

SUMMER 2018 Issue No. 6

# edible LA

Sharing the Story of Local Food, Season by Season

the  
outdoor  
issue

chefs & their gardens | summer's bounty cocktails | tempering the grill |  
suzanne goin's lamb skewers + more outdoor recipes

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# CHEFS & THEIR GARDENS

**A love affair, three ways.**

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COURTNEY GUERRA HOLDING ONION FLOWERS AT HER GLASSELL PARK FARM.

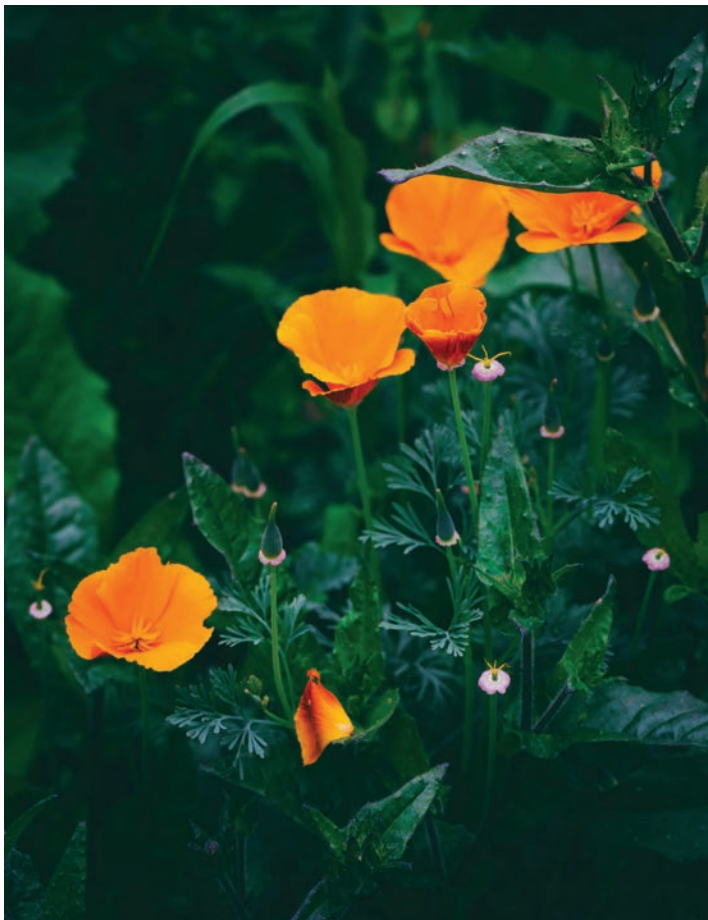
# W

è're standing in what used to be a vacant lot behind Coogie's Cafe in Santa Monica. It's been transformed into a culinary oasis that supplies chefs—like Jeremy Fox of Rustic Canyon and Ari Taymor of Little Prince—with prized ingredients. "You've never truly tasted a vegetable until you've tasted its blossoms," says Courtney Guerra of Courtney Guerra Farms.

Guerra is in her element here—any onlooker could easily deduce that there is nothing more she'd rather be doing than messing around in this soil. Tall and striking, she wears a wide-brimmed hat as she shows me around the farm, taking me over to see her dark green and very happy fava beans clumping in rows.

"With favas, the chefs are going to want open blossoms. They have such a great flavor," she says, handing me one to try. She's right—the flowers taste like crisp, fresh peas. "And look at these really nice, beautiful green tips that are just coming out—they'd make a great garnish—and you have also these very young, velvety pods," she





shows me.

It's heartwarming to see the sheer pleasure Guerra takes in greening the neighborhood. According to her, it's also about giving chefs a new or unique ingredient that they can't easily buy.

"If I'm a farmer in a farmers' market, [that means] I'm selling fava beans for weight, so I'd want a big, beefy pod and full-sized beans. The more volume, the more money... that's why I've found it easier to partner exclusively [with chefs] or have the restaurant own the farm... you can focus on what you're doing, just growing the food," she tells me.

After going to the Culinary Institute of America in Napa, Guerra discovered that she would much rather be outside instead of inside the kitchen. She began working at the Michelin-star restaurant Meadowood in Napa Valley, then did her internship at *Mélicse* in Santa Monica.

