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Veggie Visionaries

"Call any vegetable and the chances are, a vegetable will respond to you." —Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention.

BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER



YOU KNOW it's autumn by the chill in the air and the heartbreakingly clear daylight. Maine's beautiful potatoes are everywhere. But thanks to savvy farmers, eager chefs, and consumer demand, the local harvest brings new surprises every year.

MOIRA QUINN

SERIOUSLY LOCAL

If you're still moping about the end of the summer tomatoes and corn, you need only talk to **David Levi** to forget all about them.

"I love fall produce, and there are a few crops I'm pretty much dying for," says Levi, chef-owner of the strictly-local **Vinland**

in **Congress Square**. "One of my favorites is radicchio." Clearly, this is radicchio's year. Vinland serves it "roasted with potato, rosemary, garlic, potato, and extra-sharp Buggy Whip cheddar from Sonnenthal Farm. It's total comfort food.

"There's a brief window in the fall when we

HUNGRY EYE



Turmeric-infused cocktail

get our full yearly supply of ginger, turmeric, and coriander, all of which are incredibly powerful and surprising flavors. Coriander is just the seed from cilantro, so a farmer friend of mine lets his cilantro go to seed and delivers us bags of green coriander seeds, which are even more delicious than the best dried seeds I've had. Coriander is the key seasoning for our mussels. It occasionally shows up on our raw beef, and it's in our bar program.

"We put cranberries to use all year, but it's very exciting to get fresh ones, and I hear it's a big year for them. We make a cranberry and ginger compote for our cheese plate that people rave about.

"As we start getting some real frost in the ground, the parsnips turn very sweet and all the root crops reach their peak, including beets, carrots, and celeriac. Those sweet parsnips, along with the turmeric and ginger, combine to make my favorite dessert, our parsnip custard. I sneak a bite after service pretty much every night we have it available. We serve sunchokes with monkfish. Cold weather also brings out the best in cabbage. We're brewing up some really good sauerkraut.

"Then there are the wild mushrooms. Hen of the woods, chicken mushrooms, hedgehog mushrooms, matsutake. Fall is the best season for wild mushrooms, which are by far my favorite targets for foraging. It's hard to find time to get into the woods, but you can bet I'll be out there when the hens start popping out. We use some cultivated, but there's nothing like the wild stuff."

Levi's enthusiasm is catching. "I hardly know where to begin with squash, I love it so much. I'll just say this. Somebody in Maine should really do what Stony Brook

"Those sweet parsnips, along with the turmeric and ginger, combine to make my favorite dessert, our parsnip custard. I sneak a bite after service pretty much every night we have it available."

—David Levi

does in New York and make delicious, Austrian-style squash seed oil."

ITALIAN TRADITION

"For me, Northern Italian food is suited for the fall and winter months," says **Scott London**, chef at the new wine bar **Rosso-bianco** tucked into the West End's Bramhall Square. "Much of the cuisine is based on rich dishes with butter and cheese—very comforting in the cooler months."

Rossobianco, cozy with cappuccino-colored walls and a hand-built wooden bar and wine racks, is co-owned by **David Levi** and **Colleen Callahan**. Local produce, meat, and seafood are used to fashion Northern Italian dishes, but the wine list is international.

London quit a job at Bath Iron Works to attend the Auguste Escoffier Culinary School in Boulder, Colorado. He later staged (apprenticed) at two restaurants in the Fri-

uli region in northeastern Italy, where he learned the tenets of the cuisine.

"The colder the water gets here, the better the shellfish get. A nice steaming bowl of *cozze* (mussels) and perhaps seared *cape-sante* (scallops) are definite. Squash and mushroom soups are fantastic in the fall. We love mushrooms, and we use the *arancini* (fried balls of risotto) to really showcase that flavor profile. Hearty grains also go great with mushrooms and with savory herbs such as rosemary and thyme."

Sure enough, on a recent visit, the featured *arancini* were *con funghi*—rich and earthy with oyster mushrooms and Grana Padano cheese, and just the thing with a glass of Costieres de Nimes chardonnay. Crostini topped with hake rillettes were another seamless fusion of sustainable local fish with continental preparation.

"An herb that screams fall is sage. Sage, winter squash, and brown butter is simplicity at its best."

