



Chef Miles James, of James at the Mill, in Johnson, holding a bunch of herbs plucked from the gardens surrounding the restaurant.

PHOTO BY JASON IVESTER

Eating Local

CHEFS GO NO FARTHER THAN THE BACK DOOR FOR FRESH INGREDIENTS

BY DEBRA HALE-SHELTON

When Miles James needs a handful of thyme for a marinade, he has to walk only a few feet outside his restaurant to one of his three herb gardens on a Northwest Arkansas hillside.

When Margie Michell plans to serve gazpacho in her Victorian Garden bistro in North Little Rock, she picks two of the ingredients, basil and chives, from gardens outside her home that morning.

When Heather Welch, executive chef at the Winthrop Rockefeller Institute, prepares a dinner, teaches a culinary class, or needs some inspiration, she can go to the heirloom tomatoes, the blueberries, the Swiss chard and much more growing on Petit Jean Mountain.

These chefs are among a growing number who are opting for locally grown food whenever they can. And they can't get more local than produce picked right outside their doors.

At James at the Mill in Johnson, just north of Fayetteville, James, a semifinalist for a James Beard Foundation award in 2010, serves his trademark Ozark Plateau Cuisine, some of it straight from his three herbal gardens.

“It’s as much local as we can get, as fresh as we can get it, as close as we can get it to our back door,” he says.

With a gardener’s help, James also has a strawberry patch outside his restaurant and grows nasturtiums and squash blossoms.

To dine at James at the Mill is to dine with nature and art.

Entering the restaurant, guests can see and inhale a veritable herbal bouquet, from the flower-spiked cilantro leaves he uses in crab cakes and tortilla soup to the savory rosemary he puts on grilled rib-eye steaks.

Guests also can see the basil, chives, sage, lavender, and thyme growing nearby and savor the possibilities — flash-fried sage sprinkled with sea salt atop a piece of fish, an emerald green puree of olive oil and chives, a pesto of pine nuts and basil, a crispy-skin chicken in a marinade that uses so many tiny thyme leaves it is bright green.

James grows marjoram and prefers its sweeter, more pungent flavor to oregano. He raises flat-leaf Italian parsley and, like many other chefs, considers it more flavorful than the curly variety.

Inside the restaurant, nature and art converge in his culinary creations and in the decor. Silkscreens of Andy Warhol’s hibiscus paintings adorn the walls. A varnished sycamore tree rises from the floor to the bi-level restaurant’s ceiling. Guests can look out onto an herbal garden of arugula, more rosemary and mint that’s gone a tad wild.

GARDEN FIT FOR THE ROCKEFELLERS

At Petit Jean Mountain, near Morrilton, the institute’s gardens include a wide variety of herbs and tomatoes as well as sweet potatoes, lettuce, squash, Swiss chard, grapes, cherries, even pomegranates.

The institute has so many conferences in addition to the River Rock Grill’s restaurant needs that Welch can’t meet all of her produce needs from the gardens. But she gets some items there and gets plenty of “inspiration” on what to look for at farmers’ markets.

She braises Swiss chard, for instance, and adds white beans and sun-dried tomatoes for a Tuscan-style soup.

Welch serves roasted grapes on an artisan cheese platter with olive oil, sea salt and flat bread. “[The grapes are] a really good component with the saltiness of the cheese,” she says.

Blueberries lead to streusels, cobblers, even a martini syrup. She combines cherries with thyme for a compote served over lamb. She puts lemon balm in tea and drizzles truffle honey with lavender over gruyere cheese puffs.

Her “hands-down favorite” herb is the spicy cilantro, often used in salsas. “I just like the flavor of it,” she says. She uses it in Latino and Thai cooking.

Welch thinks mint is an under-appreciated herb.

“It’s really common in the Mediterranean,” she says. “Over here, we tend to use it only in sweet items,” yet it’s also good in savory dishes, such as lamb or a rustic panzanella salad with heirloom tomatoes.

