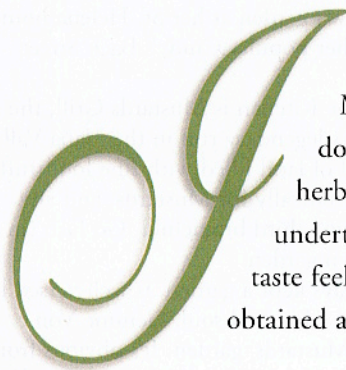


Gardens of Eatn'



*Some North Bay restaurants
have planted gardens so they can bring
produce straight from the land to the table.*

By Cerrissa MacNichols



It's long been a tradition for restaurants located in the French and Italian countryside to have a garden within a stone's throw of the kitchen. Given the Mediterranean climate of the North Bay, it's no wonder many local restaurants are doing the same. The gardens successfully supply chefs with fresh fruits, vegetables and herbs that have been harvested earlier in the day. Having a garden is no faint undertaking, but chefs and owners who want the highest quality and that "just picked" taste feel it's worth it to invest the time and money it takes to cultivate flavors that can't be obtained any other way.

Marin's cool bay breezes

The Bay Area is filled with a wide variety of microclimates. What can be grown in the warmer areas of Napa and Sonoma counties is sometimes different than what Larry Mindel, founder of the Il Fornaio chain and proprietor of Poggio in Sausalito, has been able to grow in that restaurant's garden.

In creating Poggio, it was Mindel's dream to fashion a restaurant where patrons could experience the type of food that his friends and acquaintances had cooked for him in Italy—based on what's fresh that day, made from scratch and prepared with authenticity and love. Mindel believes the key to his success was to "start with an organic garden and employ a high-energy, talented chef like Peter McNee."

McNee, who shares Mindel's vision of authenticity, thoroughly appreciates the outstanding produce that's grown on the hillside a few blocks from Poggio. "Larry and I have created a self-sustaining, rustic Italian kitchen garden," says McNee, who carefully chooses what goes into the soil. "We grow really great watercress, arugula, spinach and herbs." His motto is "use what's planted and plant what you'll use."



Left: A garden path at Mustards Grill in Yountville
(Photo courtesy of Mustards Grill)



Peter McNee is chef at Poggio in Sausalito.

“Use what’s planted, and plant what you’ll use.”

Peter McNee, Poggio

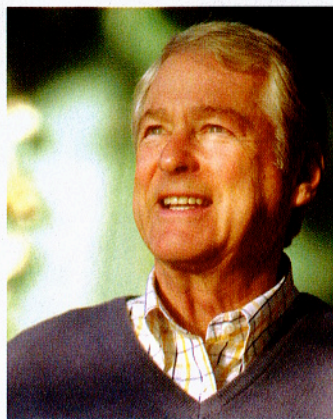
Each day, McNee or a member of his kitchen staff takes a two-minute drive up the steep roadway to Poggio’s garden, which is adjacent to Mindel’s home, perched high on the hill with

sweeping vistas of the San Francisco Bay, located on what’s thought to be the last buildable view lot in Sausalito. The one-fifth acre has its own fresh water spring...and an illustrious past. In the aftermath of the 1906 earthquake, there wasn’t enough potable water to supply San Francisco with fresh drinking water. So ships crossed the bay, and giant barrels were taken up to the spring and filled, then rolled down the hill, reloaded and taken back to the city.

The land’s days as a garden began in 1988, when Mindel (who had bought the property two years earlier) cleared and terraced the overgrown lot, which was filled with wild blackberries and loquats, and leased it to a company called Sausalito Springs. The old, crumbling well was upgraded to supply a new garden with abundant water; Sausalito Springs’ main crop, watercress, thrived in the garden but eventually needed more space, so the company moved its operations to Sonoma County.

Today, the garden supplies Poggio with amazing watercress along with braising greens, cabbages, lettuces, kale and an abundance of culinary herbs such as rosemary and oregano. McNee often has unique varieties of his produce, such as black Tuscan kale or baby lettuces. One of the things missing from the garden is tomatoes. Mindel really wanted to grow plump, juicy, sun-kissed tomatoes, but the climate won’t allow for them.

