

# Restaurants with a Green Thumb

By Skye Macbroom

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**A** growing number of chefs are busily scrubbing the dirt from under their nails with sudsy manicure brushes before preparing the evening's specials for their guests. They drop off their dusty gardening gloves and dirt-caked boots outside the door, and trade them for a clean apron or crisply laundered uniform, just hours before the rush of the dinner crowd. Green-thumbed chefs are a growing trend, and it's a movement that is drawing in a whole new wave of very hungry eco-conscience customers.

With the increasing desire for organic fruits and vegetables, and the rising cost of produce, many restaurateurs are now willing to grow their own. For many, it starts off with a small herb garden, maybe some basil, parsley, thyme and mint. Then it expands to tomatoes. Then a fall lettuce bed, and then the next summer – well, then it becomes a passion.

Frank and Claire Criscuolo of Claire's Corner Copia and Basta Trattoria can relate. Claire's Corner Copia is a vegetarian and Kosher restaurant that has been in business since 1975 in New Haven, CT in the heart of the Yale campus. Their other restaurant, Basta Trattoria, with chef Daniel Sergi, is located right next door. Although it's not a strictly vegetarian venue, Basta's menu boasts organic and sustainable ingredients (like Claire's) that are then prepared in Italian tradition, with modern interpretations.

Before starting her own garden, Criscuolo got a quote from a local vendor for organic heirloom tomatoes for \$6.50/lb. "I thought it had to be a mistake," she said. "I called the vendor back, but no, the price was correct. I thought, 'This doesn't work! Our tomato salad will end up costing our customers 15 dollars at those prices!'" That was the catalyst to the Criscuolo's goal of becoming more self-sustaining and what they call, "chefs who grow their own."

She explains, "Our guests are searching for organic, fresh, local produce and a level of food safety and quality. And it has to be affordable. I was in the market one day, looking at a ridiculously priced \$16 cantaloupe. The woman next to me was buying corn and I was so sad. Good fruits and vegetables should not mean that you need a millionaire's salary to afford them – we can grow them on our own! We feel that by teaching the art and pleasures of gardening, everyone, regardless of income, can have access to wholesome, fresh foods."

So the small garden grew, and grew.

"My husband is a saint," says a smiling Criscuolo. "Our beloved gardens, Giardino del Mare... well, now they are really taking over our house. The deck, the whole first floor of the house, the yard... now it's all vegetables. I'm not very good at doing things in a small way," she laughs.

So the small garden grew, and grew.

The Criscuolo's live in a seaside town and are convinced that the salt air encourages beautifully flavored produce, especially their artichokes. They use raised beds and Earthboxes and lovingly tend to arugula, squash, melons and herbs. Gorgeous brightly colored tomatoes were germinated from 200 seedlings in a greenhouse with lights. The Criscuolo's organic produce provides ingredients for their restaurants from the second week in May through September, and next year the offerings will be even greater.

"My grandfather taught me how to garden, and it's a smart thing for restaurant owners in this economy," she says. This year, her home grown tomatoes



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cost her \$3/lb due to the investment in equipment for the first season. Next year, the anticipated and hopeful cost for heirloom tomatoes will be less than \$1/lb.

Claire’s Corner Copia offers over a dozen delicious salads and sandwiches, and an extensive breakfast menu that is served all day. A specialty at Basta’s is their arugula bruschetta which is made with homemade crostini, wood-oven toasted with sliced organic tomato and locally produced scormoza cheese, topped with organic baby arugula salad tossed in extra virgin olive oil, fresh squeezed organic lemon juice, and Sicilian sea salt.

But whether it’s a seaside garden, or an expansive rolling field of crops, a green thumb can nurture a thriving and bustling restaurant business.

In the heart of the fertile Rogue Valley, on the outskirts of Grants Pass, Oregon, is Summer Jo’s, a full-fledged USDA certified organic farm, restaurant, and bakery. They’ve been blossoming since their opening in 1999 and are truly a self-sustaining restaurant. Summer Jo’s offers a wide variety of produce and artisan bread that they use in their restaurant, and sell at their on-site farm stand and to other local restaurants.

