



FoodHub in the News

Cooking Light

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Portland's Food Rules

Ten lessons America can learn about what it takes for a midsize city to become one of the most exciting food towns in the country.

PORTLAND - 5: THE CITY IS ONE BIG "FOODSHED"

Every fall, Portland's profuse collection of fruit trees becomes thick with apples, plums, persimmons, and figs—tons of which would fall to the ground and rot without the intervention of the Portland Fruit Tree Project.

Portland was partly built on fruit-lands. "Our climate," says 31-year-old Katy Kolker, the Project's executive director, "is particularly suitable for fruit production, and much of what is now Portland used to be orchard land. You can see this in neighborhoods where some of the original orchard trees were left standing after houses were built."

But not everyone who has inherited a fruit tree wants to pick a fruit tree. Enter the Project, which started in 2006 and has grown mightily. In 2010, it hosted nearly 50 harvest events throughout Portland—mostly on the east side—and distributed about 21,000 pounds of urban fruit to local food banks (volunteer harvesters get a share, as well).

The original plan was to send out scouts to locate and map trees for harvest. No need, it turned out: "We didn't expect the interest would be so high from tree owners," says Kolker. Portland residents now just register their trees online. Harvest wrap-up parties find Project members sharing recipes and ideas for using the fall bounty.

Eat-local proponents think of the matrix of farms, gardens, wildlands, and green spaces outside and within a city as part of the total "foodshed" (think "watershed," but for food). Foraging, whether by organized groups like the Project or by loners and friends, is a sort of interstitial farming that makes deeper use of the land.

Michael Bunsen and Bobby Smith's open source website, Urban Edibles, incorporates wiki pages and an interactive map detailing unclaimed urban edibles in the Portland area. Further afield, at the city's edge and beyond, John Kallas of Wild Food Adventures leads workshops. Participants identify, harvest, and prepare tender cattails and miner's lettuce, extract essential oils from lemonbalm, and grind acorns for acorn pudding. —L.C.

6: DISTILL IN THE CITY

Drink local is an easy idea to swallow when your rough-hewn state's lumberjack thirst long ago evolved into the West Coast heart of the microbrew revolution; when your local soils and climes are perfect for pinot noir and pinot gris; when the abundant pears and apples inspired one of the country's godfathers of micro-distilling. Throw in a cocktail scene in full hipster-peacock display, and there's a lot of interesting stuff to drink around this town.

"It's a horrendous amount of work," says Steve McCarthy, the above-mentioned distilling godfather, as he watches two employees in his industrial warehouse prepare three massive, glimmering German pot stills for a run of grappa. McCarthy's Clear Creek Distillery was first in a city (and region) that's seen an astonishing recent boom in small-craft liquor production. His pear brandy, first distilled in 1985, is widely reckoned the best of its kind in the country.

Back in the '80s, McCarthy was inspired by Oregon winemakers, whose pinots were famously taking on French Burgundies and winning. Beer-making experience also factored large; in the late '90s, the McMenamin brothers, founders of the city's first brewpub (now a brewery and pub empire), followed McCarthy's lead by making whiskey. In the 2000s, Portland distilleries began popping up like weeds, centered around House Spirits, the most famous of a five-distillery, nonprofit collective known as Distillery Row.

Today, Clear Creek is a relative titan, but newbie hopefuls, like husband and wife duo Sebastian and Erika Degens, keep launching. Their Stone Barn Brandyworks, the latest addition to Distillery Row, produces a small-batch white-rye moonshine, a softly sweet strawberry liqueur, and a pinot noir grappa. "We're trying to make distinctive handcrafted spirits that are characteristic of the materials we're working with," explains Sebastian, "so you can taste the origins of the fruit." —Patrick Alan Coleman

7: FARM TO TABLE IS THE MINIMUM. FARM AND TABLE—THAT'S IMPRESSIVE

"This is our brand," Meriwether's chef-owner Earl Hook says as he spreads his tattooed arms wide to take in 4½ acres of vegetable beds known as Skyline Farm.

