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# DINING

Maui

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## Fresh Herbs are the new Superstars

AND MAUI FARMS ARE BURSTING WITH THEM.

BY BONNIE FRIEDMAN

Many diners—and home cooks, too—think of herbs as garnishes or as small jars of dried flakes sold in the supermarket. Restaurant chefs know better. “Cooking without fresh herbs is like making movies without sound,” says Chef Peter Merriman, Hawai‘i Regional Cuisine pioneer. He says he wouldn’t think of attempting any of his Thai-influenced dishes without fresh mint, Thai basil and cilantro, or any of his fresh pizzas without rosemary, oregano and basil. Beverly Gannon, another of the original Hawai‘i Regional Cuisine “gang of 12,” the chefs who founded the culinary movement 20 years ago, goes even further. At her landmark Hāli‘imaile General Store, she serves a micro-greens-and-tomato salad in which “the micro-greens are the stars... and the tomatoes are the garnish!”

Maui chefs islandwide agree. Sheldon Simeon at Star Noodle in Lahaina sings the praises of herbs’ broad range of characteristics and uses. “They can add freshness, spice, sweet and savory notes. They can even add texture, like chives do in tartare,” he says. Color and brightness, too, as the fresh cilantro does in his extraordinary version of Singapore Noodles.

Fresh basil and fresh thyme actually drive some of the menu development at Market Fresh Bistro in Makawao. “The best quality fresh basil is critical for our pestos, and we use thyme in almost everything,” says Chef Justin Pardo. This includes dishes where it might be entirely unexpected, such as the Makawao Meyer Lemon & Thyme Sorbet.

Even more passionate than the chefs are the farmers who devote long days to growing the herbs that wind up in so many of the island’s best kitchens. Passion for farming surely played a big role in Walter and Terry Evonuk’s decision to leave behind in San Francisco their careers in architecture and move back to Walter’s



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is known for his micro-greens and micro-herbs. One could debate whether micro-greens really are herbs and whether they might be just a tad “trendy,” but not McCoy. “Micro-greens are the ‘new’ herbs. The concentration of flavor is intense. They don’t take any prep work. And if you look at a beautiful plate of food, it’s just not finished without micro-greens.” They look like little jewels as they grow in shaded boxes, with names to match, such as garnet and ruby mustard micro-greens. They grow along with micro-arugula, cilantro, mizuna, and the newest wasabi mustard, celery and an infinitesimally small onion that packs a powerful flavor. McCoy also has a kaffir lime tree, an allspice tree, and a clove tree, offering the available fruits and leaves to any chef who asks. “It’s very satisfying to be part of the synergy between chefs and farmers. It makes me feel a part of what goes on in the restaurants,” he says. It’s a mutual admiration society. Beverly Gannon calls the quality of McCoy’s product “phenomenal.”

“I like his thyme. The leaves are big, and the herb is sweet. I also like his micro-arugula, micro-basil, and micro-oregano, all of which I use as flavor additives, not just garnish,” says Chef Alex Stanislaw from Plantation House Restaurant at Kapalua. “They’re especially good for raw dishes, such as thick sliced ahi with Kona

salt, lemon-infused olive oil, and micro-arugula. Simple but delicious.”

Chef Ryan Luckey at Pineapple Grill is another of McCoy’s cheerleaders and one of the chefs McCoy says is open to trying anything new. “I have a longstanding relationship with Michael McCoy,” says Luckey. “I’ve been buying micro-greens, herbs and fresh vegetables from him for some time now. Herbs play a regular role in my garnishing, but I also make sauces, pestos and flavored reductions from herbs, like our opal basil gastrique, a reduction of port wine

and red wine vinegar blended with purple basil leaves. It adds a lasting, distinctive taste to our crab cakes.”

All the chefs agree that the variety of fresh herbs has grown exponentially in the last decade or so. The chefs asked, and the farmers delivered. Walter Evonuk notes that demand changes with current “fashion.” “Ten years ago, basil was our biggest seller. Today, cilantro is number one, by far.” He adds that requests for Italian parsley are way up recently, with Chef Stanislaw dubbing it “the most under-appreciated herb of all.” “It’s trendy,” says Evonuk. “You know, if you watch The Food Network and it’s all over the place there, you want it.” Chances are that on Maui these days, the chefs can get their hands on it.

childhood home on Maui in 2007. “My father bought this place in 1975, the year I was born,” says Walter. Today, gorgeous herbs—everything from basil to sage, lemongrass to savory, and the newest exotic called blue spice—cover much of their 30-acre farm.

The Evonuks love working with chefs and encourage them to visit. That’s how Grand Wailea Chef Isaac Bancaco found out about the blue spice. “It’s a member of the basil family,” the young chef explains. “Can you taste the banana and the tropical fruits and the black pepper?” he asks excitedly. And the answer is a resounding yes, both on its own and as part of a scrumptious bowl of mussels in an aromatic broth. “Now, they’re growing it just for Humuhumu,” he says proudly of Humuhumunukunukuapua’a, his restaurant at the Grand Wailea. He visits Evonuk Farms regularly to see what’s new with his friends Walter and Terry, and also to keep an eye on the lemongrass, parsley, chervil, basil, Thai basil, and rosemary. Bancaco buys 95% of his herbs from the Evonuks.

Michael McCoy loves working with chefs, too. He’s been growing herbs and seasonal produce on his pastoral two-acre ‘Aina Lani farm for 15 years. More than anything else, he

