

Close to home

L.A.'s resident localvore brings homegrown products to the table

BY MARIA GAGLIANO / MVGAGLIANO@GMAIL.COM

CHEF NEAL FRASER IS NO STRANGER

to the green movement. As partner and executive chef of Grace Restaurant in Los Angeles, he introduced the establishment to sustainable business practices upon its opening in 2003. He started small, investing in a reverse osmosis water filter and doing away with bottled water. As Fraser sees it, "It isn't enough to think about recycling. We need to take another step back to think about the energy it takes to drive those bottles to your restaurant ... and the energy it takes to haul them over to the recycling center."

Fraser's forward-thinking approach to sustainable business has covered new ground over the years. All of the garbage in Grace is composted and Fraser uses the restaurant's leftover vegetable oil to fuel his car. His most recent eco-friendly endeavor is the five-course Close to Home tasting menu, which features 90 percent local ingredients acquired from within 400 miles of Los Angeles.

Make no mistake though, converting a gourmet restaurant into an eco-friendly haven has proven to be anything but easy. "It hasn't been impossible, but I think it would be more difficult if I lived in another city in America," says Fraser. When it comes to sourcing local ingredients, California restaurateurs have a unique advantage. Unlike most areas of the country, within a 400-mile radius from almost all points in the Golden State, restaurateurs are within reach of sustainable agriculture, slaughter houses and fish purveyors.

Choosing local producers will pose a challenge for any restaurant's bottom

line. "We were buying grass-fed beef from Australia for five dollars less a pound than the local beef that's on our menu now, which is antibiotic- and hormone-free," says Fraser. "From a business standpoint, it's a bad idea. It's better to buy cheaper commercial products with a longer shelf life. But that's not exactly where my head is. At a certain point, you have to wonder how much you can get along knowing that your actions are affecting the people who eat in your restaurant and your community in a negative way."

“There are people who are trying to figure out different ways to change, and I feel like I'm in that group.”

—NEAL FRASER / EXECUTIVE CHEF, GRACE RESTAURANT

Making the effort to put local, sustainable ingredients on Grace's menu is just the beginning. "My biggest challenge is convincing people to try something that they wouldn't normally try," says Fraser. "My customers are used to eating fish from all over the world, and it's a matter of selling my waiters on the local options and then selling my customers." Fraser, who trained with such masters as Thomas Keller at the Checker's Hotel in Los Angeles, brings an innovative spin to some potentially uninspiring ingredients. "People are eating things that they wouldn't normally try. I've had sand dab on the

GRACE RESTAURANT



Chef Neal Fraser was inspired to up the ante on environmentally friendly practices after watching *An Inconvenient Truth*.

menu for the last couple of weeks and it's outselling salmon and halibut. We have a squab dish from a local producer that's outselling our chicken dish."

Even with so many resources at hand, creating an eco-conscious menu doesn't happen overnight. As Fraser points out, it's important for any restaurateur to start small and be resourceful. "A good place to start is to stop buying bottled water. For the menu, start with a couple of key ingredients and build from there." And Fraser still leaves room for the must-have ingredients that don't meet sustainable or organic standards. "If I have something on the menu that works well for me that doesn't have as much of an environmental impact, I'm still going to continue to buy it."

Keeping an eye on the bottom line is especially important with smaller profit margins. Although it's received rave reviews, the Close to Home menu is only available Tuesdays through Thursdays. "If people are ordering five-course meals every night, we won't be able to turn the tables ... It doesn't make sense for business."

In the end, Grace's Close to Home menu is not a nod to today's accelerated green

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movement, nor is it a way to get customers into the restaurant. "People don't necessarily go out to dinner to be political, and I'm not trying to make this political-based," says Fraser. "Some people can go on their whole lives and not care. There are also people who are trying to figure out different ways to change, and I feel like I'm in that group. We might not be the most popular, or the most successful, or the most profitable, but I don't necessarily think I can live my life not understanding how what I do affects my community and my environment."

➔ **ON THE WEB**

- LOCAL HARVEST** www.localharvest.org
- ORGANIC CONSUMERS ASSOCIATION**
www.organicconsumers.org
- SUSTAINABLE TABLE**
www.sustainabletable.org
- SLOW FOOD USA** www.slowfoodusa.org

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Grace's local suppliers

Fraser relies on the Santa Monica Farmer's Market as a mainstay for all of the Close to Home produce. Local vendors Ocean Jewels Seafood and Superior Anhausner Foods have been the main sources for Grace Restaurant's protein, which Fraser chooses first, working his produce for each dish around those selections.

OCEAN JEWELS SEAFOOD

Julee Harman
213.627.1477

SUPERIOR ANHAUSNER FOODS

Michael Antoci
310.505.9486
www.superafoods.net

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Grace Restaurant's Roasted Beet Salad uses local, sustainable products.



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