On more than one occasion, Mindel could have sold the valuable parcel, but instead decided to keep it to supply the restaurant. He recently hired a new gardener to tend the landscaping around his home and Poggio’s garden. The gardener also happens to be a chef, so he understands the importance of the fresh produce. Mindel says, “I feel so fortunate to be able to create a restaurant that comes so close to reflecting the way Italians prepare food.”



Larry Mindel is proprietor of Poggio.

Napa’s hot summer days

Using the highest-quality products is always a priority for Cindy Pawlcyn—and the iconic Napa restaurateur is no stranger to how a garden grows. She has her own garden at her St. Helena home, and often uses its produce at her popular Cindy’s Back Street Kitchen.

Just down the road from the Kitchen is Mustards Grill, the restaurant that began Pawlcyn’s legendary run in the Napa Valley. And right next to it is a parcel of land filled with fine foodstuffs. The produce here is grown specifically for Mustards, and any overflow is shared with Pawlcyn’s third brainchild, Go Fish (in St. Helena), which also has its own garden.

Pawlcyn, whose family always kept a garden, is well-versed in the ways of farming. She hired a kindred soul, Gemme Von Knopka, as farm manager of Mustards’ garden. It’s obvious from the well-tended vegetation that Von Knopka’s labor is one of love. Armed with an environmental studies degree from UC Santa Cruz, she worked at the UC Berkeley botanical gardens for a few years and then landed a gig at Long Meadow Ranch in the Mayacamas Mountains. It was while working at the Napa farmer’s market for Long Meadow Ranch that she met Pawlcyn. She’s now seen Mustards’ garden through one and a half growing seasons and says she still feels like “there’s never a dull moment.”

Von Knopka and her fiancé built a greenhouse that she’s enthusiastically filled with starters generated from seeds. Her learning curve has been steep, but Pawlcyn remains personally involved with decisions about what to grow. “Cindy is extremely knowledgeable about growing vegetables, different varieties and their uses,” says Von Knopka.

It also helps that Von Knopka’s uncle-in-law, Bill Hoffman (who planted the original garden and is Pawlcyn’s personal gardener) is still available to answer questions. She’s also become friends with many local gardeners and farmers including folks who run gardens at COPIA, Frog’s Leap and the French Laundry. “People in Napa Valley are amazingly friendly and helpful,” says Von Knopka.

She’s solicited advice from her future in-laws, Don and Sally Schmidt, who own The Philo Apple Farm, known for its organic (now biodynamic) produce, sustainable practices and highly sought-after cooking classes. The folks at Forni Brown and Welsh Gardens, who supply salad greens and more to most of Napa Valley’s best-known restaurants, have also been a priceless resource.

In January 2008, Pawlcyn sent Von Knopka to an ecofarm conference in Monterey. Von Knopka found the meeting inspirational and learned new farming techniques and different ways to foster sustainability. Pawlcyn not only wants to have food that’s of the best flavor, she’s also very interested in sustainability and preserving the environment, and she makes sure the plants surrounding her establishments are functional as well as beautiful:

For example, there used to be oleander trees lining the street where Mustards sits; Pawlcyn replaced them with edible fruit and Turkish bay trees. This spring and winter, fava beans were planted in front of the trees; they were recently harvested and used in many of the restaurant's dishes.

Von Knopka maintains the garden herself and is passionate about its contents. She says there's something to harvest almost every day, even if it's just herbs. The picture-perfect fruit and vegetable garden often draws diners out after their meals. She relishes being able to show them some of the ingredients from their dinners and lunches in their raw state. "It's educational to have it here," says Von Knopka.

There are 18 raised beds in wooden boxes. Some contain herbs like rosemary, oregano, thyme, tarragon, borage, chives and fennel. Others contain lettuces, onions, beans, or alternative items depending on the season, such as pepppers, okra, mint, society garlic and cucumbers. An arbor that used to house scarlet runner beans is now the foundation for hops that attract beneficial insects such as bees and butterflies.

On one side of the garden, there's a row of prickly pear plants that bear three varieties of red, yellow and pink fruit. The restaurant uses them to make margaritas, sorbets and sauces. Flowers from many of the plants, such as Nasturtiums and society garlic are used in salads and as garnishes. Flowers are often found in restaurant gardens, since, due to their delicate nature, they don't last long and, once picked, they're fragile and difficult to



Go Fish in St. Helena



Patrons at Sausalito's Poggio enjoy dining al fresco.

