

Tasting Terroir

Finding new meaning—
and the essence of
taste—in local flavor

BY LIZ JOHNSON

They say that harvesting honey in your kitchen can test your marriage, and I must agree. After pulling 10 frames from our backyard beehive, spinning them in a metal centrifuge, collecting the slow-dripping honey through a spigot into a plastic tub and then pouring it into glass jars—all while my sneakers were sticking to the tacky, honey-covered floor—I wasn't just ready to divorce my husband; I was ready to murder him.

But when we spread a spoonful on our toast the next morning? It was delicious, like sunshine, light and golden. The best we'd ever tasted.

After all, we planted the fruit trees that nourished the bees. We tended the hives as they swelled with honey. We knew where that food came from, down to the square foot and sticky tiles.

The French have a wine term for this “of the place” flavor: *terroir*. It factors in all kinds of characteristics and circumstances between grape and glass—the location of the vineyard, the climate, the soil—to describe the essence of the wine.

But saying something tastes better just because it's farm-to-table—even backyard-to-kitchen—is getting tiresome. Would you be able to taste the difference between our honey and that of my beekeeping friends 10 miles away? Doubtful.

I still think discussing terroir, the essence of a taste, is valid, but I also believe the word can mean something

more than how the food was grown. You can experience terroir by being in the place your food comes from or by understanding the tradition of the regional food you're tasting. Or you can experience it by sharing in the food community.

You see, there was a special feeling that came along with tasting our honey on bread from the local baker and eggs from my neighbor's chickens. This hyper-localness—this of-the-place taste, this terroir—didn't just describe the flavor of breakfast. We were right there in the moment, steps from our hives, understanding what went in to making the honey, the bread, the eggs—and embracing a kinship and camaraderie among the food lovers on my block. That's true terroir.

When you think about it that way, it kind of makes up for fighting with my husband.

Taste the Region

As food editor for *The Journal News*, a newspaper in the Lower Hudson Valley, I pay close attention to what farm-to-table chefs are putting on their menus, and I notice a lot of the same farm names popping up time after time. I can taste the unique flavors in some of these products, especially hyperlocal ones such as Rainbeau Ridge goat cheese from Bedford, N.Y., and Wild Hive Farm polenta from Clinton Corners, N.Y., but I don't think I





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could tell you, just by flavor, where a local apple or tomato was grown.

Oysters are a different story. The platter I still dream about came from King Eider's Pub, an unassuming little restaurant in Damariscotta, Maine. These oysters were the best I'd ever had, and for good reason, terroir-wise: They were harvested not four miles away and kept ice cold in water until the moment I ordered them, when they were shucked and served without delay.

"That's the big secret about it," says Todd Maurer, who owns King Eider's Pub with his wife and three other family members. "It's taking that 'eat fresh, eat local' to a level that you can't get from anywhere else."

But even Maurer will tell you that terroir is not just in the oysters themselves. There's a sense of community that contributes.

"You have a relationship with these guys," he says of the oyster farmers. And the customers are a part of it. One King Eider's regular celebrated his 85th birthday. His gift? The farmers took him out on the water to show him the harvest.

"I always tell people the local way of doing this is hip now," says Maurer. "But we've been doing it for years."

As you're sitting in one of King Eider's wooden booths, you'll taste—and feel—terroir. There's a sense of place that you just wouldn't get if you were slurping them in, say, Washington, D.C., or Philadelphia.

Or Hanover, Pa. At Sheppard Mansion, an inn and restaurant there, chef Andy Little takes the best of his little corner of Pennsylvania, whether pork or potato chips, and presents it on the plate.

"Our goal is, if you sit down at the table at Sheppard Mansion, you're going to be able to travel through food and



taste the region," says Heather Sheppard Lunn, an owner.

Sure, that does mean farm to table. Lunn and her family raise Scotch Highland cattle for beef, and Little and his father work the restaurant's garden to reap the freshest harvest. But Sheppard Mansion showcases regional cuisine, with a menu that flits among twists on Pennsylvania Dutch classics such as scrapple or shoofly pie and Little's creative new dishes, sometimes made with Snyder's of Hanover pretzels and Utz potato chips (both of which are made in town).

"I would consider us a restaurant that is inspired by the area," says Little. "We use ingredients from our farm and local farms, but on top of that we are a luxury restaurant, so seafood may come from Massachusetts or Long Island. But the inspiration for the dish is very heavily rooted in the area."

There's a similarity, Little says, between the kind of cooking he's going for and that of some of the hyperlocal restaurants making big news in the food world these days. For instance, for the past couple of years, the culinary cognoscenti have been buzzing about Noma, a restaurant in Copenhagen, Denmark, that is known for exploring regional Nordic cuisine, using traditional ingredients (such as halibut) along with others the chefs comb the countryside to find (such

as herbs and berries). Surely that's a terroir you'll find nowhere else.

"We're not going out and foraging for nuts and twigs and berries," says Little. "But we are trying to present as true a flavor of the area as possible. I want it to be a new experience that's entirely ours, and we can do that because of where we're located. If you pick this restaurant up and put it in the Hudson Valley, it would be a different restaurant, there's no doubt. It would have to be."