In the Portland restaurant business, the farm-to-table ethic—a cliché here as everywhere, and sometimes more spin than ethic—gains a ring of truth if it's your own farm. During peak season, Skyline Farm supplies about 80% of the produce for Meriwether's Restaurant, 20 minutes away in Northwest Portland.

The farm was an afterthought for Meriwether's Restaurant co-owners John and Renee Orlando, who live on and own the property. The Orlandos got into farming without the lofty fanfare that attends, say, an operation like Blue Hill at Stone Barns, outside New York City: A green-thumb waiter thought it would be neat to grow a vegetable patch in the backyard. Four years later, the acreage employs four part-time farmers and has increased output from a few hundred pounds of produce to an estimated 15,000 pounds annually.

Not without setbacks, of course. Sixty ducks were wiped out by predators, possibly a bobcat. Cold weather curtailed the tomatoes in 2010. Squash plants rotted last spring, nixing plans for locavore pumpkin pies.

"It's all part of the process," says Hook, who visits the farm weekly and helps plan plantings. The process is simple: "I talk to the farmers, and then I write the menu."

Other restaurants follow, if on a smaller scale. At Ned Ludd, the keep-it-small wood-fire restaurant set in a Northeast Portland neighborhood, chef-owner Jason French saw the vacant lot behind his place as urban eyesore and opportunity. Working with the city and a Community-Supported Agriculture farmer, French helped launch a garden that supplies a small amount of vegetables and lots of inspiration. At Lucca, a casual Italian restaurant nearby, owners Nancy Salta and Sue Davidson use produce from their half-acre home garden, including Italian varieties of kale and agretti (a briny Mediterranean herb) they can't find elsewhere.

Few chefs will farm, of course. More promising, though, is the prospect of knitting together a sustainable, social-media web of connected farms and restaurants. The 2009 nonprofit Food Hub is a forum connecting farmers, ranchers, and chefs.

"Chefs are held to a higher standard here," says Hook, "and that makes this one helluva restaurant town." —I.M.

8: PEDAL YOUR FOOD

Jed Lazar stops at a café in the cobblestoned heart of Old Town, Portland, to fuel up and rest his enormous calves. He's been bicycling since 7:30 a.m., and he's covered about 15 miles on a crisscross route. That number wouldn't surprise a bike courier, but Lazar has been towing a 215-pound trailer filled with homemade soup.

Yes, cyclists deliver food all over American cities, especially in car-clogged, high-population burbs like Brooklyn—where the Chinese-restaurant delivery guy, who's usually from El Salvador, is ubiquitous. But Lazar co-owns the business. He's the heart and lungs behind SoupCycle, a subscription-based service that offers weekly soup delivery to customers' front doors. Lazar and partner Shauna Lambert pieced together the idea for a bike-and-broth business in 2008. They estimate they've covered 10,000 miles and made 29,000 deliveries.

Today's haul included a bright, tangy tortilla soup with bits of bursting-fresh corn, and a fall squash number with a creamy heft and a touch of sweetness.

It makes sense in a bike-mad burg: 6.4% of all city commuters are on two wheels, according to a U. S. Census Bureau American Community Survey. Not only soup but also coffee and tacos are biked around town, and B-Line Sustainable Urban Delivery ports hundreds of pounds of organic products to restaurants and outlets like Whole Foods Market.

Back on the café patio, Lazar stretches out his weary legs and smiles.

"I think I have the most positive job in the city." —P.A.C.

9: HARVEST THE MATRIX

Beneath meager shelter in the middle of a small, rain-soaked parking lot off Hawthorne Boulevard in Southeast Portland, several tables are piled with produce: shiny purple cabbages, pale golden beets, bristling mustard greens, bright-red hot peppers. This is the

Hawthorne Urban Farmers' Market—the slightly muddy face of an experiment in community food-growing.

