

Food and Dining

A Chef's Plot Thickens

Worms and Waste Management Enhance The Green Efforts of Cathal Armstrong

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Wednesday, October 22, 2008;
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In the garden behind Restaurant Eve, chef Cathal Armstrong is growing staples for his fall menu: acorn squash, lentils, celery root and Brussels sprouts. He had hoped to have parsnips, too. But though he planted seeds for the wintry root vegetable, up sprouted a jungle of something else entirely. "We used the compost on the parsnip bed, and we got tomatoes instead," says Armstrong. "We're learning as we go."

The garden is just one of Cathal and Meshelle Armstrong's efforts to go green at the four-star Eve and across their growing restaurant empire in Alexandria, which includes the Majestic, fish and chips shop Eamonn's and cocktail bar PX. The kitchen at Eve composts about 50 percent of its waste. A small wormery the size of a milk crate produces enough organic fertilizer for the entire garden. Armstrong has banned bottled water and tinted the skylights in the restaurant, a move that cut his monthly electricity bill by 88 percent, from \$2,887 in September 2007 to \$342 last month. "Cathal has always been more of the 'I do it because it's right' guy," says Meshelle. "I do it because I can see the financial gain in it. I think that's why we work well together."

The Armstrongs are not the only restaurateurs to have caught green fever, of course. Nora Pouillon has been a pioneer on the organic food scene for decades, and her Restaurant Nora in Dupont Circle was the first American eatery to be certified organic in 1999. Today, dozens of local restaurants are taking steps toward sustainability, and several are staking their reputations on it: In Georgetown, the menus at Hook and Tackle Box focus on sustainable seafood. At Poste Moderne Brasserie in Penn Quarter, chef Robert Weland grows produce for the kitchen right on the restaurant's patio. Founding Farmers, which opened on Pennsylvania Avenue last month, is the first in Washington to be housed in a specially designed green-certified building. Nationally, the number of places certified by the Green Restaurant Association tripled in 2007.



Above, Meshelle and Cathal Armstrong (with acorn squash from Restaurant Eve's garden) strive for an eco-friendly business. (Photos By James M. Thresher For The Washington Post)



Chef Cathal Armstrong, right, and his crew prep vegetables; the waste goes in a composter. (By James M. Thresher For The Washington Post)

Restaurant Eve indicates when parsnips or, in this case, tomatoes come from the garden. But otherwise, the Armstrongs have not gone out of their way to trumpet their accomplishments. It's unusual given the trendiness of eco-friendly practices. "People talk about it like it's new, but it's really not," says Cathal, 39. "It's a return to what's been done before."

Cathal first learned about gardening from his father, Gerry, a tour operator in Dublin. Much to his six children's dismay, Gerry would wake them at 6 a.m. to come out and dig and weed. "We hated it," Cathal remembers.

In 1983, the Irish government changed regulations and, overnight, put Gerry's firm and other tour operators out of business. The family garden went from being a pastime to a necessity. As a result, Cathal was exposed to a broad range of ultra-local foods that he says subconsciously influenced his palate.

Even as a young chef in Washington, Cathal admits, he didn't instantly make the connection between food and the environment. While cooking at New Heights, Vidalia and Bistro Bis, he bought from local farmers because the food tasted better, period. In 2004 when Restaurant Eve opened in Old Town, his main goal was to recapture the purity of flavor he'd tasted in potatoes from his father's garden: simply boiled and topped with butter and salt. "It was my passion, but it was just dinner," he says. "It's not like we're curing cancer or flying people to the moon. You eat it; it's gone."

Like many a food lover, that changed when in 2006 Cathal read Michael Pollan's bestseller, "The Omnivore's Dilemma," which examined the environmental and cultural consequences of what we eat. One of the four sections was dedicated to the beyond-organic methods used at Polyface Farm outside Charlottesville, a farm Cathal had been buying from for years. On a flight to Aspen, Colo. (where Cathal received a "best new chef" award from Food & Wine), he was reading the book and "he kept saying, 'Listen to this, honey,' " Meshelle remembers. "As soon as we got home, he said, 'We can't do this [anymore]. Let's change.' As soon as he has something in his head, he's doing it."



The composter can process about half of the kitchen's carrot peels, onion skins, egg shells and other organic waste. (James M. Thresher - For The Washington Post)

Cathal's first step was a visit to Polyface to see the process for himself. The more he learned, the more he wanted to buy their products. So he committed to making the six-hour round trip every other week to pick up eggs and meat. To justify the gas, he volunteered to deliver supplies for other Washington restaurants, such as Komi in Dupont Circle. (Eventually the trip became too time-consuming, so he now pays a driver to make the journey.)

But most of the key changes took place this past spring. In March, Cathal planted the garden of half a dozen raised beds. It's not much to look at, though many guests do ask for a tour. There are fall vegetables, melon vines, a border of rosemary and thyme, and two nectarine trees that Cathal hopes will bear fruit next summer. In the yard beyond is a composter, a plastic container with a crank that looks like a barrel-size

cement mixer. The composter can process about half of the kitchen's carrot peels, onion skins, egg shells and other organic waste. (But not more. They've tried.) The Armstrongs plan to buy another one for the remaining kitchen scraps.

Scraps also go to the wormery, a box filled with red wigglers. Each worm can process one pound of food waste per day, turning it into nutrient-rich castings for the garden.

The list goes on: A Pennsylvania-based company called Smarter Fuel picks up kitchen grease and processes it into biofuel. Every cleanser, from hand soap to dish detergent, is non-toxic and biodegradable within 15 days. This summer, Cathal installed a drip irrigation system in the garden to cut back on wasted water. The restaurant has made changes to water at the table, too. Until last month, Eve was buying nearly 1,200 bottles of water each week, and the enormous amount of glass to be recycled and deliveries by truck increased the restaurant's carbon footprint. To fix that, Eve implemented a water filtration system that comes with its own elegant and reusable bottles. Guests no longer pay for water, and the Armstrongs' initial investment and monthly equipment rental is covered by having raised the price of one menu item by 25 cents. At the Majestic, where the system is also in place, a bottomless bottle of filtered sparkling or still water costs \$4.25.

Some changes, though, are non-negotiable. When several staff members asked the chef to consider serving frozen fish, which many experts believe is sometimes more environmentally responsible than fresh catch, the answer was no: "We have to be chefs first," he says. "So even though buying fresh fish may increase the amount of carbon, it so drastically alters the quality of what we're serving that it has to be discounted."

Still, the list of green initiatives keeps growing. Eve's staff has applied for a \$5,000 grant to build a natural irrigation system. Rainwater would be collected in a drum, then cycled through a filtration system below ground and used on the garden. Next year, the Armstrongs want to redesign and integrate the garden and the kitchen. And further down the line, if the couple opens several more Eamonn's restaurants, Meshelle has a big dream: to convert the oil that fries the food into biodiesel so that drive-through customers could refuel themselves and their cars. "I know it seems crazy," she says. "But why not?"