FEAST FOR THE SENSES

"Cooking with the seasons is a real adventure," says chef **Ben Jackson** at **Drifter's Wife** wine bar on Washington Avenue. He sums it up: "The pure pleasure of tasting something for the first time in a year is real.

"I find inspiration in the moment. It's



Meg Mitchell of South Paw Farm and her locally grown radicchio, left.

ITALIAN PIRATE FOOD



Bold seafood and pasta dishes descended from those eaten by the famed pirates and explorers of Genoa, Italy, birthplace of pesto. Solo Italiano's Genovese menu boasts freshly made pasta, locally sourced seafood, and Best in the World pesto.

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HUNGRY EYE

about place and time for me, making new dishes and calling on the past to guide me. I love alliums and [exploring] the nuances of garlic. Roasted garlic on everything, please.” The North Carolina native came to Portland via Brooklyn, where he worked with Drifter’s owners, Peter and Orenda Hale. His one-person minimalist “kitchen” is in plain sight next to the bar—a nook with just two burners and a small convection oven.

“I love bitter greens, especially radicchio and chicory. I love bright, crisp, lightly blanched collard greens and winter squash. I love making chicken liver mousse and seeing people enjoy it. Put it in a ravioli with rosemary and brown butter. . . It’s a no-brainer.”

Serious about his sources, Jackson buys his seafood from Harbor Fish Market and Browne Trading and his chicken livers from Serendipity Acres in North Yarmouth, known for spectacularly tasty organic poultry.

When we catch up with Serendipity’s owner Jules Fecteau at the Saturday farmers market to see what’s new in October, she smiles and her eyes twinkle. “We’re finalizing our Thanksgiving orders—we’ve raised a lot more turkeys this year.”

FARMERS’ KNACK

“We start pulling out our tomato vines right after Labor Day,” says **Austin Chadd**, who



owns **Green Spark Farm** in Cape Elizabeth with his wife, **Mary Ellen**. Their stunning organic summer produce can be found at **Portland’s Wednesday farmer’s market in Monument Square**, and on **Saturdays in Deering Oaks Park**. They also wholesale to such restaurants as **Hugo’s**, the **Honey Paw**, and **East Ender**. “We turn our summer tunnels over into fall greens—spinach, kale, lettuce.”

There’s no need to resort to frozen vegetables in the winter. The Chadds, like many Maine farmers, grow year-round in greenhouse “tunnels,” or hoop houses, which protect produce from harsh weather. “We sell at the winter market [once the outdoor markets move indoors to **Cove Street on Saturdays around December 1**]. “We made it to 51 of 52 Saturday markets last year.”

Meg Mitchell has eight hoop houses at her **South Paw Farm** in Freedom. “We’re into winter storage crops—carrots, cabbage, beets, potatoes. Squash is a lower yield this year because of the drought, but we have some sweet mini-buttercups, delicatas, and sugar dumplings. We’ve got orange, yellow, and white pumpkins. What I’m really excited about for autumn is radicchio—I’ve got four kinds this year.”

Her suggestion for this leafy red chicory that she grows in both oblong and round, lettuce-shaped heads? “I like to cut it in wedges and toss it with olive oil, honey, and a little balsamic vinegar and roast it.”

Of course, not all growers want to extend their season. “I don’t have any greenhouses,” says **Bruce Hinck** of **Meadowood Farm** in Yarmouth. “In the winter, I read. Our fall crops are one last set of lettuce and plenty of onions, squashes, and pumpkins.” His assortment of onions is dazzling. Hinck’s other specialty is garlic. He sets out bushel baskets of a dozen types labeled with the name and playful description of each.

And don’t forget about local mushrooms. **North Spore** sells baskets of the shiitake, hen-of-the-woods, and oyster mushrooms they cultivate in the Dana Warp Mill in Westbrook, plus a few shaggy Chagas and orange lobster mushrooms they forage.

If you’re timid about handling fancy mushrooms, the North Spore guys are there for you. “Don’t be shy about how much butter you throw in the pan,” says grower **Kevin Bassett**. Brown them up, maybe deglaze with a little wine, throw in some cream, maybe some fresh herb like thyme. Simmer it up, turn off the heat, and let the mushrooms steep for a few minutes. Toss it with pasta, and it’s awesome.”

Oh autumn, how we love you. ■



Scott London, head chef at Rossobianco

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