The veg here is ultralocal, produced on a neighborhood garden matrix—55 plots of loaned land tended by the Southeast Portland Urban Farm Co-op. The plots add up to a 2-acre labor of love for Friday and Kerry Purington, who've been turning backyards into radish fields, flower beds into rows of leafy kale, and even an abandoned horse corral into a wonderland of squash. The co-op feeds about 120 people each week through a Community-Supported Agriculture model in which landowners get a share of the produce farmed within the network in exchange for allowing the Puringtons and their comrades to farm their yards.

"Portland," Friday says, with a little bit of local pretzel logic, "is a good city to do this, not only for the climate, but also because a lot of people here see themselves as the sort of people who'd be into it."

You also see the grow-it-and-share-it ethos in 35 pooled neighborhood gardens managed by the city, each with a waiting list, and in programs like the Eastside Egg Co-op, where members share care of a chicken flock.

Another urban farmer, Joshua Dodds of Velocifeed, who does most of his to-and-froing by bicycle, reckons there are as many as 50 enterprises turning unused land into fields of produce.

It can be messy. Some CSA members are confused by produce they receive. Some don't understand how it's grown: In one case, homeowners ripped out what they thought were unsightly dying plants—a seed crop for the next harvest. Others wonder about residual toxins, a worry Friday Purington says can be minimized with a little common sense or, she amends, "not-so-common sense." —P.A.C.

10: LOVE YOUR LOCAL ARTISANS

Food artisans are popping up like mushrooms across America, but Portland's set the pace for fanatical dedication to technique, provenance, and almost loony experimentation—which citizens are willing to try and to pay for.

You want small, personal, handmade, and local? We nominate the tiny Xocolatl de David, a chocolate operation of which David Briggs is the sole owner and operator.

Tucked in the back of a Portland sandwich shop called Meat Cheese Bread on Southeast Stark Street is a 200-square-foot kitchen in which Brigg works 60 hours a week, alone. The galleylike space is filled with small pots of mousselike rhubarb chocolate preserves; trays of cooling dragées (wild Tuscan pine nuts, local hazelnuts, and other treats, tumbled with chocolate); and trays of—get this—dark chocolate chicharrón bars, which are crunchy deep-fried bits of pork rind, robed in dark chocolate: basically, Nestlé Crunch of the Aztec gods. He also makes a "foietella" spread (yes, foie gras plus chocolate, surprisingly delicious) dreamed up in the land of Ferran Adria during a trip to Spain in 2008.

The latter reflects Briggs' belief that meat and chocolate are made for each other. "People like to make a big deal out of it, and I get it, because it's different, but Mexicans and other

Latino cultures have been doing it for hundreds of years [i.e., mole]. I just flipped the ratio and made it more about the chocolate than the meat."

Briggs sees the food artisan as the essential bridge between the past and future of food in Portland. "The two primary roles of an artisan are to preserve heritage and create quality. You can push boundaries, and I love to do that—I make my living doing that—but if I wasn't bound to classical technique, my product quality would suffer." (To sample, go to xocolatdedavid.com.)

There are plenty of other examples of the local meeting the global in the handmade. Since 2006, trained engineer and avid cyclist Augusto Dias Carneiro of Nossa Familia Coffee has been sourcing coffee from his family's Brazilian coffee farm and roasting it for Portlanders. Every year Carneiro takes a small group to Brazil for several days in the summer to tour the family farm and take part in the coffee harvest.

For the aspiring do-it-yourself artisan, Claudia Lucero makes cheese kits. Lucero directs Portland's kick-ass Rock 'n' Roll Camp For Girls by day, and moonlights to produce Urban Cheese-craft kits (made by Lucero, her partner, Jeff Norombaba, his mother, and friends). The kits are assembled in a spare room in Lucero's house, and they contain everything necessary (except milk) to make 10 batches of homemade mozzarella, ricotta, paneer, queso blanco, and goat cheese. —L.C.

URL: <http://www.cookinglight.com/healthy-living/travel/portland-food-scene-00412000071132/page2.html>