

Grain House Restaurant brings its values to the table with organic garden

Chef embraces garden-to-table eating

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Video Link

http://www.dailyrecord.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2013308220012&nclick_check=1

Grain House Restaurant Organic Garden: Executive Chef Luca Carvello of the Grain House Restaurant in Basking Ridge cooks with produce grown right outside the kitchen in their own organic garden. Staff Video by Bob Karp

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Executive Chef Luca Carvello of the Grain House Restaurant in Basking Ridge with fresh picked produce from their own organic garden behind the restaurant. Bob Karp/Staff Photographer/DAILY RECORD / Staff photo

Meet the Chef

Grain House Chef Luca Caravello is among more than a dozen area top chefs participating in the fifth annual **Morris County Sunday Supper Series** on Sept. 22 at the Hyatt Morristown. The dinner celebrates the local food movement.

Learn more about the dinner and purchase tickets at SustainableMorristown.org and DailyRecord.com/Grassroots

IF YOU GO

Grain House at Olde Mill Inn: 225 Route 202, Basking Ridge; 908-221-1150;
www.oldemillinn.com

ONLINE

Watch a video to go with this story at DailyRecord.com/Grassroots

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French for ‘of the soil,’ *terroir* is a term originally used in connection with vineyards to describe the local climate in which a particular vintage is grown.

“Taste of place” — the specific connection which links every flavor on your plate to its cultivating source and conditions — is used now across the cutting board to encompass all cuisine. Nowhere is this more relevant than our own Garden State.

It doesn’t require acreage. You can do it yourself on a small scale with just a planter of mint for fresh lemonade or dill for char-grilled salmon.

Some of our favorite chefs and farmers are using sustainable options to translate summer’s bounty onto the menu and they have two rules: cook with the seasons, and keep it simple. The best flavors speak for themselves.

In a multi-part series, Grassroots will explore Morris area restaurants embracing Jersey terroir by either growing their own produce or forging relationships with local farmers. Today, we feature Grain House, a Basking Ridge restaurant that is tending to its own an organic garden.

Luca Carvello joined The Grain House as executive chef about a year and a half ago. Carvello’s parents are from Calabria and he was born in Brooklyn “into a restaurant family.” He has uncles in the business and his dad’s pizzeria is in Raritan.

Carvello started cooking at 12 and, “I was 14 when I made my first pizza. I still remember. It was on a Friday.”

At 18 he chose to go to culinary school and graduated top of his class from Johnson & Wales with a degree in culinary arts. He has traveled extensively, is recently married, and his wife is from Spain.

“I’ve been going there a lot lately and got to tour Madrid and the whole Northern Basque country, and I’ve spent a lot of time in Italy. Their ideas of food are brilliant. They eat seasonally, from the land, and I try to do the same. I hadn’t eaten a tomato since October and only recently had my first one; it was from our new garden.”

Roots to the past

Casper, Bruce, Jon, Barbara and Brenda Bocina took over the 245-year old Olde Mill Inn in the early 90s. Once a grist mill and barn on land originally acquired from William Penn, it was used to store flour, meal and feed for the Continental Army during the bitter winter of 1779-80.

The building today houses The Grain House restaurant and the Bocina family is serious about supporting local sustainable farms with a kitchen that offers their bounty.

“The owners are the most committed people I have ever met about organic cuisine,” says Sheila Palka, marketing director. “Our ingredients here are very carefully selected. It’s undoubtedly more expensive but if quality is there, that’s what’s important to them.”

Carvello met the Bocinas six years ago. “I remember I met Bruce and Jon and we sat at a table and threw out ideas — we really synched. When it comes to food, it’s the flavor profile — don’t mask it, let it burst through, speak for itself, complement it. And if you’re just honest with your food, it’s that simple.”

The Bocinas have many enterprises and Carvello now has other partnerships with Bruce and Jon including Trattoria Bolu and Dean’s Natural Food Market in Basking Ridge.