Chef Ari Taymor, who recently opened his new concept *Little Prince*, was one of the first chefs Guerra approached with her culinary garden idea. Within weeks, she found herself driving her truck to Taymor's now-shuttered *Alma Restaurant* downtown. "It was really gnarly there with a gentlemen's club across the street, the *Ace Hotel* not yet open, and crack users in the alley—and there I was with my blossoms and snails and buckets full of seaweed sloshing in seawater."

"Taymor is one of those chefs who knows how special it is to work with [ingredients] that are grown in a specific fashion...we worked very closely together for three years," Guerra tells me. "He likes spicy mustard, bitter greens, and fresh fenugreek. He's very experimental and also came from a background of working at a restaurant in France that had their own garden. And Jeremy [Fox] of *Rustic Canyon*, the same thing...there's a recurring theme that, if you peel back some layers, some of the finest chefs in Los Angeles have very close connections with farming." Guerra says that "it's more than just having relationships at farmers' markets—which is awesome because you can have conversations with the growers, and they will grow ingredients for you— but there's something so special about having your own space and your own grower."

She tells me about a dehydrated turnip she started creating with Taymor—a root vegetable that they starved for water until it formed a white skin, which left the inside exceptionally crunchy and sweet.

Taymor remembers that turnip too. An intense young man who obviously cares deeply about every element of owning a restaurant, I met him outside the construction at his newer concept, *Little Prince*, which began as a pop-up in Santa Monica and is now a bustling, permanent fixture. He remembers how small that turnip was, how condensed in flavor. He also loved Guerra's favas, harvested either super young or overly mature. "We'd dry them and turn them into a miso," he remembers.

The farm in Santa Monica is on land donated by a private owner, as is another, bigger location in Glassell Park. Along with her own farm in Ojai, everything about Guerra tells me that she's committed to urban culinary farming for the long haul.

"You've heard the term slow food?" she asks. "I'm a very impatient person by nature and gardening is the balance to that. If you think, *okay, I'm going to commit to farming for the*











next twenty years and I want to grow this specific tomato, you only get twenty chances to perfect growing that tomato or that turnip. And chefs understand that. They know they won't get it all at once, but they commit long term to experimenting with new food—and this is where they get to do that. It's so hard to find something new," she says.

Guerra also stresses that there is so much room and opportunity here, which is important to note because breaking into the world of fine dining is notoriously difficult. "If you walk up to the back of a restaurant with a case of awesome heirloom tomatoes that you grew two blocks away, no one will turn you away," she explains.

"There's a lot of vacant space," Guerra tells me, "and no reason why this can't explode. If we can get as many chefs as possible to have access to where their food is growing, what is that going to do for future menus?"

## THE NEIGHBOR'S YARD

For Chef Kevin Meehan of Kali Restaurant, community and environment define how his food gets to be hyper-local—like, on the same block—and hyper-seasonal.

Kali is situated in a residential area near Larchmont Village. Houses with front and back yards extend behind the dining room and Kevin wants his neighbors to see the restaurant as their own—a neighborhood restaurant in the most literal sense. That's what gave him the idea to go to them with a proposal, Meehan tells me: "let me turn your front yard into an edible garden that my chefs will harvest and maintain!" Within weeks, raised garden beds exploded with purple kale, mustard, arugula, and nasturtium, and more and more people wanted him to transform their yards.

"My cooks love it too," Meehan says. "Cooks get burnt out, it's a really tiring job...so they can run out in the middle of the day to go pick chives."

Meehan wants to provide a better environment and nurture a more positive kitchen culture than the one he came up in. Having worked in Michelin-starred restaurants, he remembers the screaming, long hours, and near-constant stress. "It's about my cooks getting out of the kitchen and connecting with the food," he says. "They come out here with a big bowl and scissors and nothing gets wasted."

Meehan is a self-taught gardener. It all began with a little garden he started back when he and his wife rented their first house together. Now, they have two-year-old twin daughters—Lily Peach and Naomi Olive—and, of course, Meehan planted peach and olive trees for them when they were born. A passionate gardener, he even lets me in on his own little trick: "it's like a secret," he tells me, "I put sprigs of mint in my shoes."

He also explains that one of the very unique attributes of Kali is that every single dish tells a story. Today he's discovered green almonds. He cooked them in brine and, he's right, they taste just like—actually, even better—than artichokes. Back in the kitchen, he also shows me a pan of charred avocados and another of sugar-cured egg yolks. Right now, chef Meehan is also into jarring things and aging them like fine wine.

