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THE SECRET INGREDIENT

Many chefs will tell you that the secret to their cooking is simple—just find the highest quality ingredients in peak season. As the pendulum swings away from tweezer food and molecular gastronomy, restaurants lean into the purity of pristine ingredients, often highlighting farmers, fishermen and foragers on their menus.

STONINGTON MAINE LOBSTER

If you see Maine lobster on a menu, it's most likely from Stonington, the most productive and most lucrative fishing port in Maine, pulling in a record-setting USD 73 million worth of lobster last year. Chef Ryan McCaskey grew up in Chicago but spent summers in Maine and his close relationship with formidable fisherwoman Sue Buxton of Day Boat Fresh, allowed him to get the freshest lobster, scallops, oysters, mussels, and even wild blueberries flown in twice weekly to his late restaurant Acadia in Chicago, where he earned two Michelin stars.

"The lobsters were out of the water at three or four in the afternoon, and they were in our kitchen at 11 a.m. the next day," McCaskey said. "She would get us the exact size lobsters we wanted, with such meticulous quality." On Acadia summer staff trips to Maine, the whole team would go lobstering with Buxton to understand and appreciate the process. "I've gone lobstering with her a few times now and it's absolutely grueling."

McCaskey served hundreds of pounds of Stonington lobster weekly at Acadia, delicately plated with matsutake mushrooms and lobster bisque, as a one-bite *amuse bouche éclair*, or a juicy red tail accompanied with oat risotto, root vegetables and bordelaise. Regulars knew they could also find the best lobster roll in the city at Acadia's bar—served warm with melted butter, Connecticut-style.

After the pandemic, McCaskey moved back to Maine, where he works as a chef in an 18th-century bed and breakfast in Deer Isle to elevate the tavern fare to fine dining heights. "Chefs all dream about cooking from the source," McCaskey said. "Being so familiar with the area, the nice folks, the product, it's like being home again."



Opposite: At his late restaurant Acadia, Chef Ryan McCaskey served hundreds of pounds of Stonington lobster every week

Above: Chef Ryan McCaskey and fisherwoman Sue Buxton of Day Boat Fresh on a fishing day in Maine



MUSHROOM MIKE MORELS AND FIDDLEHEAD FERNS

Chefs Daniel Jacobs and Dan Van Rite of EsterEv in Milwaukee first met Mushroom Mike at a Milwaukee farmer's market a decade ago, when Mike Jozwik was still in college and just getting his career started.

"He's great at what he does because he's from the area, his parents were avid foragers and he's committed his whole life to it," Jacobs said. "It's not just a hobby." Jacobs and Van Rite have gone foraging with Mike on many occasions, sometimes for several hours in the morning and then heading straight from the forest to the kitchen for service.

At EsterEv, diners will find morels either sautéed or pan-fried and often paired with wild game dishes. "Or we like to use them in a sauce to lay under or on top of a nice cut of game meat," Van Rite said. Morels, ramps and fiddlehead ferns are found around the same time of year, from late April through May.

"Winters are long and relentless so when the local mushrooms and fiddleheads pop up, it's like a time of rebirth for this area which we then reflect on the menu at EsterEv," Jacobs explained. "It's one of my favorite times of the year and I think most of Milwaukee would agree with me on that. We embrace seasonality at EsterEv so this transition from winter to spring is celebrated."



HUNTER CATTLE RANCH GRASSFED BEEF AND PORK

Located in Brooklet, GA, just outside of Savannah, Hunter Cattle Co. is a third-generation family owned farm dedicated to raising their animals responsibly and humanely, without using antibiotics, hormones or steroids that are all too common in industrial livestock production.

One of the most anticipated openings of 2024, Hotel Brando's Saint Bibiana—named for the patron saint of hangovers—fills a gap in Savannah's vibrant dining scene offering coastal Italian fare that bursts with a distinctively Southern influence. Chef Derek Simcik, Culinary Director of Hotel Bardo Savannah, first met Larry Ferguson at a farmer's market within a few months of moving to Savannah to open his new hotel project. They immediately hit it off and Simcik uses a custom cut for his 24 oz *Bistecca alla Fiorentina* at Saint Bibiana as well as their heritage Berkshire pork belly for porchetta and tomato-braised pork belly for stuffing in *arancini* (Italian rice balls that are stuffed, coated with bread-crumbs and deep-fried) with saffron mozzarella risotto.

"Someone from the Ferguson family works in every facet of the property from raising the animals to slaughter to sales," Simcik said. "They are so passionate about their animals."

Opposite (left): At EsterEv, diners will find morels, ramps and fiddlehead ferns in the menu from late April through May

Opposite (right): At Saint Bibiana, Chef Derek Simcik serves steak sourced from Hunter Cattle Co., a third-generation family owned farm in Savannah, GA

Top: Grown at Chino Farms, in California, the French Mara des Bois strawberry is a classic French strawberry with a distinctively sweet taste

Below: Tom Chino is the Owner of Chino Farms, a well-known farm by local residents and world renowned chefs alike



CHINO FARMS STRAWBERRIES

Alice Waters and Wolfgang Puck have extolled the flavor of the *Mara des Bois* strawberries grown at Chino Farms in Rancho Santa Fe, CA, for decades. The third-generation family farm grows close to 400 different heirloom varieties of fruits and vegetables in sunny Southern California—koginut squash, snow leopard melons, thumbelina carrots, Jimmy Nardello peppers—but it's the strawberries that have become their calling card.

"Tom [Chino] is widely known as one of the best farmers in California and quite frankly, one of the best in the country when it comes to growing organic vegetables and fruits," said Executive Chef, Cameron Ingle, who visits Chino Farms daily to pick out produce for his modern Italian restaurant, Marisi, in La Jolla.

"The *Mara des Bois* strawberries are a super classic French strawberry that is so sweet and perfectly sized to be a one-bite treat of a strawberry," he said. For spring, Ingle has a tomato and strawberry salad on the menu at Marisi with fresh mozzarella and ramp purée. "I want to keep it really simple and allow their vegetables and fruits to shine."

Unlike most farms, Chino Farms doesn't deliver to restaurants, so chefs have to swing by the farmstand to pick up orders in person. Ingle doesn't mind though—he loves spending time at the farm and developing a real connection to the land and the people who work it. "If you're going to say you're farm-to-table, you need to go to a farm every day," he said. "Plus, I'm a competitive human being and I want to have cool stuff that nobody else can get." ←

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