Summer Jo’s grows over 100 crops including: artichokes, broccoli, carrots, beets, beans, sweet corn, eggplant, fennel, kale, cucumbers, lemons, melons, onions, potatoes, peppers, pumpkins, tomatoes, millet, wheat, oats, beans, apples,

plums, pears, berries, edible flowers and a full herb garden.

Nancy Groth, restaurateur and owner of Summer Jo’s, says that the primary reason for their organic farm is not necessarily for cost savings, but rather for the overall philosophy of providing fresh field-to-table offerings. Groth explains, “I think that people want to buy their food from people they actually know. Our guests recognize the farmer out in the field; they know whose growing their vegetables, then washing, preparing and cooking them. They know that we are good stewards of the land.”

In fact, Groth encourages visitors to wander through the farm on their way to lunch because it helps to make that connection between field and table. For an after-dinner stroll, many will walk through the herb garden. It’s beautifully framed by a rose arbor and a hedge of evergreens, with concentric rings of beds surrounding a central pond. The garden contains both medicinal and culinary herbs and informative labels that describe the nature of each plant.

Chester “Ski” Smigelski bakes fresh artisan bread made from Summer Jo’s very own organic wheat that grows in waving fields just north of the main farmland. Ski was trained at the prestigious Culinary Institute of America and uses what they call, “The Mercedes oven,” because as Groth says, “There is a place for technology, even in art. And the slicer is, well, the best thing since sliced bread.”

You can reach Claire’s Corner Copia at [www.clairecornercopia.com](http://www.clairecornercopia.com) or by phone at 203-562-3888. For Basta Trattoria try [www.bastatrattoria.com](http://www.bastatrattoria.com) or 203-772-1715. To reach Summer Joe’s online try [www.summerjos.com](http://www.summerjos.com), or 541-476-6882 via phone.

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## DIY Restaurant Garden 101

A do-it-yourself garden can be quite rewarding for novice green thumb chefs and restaurants. It’s important to start small and enjoy the process, and then each year your crops, yield, and variety can get bigger and better. Since growing seasons can vary a great deal by region, you should consult your local garden center or the Internet for the growing season that best matches your climate. Then follow these steps:

- During the winter months you can begin planning your garden. Choose a spot that gets at least six hours of sunshine per day and is convenient to a water supply and for you to pick from each day once the crops arrive. If you want to get a head start on the growing season. You can start many different vegetables inside. Check online for options.

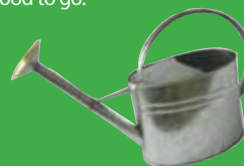


- As the weather gets warmer, you can start preparing the soil in your chosen garden spot. You want moist, dark soil that is loose and free of rocks, debris and weeds. Adding peat moss or compost can improve sandy and clay soils. Adding manure is another great way to naturally improve the quality of your soil each spring.



- Planting usually takes place in late spring or early summer. Make sure to stake your vegetables now because before you know it many of those small plants will grow over six feet tall. When planting seeds, follow the instructions on the seed packets with regard to spacing, sunlight and watering. When using transplants, consult the plant tag or your local garden center with regard to the same questions.

- Maintaining your garden throughout the growing season is 50% hard work\* and 50% planning for that hard work. A few tricks to remember are the earlier you fertilize the better. This will improve the flavor of your veggies and keep the size of the plants under control. Never let your soil dry out because that can setback your plants and ultimately reduce your yield. During dry spells get on a watering schedule with a sprinkler in the early morning or evening. Remember not to over-water either. Set aside some time for weeding and you are good to go.



- Harvesting your garden usually begins 6-8 weeks after planting. Once you pick your first ripe tomatoes you’ll be a gardener for life. I always eat the first one right from the vine. Soon your restaurant patrons will be thanking you, because nothing beats the taste of a fresh-from-the-garden veggie. Enjoy!

\* To a true gardener this so-called hard work is anything but.