A kitchen garden

Carvello suggested a kitchen garden last year. “Look at this beautiful property,” he says, “I couldn’t resist. My job as executive chef is look for ways to improve what we do. This is how a passionate chef would really love to cook.”

Last year they tried with a verysmall plot. This spring, the Bocinas oversaw the creation of the organic garden that’s just in its first year.

“It was a very high priority for them,” Carvello says. “It could never have happened otherwise. They are committed to this project because it supports causes they believe in.”

Construction proceeded from beginning of March to beginning of May and a professional gardener was consulted as to optimal timing. Then, and then after Easter, it was finally time to plant, “All from organic seeds,” Carvello says.

Row after pristine row in various stages of growth now thrives, protected by a fence that goes down a foot to discourage burrowing. The entry has been skillfully landscaped with a white picket fence, paving stones, and edible and ornamental flowers.

“There are apple trees out back. I can’t wait to make my first apple pie,” Carvellos says.

Which reminds him of a favorite dining experience.

Spanish hospitality means sharing the pleasures of the land and the best local food and drink. In many places, this includes communal dining. In northern Spain are places called ‘siderias’ — cider bars — where they make alcoholic (hard) cider and serve a pre-set meal, “Usually steaks and cheeses. You’re surrounded by a roomful of barrels (kupelas) and while you’re waiting, you get up and get your own sidra.”

But there are rules. Strict rules. “You can’t pour more than you’ll drink at a sitting and you have to drink it immediately. If you want more, you have to get up and pour more.

“And you can’t hold the glass right under the spigot. You have to hold it far enough away — about 3 feet — so that it ‘hits.’ They say that’s what releases the flavor. It’s wonderful, the people are wonderful, the food is wonderful.”

Desserts at the Grain House are wonderful.

“I refuse to outsource a dessert, there’s no reason to do that. Today I made a key lime pie but with a chocolate biscotti crust instead of the conventional graham cracker crust.” He shoots a mysterious grin. “Just a little twist,” Carvello says.

As fresh as can be

It’s impossible not to share Carvello’s passion for his kitchen — and now the garden that supplies it.

“Right now we utilize the garden more for specials,” Carvello says. One of these is the Zucchini Flower — zucchini blossoms stuffed with ricotta cheese, and basil, fried in a light tempura batter, served with a cherry tomato salad.

“Tempura is a lot lighter than egg batter, and the blossom is a contrast of warm cheese on the inside, light and crispy on the outside, and the tomato-ey brightness from the garden, drizzled with olive oil and sea salt. You don’t need anything else. Fresh ingredients speak for themselves.”

One of his favorites is prosciutto and melon, “but not with honeydew or cantaloupes. I make it with Crenshaw (a cross between casaba and Persian). When Crenshaws are really ripe and juicy, they’re sweet and delicious.”

We planted watermelon radishes (white on outside and red splashes), “. . . which I use in salads shaved raw; they’re pungent but less so than horseradish,” Carvello says.

“We’ve already gone through a dozen lettuce varieties, arugula, lemongrass, broccoli rabe, lemongrass, all kinds of herbs. After tomatoes are done put in more lettuces, perhaps cabbages, always beets, radishes, perhaps turnips, garlic for winter.

Feedback has been fantastic.

“We always let our customers know, ‘This was just picked a few hours ago,’ ” Palka says.

Plans for the future?

“Ultimately, I’d like to take the restaurant to the point where we’re almost completely independent, where we buy almost nothing and make everything from scratch.”

He smiles. “But I have little goals I always set for myself. This year it’s to make the kitchen corn-syrup-free. Do you know that commercial breadcrumbs have corn syrup listed as the No. 2 ingredient? Now our baker makes bread strictly according to our specs; we save what we don’t use and that leftover bread becomes our breadcrumbs.”

After breadcrumbs?

“Next is the garden, to see how many things I can create from the garden.” He laughs. “On my day off. But this is why I do this. When I was young I never dreamed I’d get this far — I’m blessed to be here. This year we realized a dream.”