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Mustards Grill celebrates its 25th anniversary this year

transport. The society garlic plant produces a small lavender blossom with distinctive onion flavor and is a favorite of Von Knopka.

Pawlcyn owns the six acres surrounding the restaurant and has plans to expand the garden, which currently produces about 20 percent of the produce used by Mustards, depending on the season. It does help keep food costs down, but just as important, it gives staff the opportunity to control the production process. When they harvest an onsite plant, they use as much of it as possible.

Take, for instance, those fava beans. In addition to the flavorful legume, the edible leaves are a specialty item that can be hard to come by. Featured on the Go Fish spring menu (which changes seasonally, with additional daily offerings) was a plate of salted cod cakes "Brandale," served on a bed of shredded fava leaves. The leaves were also used at the popular eatery as a garnish for the Icelandic Char. The leaves, lightly fried, were translucent, crispy and exotic. As is the case with the fava leaves, when a particular crop ripens all at the same time, there's often an abundance, and the vegetable can be seen on all three of Pawlcyn's menus in varied and innovative dishes.

At the Go Fish garden, two gardeners work the land and are overseen by Von Knopka. Sean Knight, managing partner of Go Fish, Mustards Grill and Cindy's Back Street Kitchen, says one of the best things about having produce onsite is quality control. In addition to what they grow in their garden, Knight has numerous friends in the Napa Valley who share the abundance of their bounty with the restaurant. Both the owners of Staglin Family Winery and St. Supèry Vineyards and Winery have been known to bring their extra peaches and other stone fruits to the restaurant for Knight to purchase at a minimal cost.

In an industry that can be fickle, Mustards celebrated its 25th anniversary in June 2008, and Pawlcyn's other restaurants are thriving, proving her dedication to fresh, local, hand-grown food that goes beyond the norm is worth it.

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*"You can't help
but be seasonal in
California."*

— Dino Bugica, Taverna Santi



Northern Sonoma's rich, gravelly soil

Taverna Santi in Geyserville contracts with local farmers to get the freshest produce around, but executive chef Dino Bugica says it's still nice to have a garden onsite as well. Proprietor and general manager Doug Swett, who's owned the property since 2005, has maintained the garden that was there when the restaurant was opened in 2000. Housed in a historic 1902 landmark building in the Alexander Valley, Bugica and the kitchen crew care for the approximately 50-by-60 feet of raised beds surrounding the establishment. He finds that just taking five to 10 minutes outside, picking fresh garnishes, can prove to be calming and meditative, offering him and his staff a mini-retreat from the kitchen's fast pace.

Santi always has a spring, summer and fall garden. During the winter, it only plants a cover crop. Its bounty of Northern Sonoma County includes Southern Italian chilies, eggplants, zucchini, peas, wild arugula, sage, rosemary and edible flowers such as Nasturtium and lavender. The restaurant sticks with what



Santi's Executive Chef Dino Bugica and Proprietor Doug Swett

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works, since it doesn't have a lot of space for experimenting. "You can't help but be seasonal in California," says Bugica. The rhythm of the seasons is respected at Santi, based on the chefs' vision to return to a time when ingredients were always seasonal, fresh and locally grown. The proud motto of the mostly Italian kitchen crew is "setting Italian cooking back 75 years"—to a time when necessity dictated food originate near its final destination.

When Santi's gardens have an over-abundance of a crop, it finds ways to use it in-house. It has preserved eggplant and



pickled zucchini for use in dishes to be served later in the year. Some garden specialties that have been very popular are the stuffed zucchini flowers and the homemade borage ravioli (borage is a popular Mediterranean herb).

Bugica, born in Reno, Nevada, is no stranger to having the freshest ingredients available for his use. He grew up on fresh meat and produce from his grandfather Secondo Valentino Bugica's ranch and farm in Washoe Valley (just south of Reno). As a young man, his passion for food and his Italian heritage took him to Italy, where he lived for seven years and met his wife, Sonia. He learned first-hand about the bounty of the country and how to integrate it into the regional cuisines to which he was exposed.