Whether cooking at home or in a restaurant, the advantage to having garden produce is obvious.

“It’s garden to the table,” Welch says. “I think people appreciate the freshness of that.”



PHOTOS BY JASON IVESTER
A bunch of fresh herbs, top, and a small basil plant, above, outside James at the Mill in Fayetteville.

“

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— Margie Michell, chef, Victorian Garden



PHOTOS BY ARSHIA KHAN

Chef Margie Michell, right, grows herbs and tomatoes at her home for use at her restaurant, Victorian Garden, in North Little Rock.

GARDENING FOR A BISTRO

Michell gets the fresh herbs for her Victorian Garden restaurant from her own gardens — well, gardens that her husband, Steve, mostly tends at their Little Rock home. They also grow cherry tomatoes for the restaurant.

They grow some herbs in pots and plant others on a hillside.

“They’re fresher. We don’t use any kind of pesticides on them,” Michell says. “I can go out in the morning and pick them and use them that afternoon or that night. ... The flavor of those is phenomenal.”

Because Victorian Garden offers healthy-eating options, Michell says, “I try to use the herbs instead of using quite as much salt to add flavor.”

Michell also makes herbal olive oils with rosemary, thyme, tarragon, basil, and oregano. “Those will last all winter if you put them in an air-tight bottle,” she says. “In the summer, I do up about twenty-five bottles.”

Instead of butter, she drizzles the herbal oils on vegetables. She also flavors pasta with them and occasionally tosses herb leaves atop the pasta, giving diners a hint of the flavor ahead.

Other herbs the Michells grow include mint, lemon balm, lavender, chives, and stevia, a sweetener. She sometimes combines stevia with cinnamon to give iced tea “a little different twist.”

The gardens of both James and Michell focus on herbs.

“They don’t require a huge amount of maintenance,” James says. Once a year, the beds are tidied up, mulched and composted. “Besides that, it’s water once a day and then use [them]. They just want to be cut so they can grow some more.”

BRUSCHETTA

Makes 6 Servings (3 Slices)

Tomato Topping

2 cups sundried tomatoes, soaked in water 15 minutes and chopped
1/2 cup parmesan cheese, grated
1/2 teaspoon garlic, finely chopped
1/2 cup olive oil
3 basil leaves, fresh, chopped
1 tablespoon oregano leaves, fresh

Artichoke Topping

2 14 oz. cans artichoke hearts, drained
1 tablespoon rosemary, fresh, chopped
4 basil leaves, fresh, chopped
1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
1/4 teaspoon garlic, chopped
1/2 cup parmesan cheese, grated
1/4 cup olive oil

Other ingredients

1 18-inch French bread loaf, sliced, 3/4-inch thick
1/2 cup Provolone cheese, shredded

Preparation:

1. Blend tomato topping ingredients in food processor and put in small bowl.
2. Blend artichoke topping ingredients in food processor and put in small bowl.
3. Toast bread on each side under broiler.
4. Spread a layer of artichoke mixture on one side of bread.
5. Add a layer of tomato mixture.
6. Top with Provolone cheese.
7. Place under broiler for about 1 minute or until cheese is melted.
8. Top with herb garnish of choice.

— Recipe courtesy Margie Michell

ROTISSERIE CHICKEN STUFFED WITH LEMON AND HERBS

1 four-pound chicken
Serves 2 to 3 people

Salt
Pepper
1 bunch sage
1 bunch rosemary
1 lemon

Method:

Season the chicken liberally with salt and pepper.
Cut the lemon into quarters.
Stuff the herbs and lemon into the chicken cavity.
Place on a rotisserie for 1.5 hours on high heat.
Serve with local arugula dressed with oil and vinegar.

— Recipe courtesy Miles James



The many herb plants outside the Winthrop Rockefeller Institute are labeled with tiny signs.

PHOTO BY KATHERINE WHITWORTH

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