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Taking Orders in Paso Robles

Chefs are using local flavors to create exquisite gourmet cuisine.

By Wendy VanDiver | April 23, 2009

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Touring & Tasting

When Villa Creek Chef Tom Fundaro first moved to Paso Robles from New York City six years ago, he started looking locally for the ingredients he needed, but he couldn't find what he was looking for. "I couldn't even find a good cheese," he recalls. "I'd drive up to Berkeley and buy about a month's worth and drive it back in an ice chest." The situation seemed ironic to Tom, seeing as Paso Robles was a longtime farming community, surrounded by acres of vineyards and farms in every direction. It was also costly, since the trek is two hours each way, and certainly not a valuable use of an ambitious chef's time.

"I set out to meet local farmers at the farmers' markets around the area, and I met Bill and Barbara Spencer who were just starting up their operation, Windrose Farms," he says. "This all happened at the same time the already-popular Villa Creek Restaurant was talking about changing their paradigm to be more sustainable." So Chef Tom told Bill and Barbara to grow whatever they wanted to grow and he would use it in the restaurant. Since then, Chef Tom has struck up relationships with all sorts of local growers who provide him everything from pigs raised on sheep whey and organic fruits, vegetables, and feed, to black cod caught in baskets they've swum into themselves. Villa Creek has shifted into being a local, sustainable, organic restaurant. And they're not alone. In restaurants throughout Paso Robles, chefs are forming partnerships with the farmers and ranchers who are also their neighbors.

Chef Matthew Riley, owner of two Paso Robles restaurants, Matthew's and Matthew's at the Airport, came to Paso 13 years ago, after working at the former Rex il Ristorante in Los Angeles. He buys his produce locally and from neighboring towns and is inspired by the ingredients. He derives intensely flavored sauces by marinating the lees of wine with chicken or beef overnight, and then roasting the concoction the next day. He reduces the marinade, skims it and he has his sauce. He also takes grape leaves and seeds from macerated grapes and rolls a goat-cheese log into the mixture. "The stark whiteness of the smooth, fine goat cheese is met with the vibrant color of the wine and the seeds give a crunchy texture to the outside," Chef Matthew beams. "It is exquisite." Even local grapevines play a part in his imaginative cuisine. "When they re-graph the vines, I take the wood, chip the grape vine and smoke salmon and fontina cheese that way," he says. When he opened his restaurant at the Paso Robles airport a couple years back, customers began to remark on how they couldn't find his fontina cheese anywhere. "That's because I make it. It is only here, in my restaurants in Paso Robles."



The only challenge with working with local growers is seasonal. Chefs need to think ahead, and when they can, prepare ingredients that can be stored for future use, when they are not so plentiful. And customers need to understand that the wonderful dish they had in February may not likely appear on the menu in June.

"The local farmers are working with the restaurants and planting all the things that interest us," Chef Matthew reports. "They're giving us all different strands and varieties. It is very exciting."

The movement is not just restricted to produce. Hearst Ranch Beef is one of the local providers of beef to the restaurants of Paso Robles. "We're working with the top chefs there to provide locally raised grass-fed beef, which, in our minds, is the ultimate expression of the terroir of our ranches," Division Manager Brian Kenny explains. "We have tailored our management plan to ensure that we have cattle ready all year-round, while maintaining sound principles for environment and sustainability."

Commercial diving for abalone has been banned for over ten years, yet abalone appears regularly on several Paso Robles menus. "Although restaurants are a small portion of our business, they're a very important part," says Brad Buckley, sales manager for the Abalone Farm in nearby Cayucos. "The chefs that know and love abalone want to know where it came from and how it was raised. They know that we are growing our abalone as similar to nature as possible, and that we're part of the Seafood Watch program and Seafood Choices Alliance."

One such chef is Chris Kobayashi (aka Chef Koby) at Artisan. He also uses several organic farms and individual growers as resources. "There are a lot of small farmers who actually come to the restaurant and bring beautiful ripe fruit that's organic," Chef Koby explains. "They'll bring in a box of peaches because they know I'll purchase and utilize it. Whenever product shows up at my front door, I already know it's going to be the season's best as these farmers are proud to showcase their extremely hard work." He gets his tomatoes from a farmer who hand-pollinates them and a sweet, hearty Bloomsdale spinach from another grower. "We're trying to use products from within a hundred miles," Chef Koby says. But the restaurant's customers are coming from much further.

"We're finding that Paso people are more apt to stay in town for dinner these days," reports Communications Manager Chris Taranto for the Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance. "And people from as far away as Los Angeles and San Francisco are coming here and staying over a few nights to get a taste of several of our restaurants as it complements their wine country experience."

"It's great to be a chef in Paso Robles these days," smiles Chef Matthew Riley. "We have hundreds of wineries, many exciting restaurants, and still have a small town atmosphere. It's truly inspirational."