

# How a Des Moines Chef Lets the Produce Be the Star

By Missy Keenan, August 1, 2015



Suman Hoque, the chef and owner of HoQ in the East Village, wants people to realize how good fresh vegetables can taste — even when unadorned.

If comments overheard at a recent Des Moines Chamber of Commerce luncheon at the restaurant are any indication, his mission is a success.

Attendees said things like:

- "Wow, this soup is amazing; it really tastes like fresh tomatoes." (And alternatively, "I don't usually like tomatoes but I love this soup!")
- "This ice cream tastes just like fresh peaches."
- "I never knew a raw green bean would be so good."
- "This carrot has so much more flavor than the ones in the bags!"

The last two comments were in reference to the table decorations at each place that were just about the cutest thing ever. Three little skewers on a wooden stand displayed a trio of raw veggies — a green bean, a cherry tomato and an unpeeled mini carrot with the top still on. Most guests thought the vegetables were fake until one brave soul started munching on her carrot.

**Ninety percent of HoQ's** ingredients are organic, locally sourced within about 50 miles of the restaurant, and fresh from the farm.

"So many people are used to vegetables from the grocery store that are nice-looking and available all year around but have no flavor," Hoque said. "And sometimes the vegetables you buy from the store don't look like real vegetables."

Case in point, when Hoque moved to the U.S. from Bangladesh and first saw peeled baby carrots in bags, he asked his wife if they grew like that. She tried to pull his leg that American carrots grow as

uniformly shaped miniature cylinders, but his mother-in-law set him straight that carrots are processed to have that shape.

"Why would you do that to a carrot?" Hoque asked. "Real carrots are so good, but those don't taste like anything."

**Sheree Clark, healthy living expert** and host of the local TV show "Fork in the Road," also likes to encourage her clients to eat fresh, local produce — for both the health benefits and the great taste.

"When it comes to good eating, this is by far the best time of year to live in Iowa," Clark said.

"Produce is abundant, it's cheap, and it won't taste this good again until next year. I tell my clients, 'Don't waste calories on oil and sauces; let that good fresh taste shine through.'

"I've had clients tell me they don't like something, maybe beets or asparagus," she continued. "But all they've ever had was canned, and then they taste fresh and discover they do like it after all. Fresh, in-season produce tastes nothing like canned, or even frozen, and it's packed with more vitamins, too."

**When Hoque first opened** his restaurant three years ago, he had a hard time sourcing enough local, sustainable produce and meat. Now he has farmers stopping by almost every day.

"The first six months it was hard to get sustainably raised chicken," he said. "Now people know they have a place to sell it, so they're raising more chicken to accommodate that. Some people think it would cost a lot more, but you can often get good, fresh, local organic food just as cheap and just as easily as from a distributor if you buy it right from the farmer."

Hoque is happy to know that the money he spends on his ingredients stays in the community and supports small farms, and he's proud to list the farm names on his menu as well.

"I think more and more people want to see that farm name," he said "You couldn't find that five years ago, but lots of restaurants have it today. When I did my books last year, I saw that I spent like \$130,000 that went to local farmers in this community. That feels great."

**Hoque's enthusiasm is contagious** when he talks excitedly about menu items he's planning for the fall.

"I like all vegetables, but I'm really looking forward to the root vegetables," he said. "I love serving squash in all different ways. And I'll be making fries from sweet potatoes, beets and potatoes that are purple all the way through. They look beautiful and they're so good."

He's also looking forward to serving more fresh, raw veggies like he did at the Chamber event.

"You put sauce and dressing on vegetables and you change the flavor," Hoque said. "I want to serve real food. Take a vegetable, put it on the plate, and don't do anything else."

### **Enjoying Produce at Home**

Want to let fruits and veggies be the star in your own kitchen? Start with a trip to a farmers' market for local seasonal produce — the fresher the better.

Guests at a recent Des Moines Chamber of Commerce luncheon held at HoQ restaurant were raving over the salad. Since the flavor of the vegetables really shone through, people guessed that the dressing was just good olive oil and maybe salt.

"I think it's not about the dressing," Hoque said. "The farmer picked the lettuce early (that same) morning, so it was really fresh. That's what made it taste so good."

### **CHEF HOQUE'S RED WINE VINAIGRETTE**

- 1/3 cup of good red wine vinegar
- 2/3 cup of extra virgin olive oil
- 2 T chopped sage
- 1 T chopped thyme
- 2 T Iowa honey
- Salt and pepper to taste

Put all the ingredients in the blender except olive oil for 1 min. Then add the olive oil slowly to the blender. Taste if you want salt or pepper. Makes approximately 1 cup of dressing.

### **SHEREE CLARK'S NO-DRESSING CUCUMBER TOMATO SALAD**

- 2 medium cucumbers, peeled, seeded and chopped
- 1 1/2 cups diced tomato
- 1/3 cup thinly sliced sweet onion (or more)
- 1 large avocado, peeled and cubed
- Unrefined salt and fresh-ground black pepper to taste

Combine cucumber, tomato, onion and avocado in a glass bowl and toss together. Feel free to get aggressive; the avocado takes the place of a dressing, so it's good if you "smoosh" it up. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Serve immediately. Makes 2-4 servings.