoms will be stuffed with Gorgonzola, dipped in a light batter and fried until the edges crisp and the cheese oozes. Because Ms. Zeph is not one to toot her horn, diners will not know unless they ask that it was she who tilled the soil that nourished the vine that bore the blooms that fed them.

Once a trainee in the kitchen of Michel Guérard at Les Prés d'Eugénie, in France, Ms. Zeph remembers that each morning a staff member would disappear into the garden to snip herbs, returning with a basket that brimmed with scents and possibilities. The immediacy of this ritual enchanted her, and she has built a flowering Eden that looks more than a little like Mr. Guérard's exuberant gardens in Eugénie-les-Bains.

The benefits of a kitchen garden are as numerous as cherry tomatoes in August. Chefs can experiment with little-known and heirloom varieties, and stagger plantings to ensure a rolling harvest from May until the first hard frost.

Savings from cutting out the intermediary, not to mention the conservation of fossil fuel, can be considerable. Produce can be picked gingerly at the peak of ripeness, and spared the bruising that can mar commercial produce. Proximity not only allows oversight (pests can be tackled quickly, diseases nipped in the bud) but also creates opportunity for flights of fancy.

"I love the flexibility," says Vincent Barcelona of Harvest on Hudson, in Hastings. "I come in every single day and see what's fresh and ready to be used. My menu revolves around the garden. I'll send my cooks out when the place is packed to pick a little sage or tarragon."

In late summer, with eggplant, tomatoes, peppers and zucchini in abundance, Mr. Barcelona was making ratatouille fast and furiously. "With the movie so popular, it's been a hit," he says. "Kids love it." Mr. Barcelona, who worked as a young cook at Le Bernardin in New York when it first opened, also makes a lovely garden-inspired salmon ceviche, with shaved red onion, diced tomato, and segments of sweet-corn kernels that look just like leaf-eating caterpillars.

Farther up the Hudson River, Jeff Raider of Valley, in Garrison, is in heaven in August, when the tomato is king. "I grew up in New Jersey," he says. "I love tomatoes."

Mr. Raider enjoys the luxury of ample acreage and a full-time farmer at the Garrison resort, where Valley is located. Twenty varieties of tomatoes thrive in a hoop house just down the road from the restaurant; they include Black Cherry, a mild tasting tomato that looks like a jumbo Bing cherry; Striped German, which can weigh in at two pounds each; and Lemon Drop, a tiny fruit with a citrus kick.

“A simple tomato salad is great, “ he says. “You don’t have to get fancy.” Well, maybe a little. Mr. Raider’s knockout tomato salad is adorned with ribbons of red onion, wedges of blue Cabrales cheese, shaved Parma ham and



basil chiffonade and crowned with a slice of grilled country bread brushed with olive oil infused with garlic, red chili, fresh oregano and fleur de sel.

At Valley, diners can reserve the Garden Table, where they are treated to a chef’s tasting menu in a walled garden filled with herbs and rambling roses, with glimpses of the Hudson River in the distance.

In Pocantico Hills, at Blue Hill at Stone Barns, Dan Barber has an entire farm at his feet. Subsidized by [David Rockefeller](#) and spurred by his own broad vision, Mr. Barber’s domain includes a kitchen garden, an herb garden, an enormous greenhouse, an orchard and a field of greens. (The farm also provides veal, pigs and pullets.)

Many of his dishes celebrate the essence of an ingredient; a green-tomato cocktail spiked with dill or a strawberry “cannoli” brings to mind nothing more than the most sprightly green tomato or the jammiest strawberry.

Back in Brewster, Vicky Zeph’s two garden plots look like giant embroideries (“I just don’t like doing rows,” she says). There are Egyptian onions and Peruvian pumpkins, Italian artichokes and Aunt Ruby’s German Green tomatoes, Thai peppers and sweet potatoes. Ms. Zeph proffers a tiny husk tomato, which tastes exactly like a hazelnut. “People go crazy when they get these in a salad,” she says.

Nowhere is Ms. Zeph’s passion for growing things more plain than on the menu at Zeph’s. The Green Garden Tart is a garden unto itself, with layers of sorrel, Swiss chard and leeks baked in a shell of cabbage leaves.

There is an old-fashioned sorrel and lovage soup, as well as a soup made from zucchini, leaf broccoli, chard, garlic, leeks, yellow flat beans and pesto. Serrated leaves of burnet garnish Vietnamese salad rolls, and the grilled rib-eye steak is seasoned with oregano, lovage and chives.

Needless to say, winter can be a downer. “I buy the junk from the store,” says Ms. Zeph, who manages to can and pickle some of her extra produce. “What else can I do?”

But for now, with a fabulous growing season in progress, diners are treated to Ms. Zeph’s bounty night after night. With one exception: This summer, the little fig tree in her yard produced close to 50 figs. “Delicious,” she says, smiling broadly. “They never made it to the restaurant.”