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# Arrive

MAY/JUNE 2008

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# From the Source

Chefs search near, far and wide for only the freshest ingredients

BY LIZ JOHNSON  
ILLUSTRATIONS BY SERGE BLOCH

As you're dining at Eighty One—the new restaurant on the Upper West Side in Manhattan—you might be marveling at the floor-to-ceiling glass wall of wine, which holds 3,200 bottles at just the right temperature, or cooing over the Chatham cod, which was FedExed

that morning from the Cape. I can pretty much guarantee that you won't be thinking about pumpkins.

That's OK. Ed Brown already has. In fact, Brown, the chef and owner, has given pumpkins quite a bit of thought. Enough to know that the best pumpkin seed oil comes from pumpkins grown in Austria, which he uses to flavor his pumpkin risotto with braised chicken wings. And enough to know that if he's looking for the actual seeds—which he'll

toast and season before serving—he's better off getting them from Mexico.

Putting together a great meal is all about finding the best source for the ingredients. This is why Eighty One is named for the 81 purveyors, vintners and others—around the corner and across the globe—who helped the restaurant come to life.

"I get the best of what I can find by way of making relationships with growers, farmers, fishers—wherever they happen to be," Brown says.

We've been hearing so much about local lately that it's a welcome change to hear chefs talking about sourcing ingredients that aren't grown or produced outside the restaurant door. Sure, they respect the local farmer who raises tender lettuces in the summer, and the cheese maker who relies on the local milk to impart a special tang. But Brown's got a guy in Hokkaido, Japan, who gets him

giant scallops, and those are nothing like the ones coming out of Nantucket Bay.

It's still about building a relationship—even if it's a long-distance one. Take, for example, José Andrés, who owns several restaurants in the Washington, D.C., area. He spent 10 years working with Santiago Martin of Embutidos Fermin to import the first jamón ibérico to the United States.

Or Barbara Lynch, who has a collection of restaurants in Boston. She's taken a group of her loyal customers on a food tour of Italy to meet the farmers at Acquerello who grow the organic carnaroli rice she uses in her risotto.

Or chef David Burke, who this summer is adding David Burke Prime, a steakhouse at Foxwoods Resort & Casino in Connecticut, to his brigade of restaurants. To ensure he has the best beef, Burke went even further than the farmer: He bought a bull. It lives

at Creekstone Farm in Kansas, weighs more than a ton and, among more than 14,000 bulls in the country, is rated in the top 2 percent when it comes to producing offspring with great marbling.

Its name? Creekstone OB45/174 207L. But you can call him Prime.

"We ensured we'd get the top prime of the prime, and that's how we got started," says Burke. "We thought knowing where the bull came from was good, but knowing the guys that feed him—it turned out to be great."

So great that he jumped on the chance to buy some pigs, this time from La Quercia in Iowa. He laid out three grand apiece for Big Al, named for Capone and heading for Burke's restaurant in Chicago; Applesauce, who is destined for the New York restaurant; and Blackjack, who is heading to Burke's property in Las Vegas. And his customers are clamoring for everything



from the filets to the spareribs to the headcheese and sausages.

“We should have bought three per store,” Burke says. “So far, so good. We trust in the farm. We think the whole natural thing and a little relationship with where you’re getting your product makes a lot of sense.”

### All in the Family

The relationship with purveyors makes a lot of sense to Orla Murphy LaScola, the owner and wine director of American Seasons on Nantucket. She’s always looking for small-production wines—less than 250 cases, if she can get it—to match the food of her husband, chef-owner Michael LaScola.

But such wines, especially those from California, are often made by people for whom winemaking is a second job. They’ve already put up their life savings to buy the vineyard; they don’t have the time or money to market and deliver their wines to the East Coast.

“The only way to get your hands on these is to go out and walk the fields



with them and let them know their baby is your baby,” says Orla LaScola. “We actually go out and see the soil that the stuff has been grown on. It makes you understand the product.”

So she heads out to California, hikes up her wellies with both hands and gets out there to learn.

“As interested as you are,” she says, “they’ll give you as much information as you want.”

And then she’s able to pass that information on to her guests. If someone’s looking to find a wine to match Michael’s oven-roasted duck breast with wild rice risotto and a Bing cherry vinaigrette, she’s able to help them choose among several pinot noirs. The ones from the Sonoma coast will be soft and pretty—something that matches the lighter meats and vegetables. The ones from Napa will do better in the fall, when there’s a little more fat in the food. The ones from Oregon? They’re greener, more acidic, more Burgundian. They’ll go great with meat or fish.

“When we’re sourcing, we’re always looking for wine to go with our food—that’s not just quaffable,” she says. “I don’t want them just to drink it. I want them to pair it with the food that Michael’s serving.”

And if she gives them a little back story, like how the wind blew the dusty, rocky soil out of the palm of her hand,

**Chef Ed Brown on an antique tractor at Chef’s Garden in Huron, Ohio. Chef Brown commissions the farmers at Chef’s Garden to grow specific produce for him.**

they’ll remember the wine the next time. She’s brought the connection full circle.