Closer to the Food

I was quite aware of that last summer, sitting in the formal, Victorian-style dining room at Sheppard Mansion. Little's sophisticated tasting menu started with a heavenly beef tongue paired with impossibly fresh vegetables and herbs and ended with a sugar-sweet tomato tarte tatin. The 12-course meal was punctuated with lots of regional surprises, including a cheese course called cheese sticks, which included black truffle-dusted cheese curds and chowchow vinaigrette.

I felt the influence of the area as strongly in Pennsylvania as I had a few days earlier in Charlottesville, Va., at Zinc, an industrial, modern bistro in an old gas station. I had been drawn to Zinc because of the old-fashioned meaning of terroir. The posted menu promised chicken from Polyface, the famous

Shenandoah Valley farm owned by Joel Salatin, which had solidified the words *sustainable agriculture* in the farm-to-table lexicon. I was an hour from Polyface, and if ever there was terroir to be tasted, I was eager.

Alas, a different chicken was served that night, this one hailing from Janet's Garden, a local farm. It was unbelievable—crispy and juicy, with a simple-but-genius combination of earthy mushrooms, soft gnocchi and peppery arugula. Chef Justin Hershey may have lured me in with Polyface, but it was Janet Ripley, who raised the chicken, who won me over.

I learned a terroir lesson: Tasting a region is as much about the food community—farmers, artisans, chefs—as it is about the essence of the flavor of any one ingredient, even if you're expecting it to be from the most famous farm around.

"You can't count your chickens every week," Hershey tells me later, explaining the change in menu. "There are hardships involved in sourcing locally. A difficult part is keeping your menu as fluid as possible and going with the flow day to day."

Ripley personally delivers her milk-fed chickens to the restaurant, and she and Hershey have a close enough relationship that she'll grow produce he is interested in using at the restaurant.

"As long as she has a market for it, she has no problem trying it out and seeing how it works," he says. "The education you get from these relationships just gets you closer to the food."

"Food is on everyone's mind—you can't escape it," he continues. "My bartender's brother-in-law forages mushrooms for us. One of our waitresses was a farm manager in Abingdon, Va. My girlfriend's grandmother has the oldest grapevines—along with apples and pear trees—in Stuarts Draft, and we make jelly, jam and pies. Food is everywhere and on everyone's mind. We share it together."

Talk about kinship, camaraderie and community.

"It's such an age-old concept, people coming together to trade stuff," says Jane Lerner. She is one of the organizers of BK Swappers, a food-swapping group that meets a half-dozen times a year in Brooklyn. "And then



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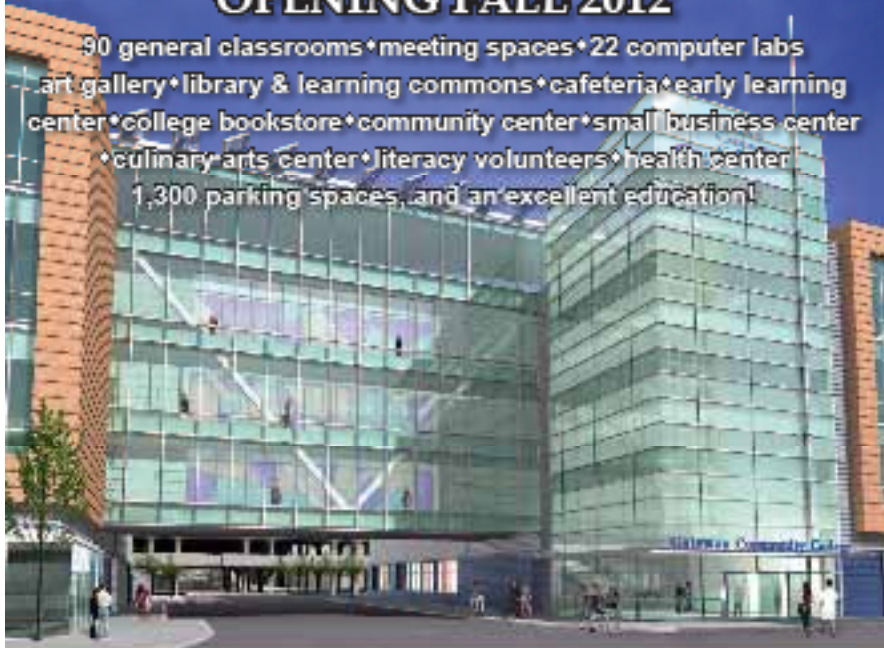
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you think of the 1950s—ladies trading cookies and things. But we've brought this into the DIY era.”

Indeed they have. About 40 of them get together each time to swap homemade—but hip—food, such as blueberry syrup and marshmallows, sofrito and kombucha.

“It’s really a social occasion,” says Lerner. And although the food isn’t necessarily local—though some is, like honey, hard apple cider and jam—there’s definitely some terroir there. At least my kind of terroir.

“The local is not mandatory,” says Lerner. “But it’s very much about the homemade. This is something that was made by somebody in Brooklyn, someone locally. Down the street.”

I understand the terroir you taste and feel after opening a jar of a friend’s apricot jam and smelling summer, or cracking a neighbor’s fresh egg into a pan and watching as it spatters and turns white with a bright orange yolk. To trade with talented cooks like the ones at BK Swappers—and they do like to show off with some one-upmanship, I’m told—must be very satisfying indeed.

Maybe even worth another honey harvest in the kitchen. ☞

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