

Local cuisine takes a bite of the Island

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Inn at Laurel Point executive chef Takashi Ito, right, chef de partie Lyall Chalmers, left, and executive sous-chef Castro Boateng prepare a preview of the offerings at the upcoming Taste: Victoria's Festival of Food and Wine.
Photograph by: Adrian Lam, Times Colonist, Times Colonist

Local spot prawns, little wing oysters, dungeness crab and Saltspring Island mussels. This is the feast that chef Takashi Ito and his crew have prepared for the preview of the third annual Taste: Victoria's Festival of Food and Wine.

Food lovers, writers and connoisseurs crowd around the table, stationed in front of a breathtaking backdrop at The Inn at Laurel Point. It almost looks tropical, but local is the word of the day.

Actually, chef Ito helped the Inn make the switch from black tiger shrimp - imported from Asia and in danger of overfishing - to the local catch featured today. But taste won't be compromised.

"I always say, it can't just be local, it has to be good," Ito says.

Twenty years ago, a food event such as this was a bit of a rarity. But this year, there are events and festivals all over Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands, emphasizing local, sustainable and seasonal fare.

The Saanich Strawberry Festival, the B.C. Shellfish Festival and Fernwood Bites are just a few of the culinary events that have already taken place this season.

"It has really blossomed, over the last 15 years or so," says Times Colonist food columnist and chef Eric Akis. "It makes sense because we have the longest growing season in Canada, which enables us to grow all kinds of things - from artichoke and fig to every berry imaginable."

Food culture may be booming now, but someone had to plant the seeds for local cuisine to grow.

When former sommelier Gary Hynes launched Eat magazine in 1999, there weren't many culinary events on the Island.

"When I think back to that time, it was really the very beginnings of the developing food culture," Hynes said.

Still, a few trailblazing localists had begun looking to their backyards for the freshest food, Hynes and Akis said, though they worked mostly independently of each other.

Both said chefs were the vanguards of the movement. And Sooke Harbour House, which has been called a "grandfather of Canadian cuisine," was the pioneering restaurant. By sourcing local produce, Akis said Sooke Harbour House built local cuisine.

"They were leaders," he said. "Other chefs took notice."

Camille's fine West Coast dining restaurant, opened by David Mincey 22 years ago, was another innovator.

Fed up with sub-par produce shipped from California, Mincey swore never to serve anything out of season.

"In the early days of the restaurant, people couldn't understand why they couldn't get a caesar salad in winter," he said. "We lost customers like crazy."

Besides retaining customers, early locavores faced other challenges. Preparing inspired local dishes was tougher back then, since farmers weren't growing many specialty items. Today's synergy between chefs and farmers - where a chef will say, "I'll buy this product if you grow it" - still had to be nurtured.

At the time these chefs reached out to local farms, a few farmers were making direct links with their customers.

Five local farmers organized the first Moss Street Market 20 years ago, with strong support from the Fairfield community in Victoria - a sign that consumers were also interested in buying locally.

But it was about a quarter of the size it is today.

While each of these disparate groups and individuals reached their feelers out to each other, one event changed the game, according to culinary observers.

Feast of Fields, first held on Vancouver Island in 1998, invites local chefs to pair with local farmers, vintners and brewers, in an outdoor festival hosted by a different farm each year.

"That brought all the various chefs that had been working on their own together to one location," Hynes said. "And it tried to feature, as much as possible, the local farms where they were getting their food."

It was also one of the first venues for consumers to meet both farmers and chefs. "The public can come and talk to chefs and talk to farmers and get a sense of what's happening out there in the food movement," said Mincey. "I think it brings people together as a food community."

The first Feast of Fields was held by Ontario chefs Jamie Kennedy and Michael Stadlander. Chef Mara Jernigan participated in the Eastern event and when she moved west, she recognized great potential in the fertile farms, wild forests and bountiful sea around Vancouver Island.

She and about 20 others in the growing food movement, including Akis and Hynes, hatched a plan to hold the event here, during their regular, informal meetings in an Oak Bay living room.

With their children running around a potluck of homemade food, that same group would become the foundation for Slow Food Vancouver Island, dedicated to countering the fast-food culture. But Feast of Fields was their first project.

"None of us really knew what to expect at that time," said Mincey. The pilot event was a huge success. "We knew from that one that it was going to be an annual event. There was no question about it."

Besides providing a space for those involved in the food movement to connect, the event endeavours to educate about local food issues.

"We always try to have a bit of a theme," Jernigan said. "Education is a really big part of it. It's kind of meaningless if people just eat, drink and go home."

As the idea spread that what we grow in our backyards could be a delicacy, it changed the way local chefs looked at their hometown.

Previously, the most talented aspired to cook for Toronto and Vancouver markets. "Now they could see the possibility of staying home," Hynes said.

While other parts of the country struggle to put together tasty local meals, even when the interest was there, Vancouver Island had the advantage of abundant and varied local fish, meats and produce.

Local food is not only available today, it's a norm.

Many chefs highlight local ingredients on their menus and specialty food shops dot the city, from Choux Choux Charcuterie to Charell's Cheese Shop and Delicatessen.

Relatively new cooking schools such as the French Mint and the London Chef give consumers the skills they need to cook their own culinary masterpieces, although simple preparation is also trendy.

"People aren't looking for overly complicated fine dining anymore," said Hynes. "A popular thing is simply prepared foods, where you let the quality of the ingredients shine."

It fits, for a place with high quality, fresh and diverse local foods. And it seems to fit with the culture, too.

"It's a very fun-loving, very relaxed kind of movement. We're definitely not stuffy about it," said Mincey. "That's what sets us apart from the bigger cities."

The individual efforts of the past have grown into a network of local food activity.

No longer are chefs and farmers communicating in isolation, for example. The Island Chefs' Collaborative, formed a year after the first Feast of Fields, formalizes communication with annual meetings - in addition to actively fundraising to support small farmers and organizing a food festival.

Of course, obstacles remain. Local produce is typically pricier than lower-grade imports, drawing criticism regarding accessibility.

Some are trying to level the playing field and make the movement more democratic, however. The Good Food Box, for example, organized by the Fernwood Neighbourhood Resource Group, provides affordable access to high-quality local produce for young and at-risk families.

And while farmers continue to face some insecurity, the local food movement has given them some hope.

"Nowadays people want to come out, they want to know where things are grown, they want local products," said Dan Ponchet, president of the Southern Vancouver Island Direct Farm Marketing Association, which represents about 75 producers.

"I think it's a good time to be farming."

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