Customers at Barbara Lynch’s Boston restaurants, including No. 9 Park, got to make the connection themselves on a recent trip to Italy. Lynch took a group to see the wineries that make the barolos that are on her list, the artisans who cure the meats on her charcuterie plate, and the farmers who grow the rice in her risotto.

Sometimes, the relationship between chef and source is one that’s been building over many years. Andrés, who owns the D.C. restaurants—among them, Jaleo, a tapas bar; Oyamel, which serves interior Mexican; and Zaytinya, which focuses on eastern Mediterranean small plates—was born in Spain and goes back all the time. He was there earlier this year when I e-mailed to ask him how he sources the ingredients for his restaurants. He e-mailed back, “Sometimes I am thinking of something wonderful I know exists and it is a matter of trying to bring it here. A great cheese I grew up eating in Spain, or jamón ibérico, for example. I know these products and their quality, and I know their producer and I want them. So we just go to work trying to get them here.”

Other times he discovers new tastes along his travels. Like avgotaraho, which is dried mullet roe from Greece.

“This was a very high-end product, a very select product, unusual even in Greece,” he wrote. “I was able to try it on a trip to Greece and I knew this was something special. So we went to work trying to get it for Zaytinya. In the case of Oyamel, I knew grasshoppers or chapulines were a great delicacy in Oaxaca and I had to make that happen. Very authentic. So we went to work and now we bring them from Mexico to serve at Oyamel. They are a best-selling item.”

(I’ve had them, but in Mexico. They’re kind of salty and crunchy, like popcorn. Andrés sautés them with garlic and tequila and serves them in tacos.)

I wondered if Andrés’ relationship with his purveyors has ever given him exclusive rights to import. After all, he

worked hard to get that first Iberian ham to America.

“There have been times that we were first,” he wrote. “But for me it is not so much about exclusivity as it is about discovery. And sharing that product with others. Avgotaraho maybe has a market in America because we were crazy enough to begin bringing it for Zaytinya. Other people tried it and said, ‘Hey, they’ve got something there.’ Thomas Keller (of Per Se in Manhattan) has started buying avgotaraho after trying it at Zaytinya. The avgotaraho is now sold with my logo on it. Same with Ibérico. Many people worked for years to bring Ibérico ham to America. When it finally arrived, Jaleo was the first restaurant to serve this ham. If we have an

exclusive it is mostly because we open the door.”

### Open-Door Policy

Opening the door is something Mary Ann Cricchio and Masood Masoodi are quite familiar with. They had to convince importers to carry a certain pasta—paccheri—so they could put it on the menu at Da Mimmo in Baltimore, where Cricchio is the owner and Masoodi the chef.

Indeed, Cricchio sends Masoodi to Italy every summer so he can keep abreast of any new products and maintain his relationship with the growers, farmers and producers there.

“I like him to go over there and actually meet them, because I feel like we get

# 10 ARTS

BY ERIC  
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# Arrive

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Some signature dishes from Eighty One in Manhattan. Top: For dessert, the Meyer lemon frozen soufflé. Middle: Baby Montauk calamari a la plancha, made with pimenton de la vera, potato sauce, garlic chips and parsley leaves. Bottom: foie gras and butternut squash terrine with baby arugula and aged balsamico di Modena Vecchio.

a better product and better service,” she says.

It started four years ago, when Masoodi did a three-month internship at Le Sirenuse in Positano, Italy. He met suppliers and farmers up and down the Amalfi coast and came home with plenty of contacts. He counts on them to keep him informed.

This year, he visited Vanullo dairy, an organic buffalo farm that produces silky mozzarella that pairs perfectly with tomato and basil for Da Mimmo's top-selling Caprese salad. Cricchio made the trip along with Masoodi, and she found getting close to the animals—the source of her restaurant's ingredients—inspiring, especially when they're treated well. And these animals are treated well. They sleep on 3-inch-thick foam mattresses and scratch their itchy backs by walking under huge brushes attached to the buildings.

“It was very interesting to see how they feed the buffalo and milk them and shower them,” she says. “They keep them happy.”

She visited the dairy in July. By September, Vanullo mozzarella was on the menu.

Cricchio builds relationships with all sorts of purveyors—even those that aren't specialty producers. The restaurant is very well known for its veal chop. Though it's delivered by Sysco—the food distributing giant—it's supplied by a butcher in Philadelphia, and Cricchio meets with the owners once a month to make sure she gets exactly the cut she wants: T-bone, 2 1/2 inches thick.

“You can only make food as good as what you start off with,” she says. “You have to have a quality product. Treat it right before you cook it, and then you have to cook it properly. It all starts with us having this personal contact with the people that are supplying us the product. We're not just a name and a number.”

Ed Brown hears exactly what she's saying. The relationship he built with



fishermen when he was the executive chef at Sea Grill in Rockefeller Center helped build that restaurant's reputation for having the freshest fish around. He'll take the same name recognition to Eighty One.

A fisherman knows and respects Brown—“Not some guy who's never been to the source and says, ‘Send me the best!’ Fishermen don't have a lot of respect for that.” And it's given Brown a very healthy dose of respect for what they do.

“It's taken me a good 20 years to find my own self in cooking,” he says. “This veal shank, this vegetable, can be about the veal shank and the vegetable—and not about me. Cooking takes skill and craftsmanship, but it's about those products.”