"Think about it," he says. "You could have a main



**CHEF KEVIN MEEHAN IN ONE OF KALI RESTAURANT'S GARDENS. PHOTO COURTESY OF KALI RESTAURANT**

course with a 2002 Kirby pickle. Who does that?" he asks.

What strikes me most about Kali is the reaction when diners found out about chef Meehan's edible farms. "People just show up at the back door with buckets of stuff," he tells me. 'Here are some loquats from my backyard; or 'I have all these apples.' Everybody just wants to be part of something," he thinks. It's an arresting Alice Waters-ian vision, and also the mark of a true neighborhood restaurant.

## GROWING FOOD ON AIR

Chef Tim Hollingsworth's downtown restaurant, Otium, has been meticulously planned. There's a mature olive grove, a patio with herb boxes and fireplaces, and a terrace with twenty-four vertical aeroponic food farms—more like towers—installed and maintained by LA Urban Farms. In yet another variation on the theme, Otium's culinary team like their gardens growing up to the sky.

And there's a lot to love with these towers. Using only ten percent of the land and irrigation of traditional farming, they recycle all of their nutrients and water through a closed loop system. They also leave a negligible CO2 footprint by eliminating the need for shipping and storage. The pH-balanced ionic materials and nutrients mean no harmful chemicals, and the system uses less than a dollar per month in electricity. Let's not forget that, according to some estimates, the yields grow





ONE OF THE VERTICAL FARMING  
TOWERS AT OTIUM IN DOWNTOWN LA.  
(PHOTO COURTESY OF OTIUM)



three times faster and three times bigger than soil-based crops.

“Tim got with Niels [Thorlaksen, of LA Urban Farms] before Otium was even built,” their chef de cuisine, Jonathan Granada, tells me.

Granada obviously delights in the garden and wants to show me everything, especially his prized ice lettuce. “We got the seeds from Tucker, who used to be the old French Laundry gardener...we cook it instead of using it raw. It’s a little more bitter and is great with [ingredients that] need acidity.”

And a gorgeous plant is—dark green, purple, and beaded with tiny droplets of water that hug the fleshy leaves like glycerin. Borage, multi-colored bachelor’s buttons (cornflowers) and kale also festoon the white towers, among many other vegetables and herbs.

“We use this cilantro in our tabouli,” Granada tells me, and “this baby kale goes with our pork belly at lunch.”

The garden doesn’t completely supply the restaurant, which is hard to believe when I look at the two-week harvest covering a long table that runs the length of the terrace. “We use bits here and there,” Granada says. “Like when we do a funnel cake, I’ll finish it with arugula. If there’s an octopus on the line, I’ll grow epazote and use it in the oil. It’ll take me one month to grow and one month to use the oil up.”

This lush oasis didn’t quite spring up overnight—it’s the result of a collaborative effort between Otium’s chefs and the urban farmers. First the chef will write the season’s menu, then they all come up with a planting schedule for the crops—some of which take only seven to fourteen days to grow— and LA Urban Farms tends the towers, sending out gardeners to harvest the flowers, vegetables, and fruits every week and then replant with seedlings.

As Wendy Coleman, a founder of LA Urban Farms, tells me, “the chefs love [the process] because we have a huge seed catalogue.” Moving into summer, the towers will soon be packed with herbs. “Greek basil on the front [towers] because it grows in these cool globes,” chef Granada shows me. Diners can sit on the terrace and literally watch their garden grow.

“I get to play with every stage of the plant,” chef Hollingsworth adds. “If you go to farmers’ markets, you only see the end game. If something starts to flower, we can use that here and being able to have that versatility...that’s pretty amazing in an urban environment [like downtown Los Angeles].”

It’s interesting to think about the fact that most of our beloved local produce comes from surrounding counties and isn’t really as close to home as we may believe. Imagine how we could all green up our neighborhood’s vacant lots, schools, or even just a small portion of our own yards.

As I leave Otium, it’s hard not to be excited about our local food scene. LA Urban Farms continues to install these vertical farms at some of the county’s best restaurants, hotels, schools, and corporate offices. Courtney Guerra sees her gardens as the vanguard of a movement that’s about to explode. Kevin Meehan is colonizing a neighborhood, one yard at a time.

As I drive home and look beyond the traffic, all I can see are possible urban farm spaces where I only saw buildings or empty space before. Now, take a look around *your* neighborhood. ♦

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