After leaving Italy, Bugica worked as a chef at the Fairmont Kealani in Maui, Hawaii, for two years. It was on a vacation to Sonoma County that he dined at Santi and decided this was where he wanted to live and work—and he's been with Santi ever since. He and Swett share the vision of Santi being an Italian country "taverna," where social gatherings are about honoring guests with the very best they can offer. Remarkable reviews from such prestigious publications as the *New York Times* and *Wine Spectator* (not to mention *NorthBay biz*) confirm Santi is a hit with the locals and revered guests. Bugica and Swett are

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Steve and Colleen Rose of Vineyards Inn at their Kenwood

also opening Diavola in Geyserville this summer. The new venture will be a combination pizzeria and salumeria (delicatessen) that will offer fine, house-cured meats and homemade sausages.

The heart of Sonoma Valley

For 27 years, Steve and Colleen Rose have owned the Vineyards Inn Bar and Grill in Kenwood. Their restaurant, located on one of the most scenic drives in Wine Country, on Highway 12 between Sonoma and Santa Rosa, has morphed over time. Today, there's less emphasis on Mexican cuisine and more focus on authentic Spanish-style tapas and fresh fish (Steve's heritage is Spanish Basque).

Organic produce hasn't always been available to them, so, 16 years ago, the Roses decided to grow their own. Today, all of their produce grown on the Rose Ranch (down the lane from Vineyards Inn) is certified organic and biodynamic. (Biodynamic agriculture is an organic farming method that treats farms as unified, individual organisms. The emphasis is on balancing the holistic development and interrelationship of the soil, plants and animals as a closed, self-nourishing system.)

They pride themselves on the quality of



Vineyards Inn owners Steve and Colleen Rose
(Photo by Will Chubb)

their produce and on the fact they strive to be as green as possible. They raise most of their own vegetables and even process and store some for winter. They make their own compost from vegetable matter at the farm and from the pre- and post-consumer waste produced at the restaurant. They compost the straws, placemats and cocktail napkins, and even their waste can liners and to-go containers are made of a compostable corn product. Oyster, clam and mussel shells and fish bones also go into the compost, and that enriches the soil.

They recycle everything possible and create landscape gravel from all the wine,

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The Vineyards Inn in Kenwood (Photo by Will Chubb)

liquor and beer bottles. Each week, the non-renewable waste they produce only fills a 32-gallon, half-sized residential garbage bin (this includes their family of four, as well). What drives them to be such responsible restaurateurs is their desire to take care of the planet for future generations.

The Roses have complete quality control over everything from the soil to the harvesting of their own seeds. The microclimate in Kenwood lends itself to year-round growing, and the menu reflects each season's harvest. It gives Steve Rose, who's also the chef, the chance to be creative. When there was an abundance of Swiss chard last spring, he made dolmas. The Roses are beginning to sell their extra produce at local farmers markets and are contemplating starting a cooking school with an emphasis on foods from the garden. They'd also use the school to teach people about organic and biodynamic gardening. Rose will soon start doing chef demonstrations at Macy's in San Francisco and will use the opportunity to talk about using organic produce during his presentations.

Property is a premium commodity in Kenwood, and Rose makes the most of his space through creativity. He grows grapes that Benziger Winery makes into a vineyard-designate Rose Ranch Merlot. When the grapes go dormant in the winter, he plants crops between the vines, such as garlic and onion varieties, chards, cabbages and brocolis. Spring and summer bring dry-farmed tomatoes, bush beans, shelling beans and winter squashes.

The separate spring and summer vegetable garden raises hot, sweet and drying peppers, heirloom tomatoes and tomatillos, Asian varieties, basil, corns, summer squashes and cucumber varieties, pole beans, asparagus, artichokes, cilantro, parsleys and lettuces, okra, brocoli and cauliflower.

He says the most difficult thing about having a seasonal menu is educating patrons about why they can't have certain dishes when the ingredients aren't available locally. So he and Colleen are striving to help them understand...and care about the bigger picture.

Every restaurant that has its own garden—from local neighborhood "joints" to Michelin-rated fine dining establishments—prides itself on providing clientele with the freshest and highest quality ingredients possible. For those of us living in the North Bay, that means we're assured a venerable smorgasbord of establishments offering delectable, locally grown meals. ■

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