

Trend Alert: the Urban Farm-to-Table Movement

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By: Serena Ball

Farms aren't just in the country anymore. Rooftop gardens supply dozens of Chicago restaurants with just-picked veggies. In the lobby of Vin de Set restaurant in St. Louis, diners are greeted by tall white towers growing kale for salads that night. At New York's Bell Book & Candle, the menu is set by herbs like chervil, Opal basil and sage, all grown several stories above the dining room. Today, chefs and consumers are tasting veggies picked mere hours beforehand from restaurant rooftops, and from the abandoned parking lot turned urban farm next door.

Aeroponic Farming

Jeff Seibel's official title is Farm Manager, but his unofficial title is "Urban Farmer" in St. Louis. He oversees a commercial greenhouse that supplies all of the Bibb lettuce, Romaine, kale, arugula, kohlrabi, fennel, mustard and other greens for five Hamilton Hospitality restaurants. From March to December, restaurant owners Paul and Wendy Hamilton do not order a single green leaf for their growing restaurants. "We've even switched up our menus to add more greens to our dishes, including green-topped pizzas, braised greens pastas and creative salads. It's a good dilemma, to have so much just-picked produce," said Wendy.

To make the most of crowded city spaces, Seibel grows produce for the Hamilton's restaurants in white vertical Tower Gardens. Last year over 10,000 pounds of produce was grown in just a 1/4-acre plot of land. The Tower system is known as aeroponic farming and according to some calculations, farmers can grow 30% more food up to three times faster than traditional farming methods, using 98% less water and 90% less space.

Hydroponic Gardens

In New York City, students at the Food and Finance High School (FFHS) in collaboration with NYC Cornell University Coop Extension (CUCE) tend hydroponic gardens —soil-free plots that grow plants in nutrient-rich water. Students learn that the liquid nutrient solution requirements needed for young plants is different from that needed for mature plants, and that a controlled environment is needed to produce healthy vegetables and herbs.

Once harvested, produce like kale and Chinese cabbages are prepared by students in the school's cafeteria, and in the culinary arts and catering programs. "Graduates of our programs are skilled in every aspect of growing plants hydroponically to marketing the mature vegetables in retail settings," explains Professor Philson Warner, Founding Director of CUCE Hydroponics, Aquaculture, Aquaponics, Sustainable Agriculture Applied Research Teaching Labs.

Rooftop gardens

Over 10 million heads of leafy greens and herbs are grown year-round on the south side of Chicago at the Gotham Greens 75,000 square foot rooftop farm. It claims to be the world's largest and most productive greenhouse. Not only can chefs get bok choy and Windy City Crunch lettuce blend, but consumers can find these greens at their local Jewel supermarket. Gotham Greens also partners with the Greater Chicago Food Depository food bank.

Baseball fans seated on the third base side of Fenway Park in Boston can view the Fenway Farmsgarden from which the kale on their Kale Caesar was harvested. Tomatoes, peppers, Brussels sprouts and other veggies grown in the rooftop garden are served at Red Sox EMC Club restaurant, for special events, and in concession stand favorites.

Tips for Finding Urban Farms in your City

Keep your eyes peeled for greens grown right in your own city above restaurants, at schools, in stadiums. Or search online for: urban farm, hydroponic, rooftop garden. Here are a few specific examples:

Colleges

University of Southern California

Lindsey Pine, a Registered Dietitian at USC Hospitality, notes: "Students may see the lettuce they will have for lunch as they walk to class." With 88 Tower Gardens, there's a good chance if you eat at a restaurant, catered event, or dining hall on campus, you're eating greens that are only a few hours old.

Bowdoin University

Even in Maine's short growing season, vegetables, fruits and herbs from the Bowdoin Organic Garden are served in the school's cafeteria.

Community Programs

Columbia Center for Urban Agriculture

This organization in Columbia, Missouri, is like gardening training wheels. Chefs, pharmacists and wannabe home gardeners can learn skills in gardens around the city.

Little Free Garden Project

In Moorhead, Minnesota and Fargo, North Dakota, you and your neighbors can share the fun of gardening together.

Supermarkets and Farmers Markets

Gotham Greens

Originating in New York City, their greens are in hundreds of NYC restaurants and at grocery stores around New York, New Jersey and Connecticut.

Rising Pheasant Farms

Farmers market shoppers in Detroit can pick up asparagus, sage and sunflower shoots grown on the East Side.

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*This article was written and/or reviewed by an independent registered dietitian nutritionist.