

## Local produce adds fresh flavor

By Nicole DiNoia, Globe Correspondent | May 13, 2007

If you're like me, the change of seasons means new seasonal foods. We're moving away from the comfort foods of winter and into barbecue and berry-picking season, albeit slowly.

For some local restaurants, spring blooming means their menus will start to include seasonal fruits and vegetables, many cooked up in creative ways.

Verrill Farm in Concord, (11 Wheeler Road, Concord, 978-369-4494), owned and operated by the Verrill family since 1922, supplies produce to about 25 local restaurants. While it can be a bit more costly for the dining establishments to buy locally, the benefits are many.

Often, vegetables picked from Verrill's field can get on your plate in a local restaurant in just 24 to 48 hours. And the biggest benefit of fresh produce? For me, it's taste. There's nothing better than juicy tomatoes, crisp greens, or sweet strawberries.

During growing season, staff members from the Gibbet Hill Grill at 61 Lowell Road in Groton (978-448-2900) visit Verrill Farm twice a week to pick up fruits and veggies. They understand that produce is best when travel and packaging are minimal, and it shows through the restaurant's many tasty dishes, all variations of traditional American fare.

Open two years, Gibbet Hill Grill is owned by the Webber family and serves a variety of foods, including seasonal soups, fresh salads, burgers, steak, and chicken pot pie, all prepared fresh by executive chef K.C. O'Hara and his team.

Entrees range from \$13 to \$36. When dining with my family, I ordered the delicious , crispy , potato-crust haddock, and everything around me looked and smelled just as mouth watering.

Most of Gibbet Hill's cream, as well as its goat cheese and blue cheese, comes from local farms as well. To demonstrate its commitment to buying locally, Gibbet Hill Grill last summer held a "Farm-to-Fork Dinner," during which everything on the five-course menu came from within 100 miles, including a tasting of tomatoes from Verrill Farm .

Fresh vegetables also allow Za at 138 Massachusetts Ave. in Arlington (781-316-2334) to take seemingly simple pizza and salad items to a new level. Owners Peter and Colleen McCarthy, also the owners of Evoo in Somerville, and general manager Steve Kurland collaborate to create surprising and tasty creations. They get produce from Verrill Farm as well as other local farmers markets and farm stands.

My friends and I visited the busy restaurant on a Sunday night. While the one-page menu consists of the standard fare, behind us on the wall was a chalkboard packed with specials that rotate with the seasons. The salads (\$6 to \$ 8) are inventive and delicious.

I ordered a more-traditional salad of iceberg lettuce, fresh vegetables, applewood- smoked bacon, blue cheese, and buttermilk dressing, while my friends ordered the fancier specials. One consisted of avocado, black beans, cheddar cheese, jalapeños, and red pepper that was fresh and tangy.

Za is known for interesting combinations for both salads and pizza (\$6 to \$11). One of the current pizza specials features pears, Gorgonzola cheese, red onion, walnuts, dried cranberries, thyme, scallions, and extra virgin olive oil.

All pizzas are 10 inches, a hearty meal for one. We ordered a few pizzas to share.

One of our selections was the irresistible "Mac 'n' Cheese" which consisted of macaroni, four cheeses, a light cream sauce, caramelized onions, and toasted bread crumbs atop crispy pizza dough. This kid-friendly dish satisfied every one of our taste buds.

The other pizza we selected was just as tasty, made with grilled chicken, broccoli, caramelized onions, fresh garlic, various cheeses, and extra virgin olive oil. I thought I would miss the marinara sauce, but after taking the first bite, I knew it was just perfect. While the pear and apple dishes will disappear from the chalkboard soon, menu items consisting of fresh asparagus and tomatoes are in the works for late spring and summer. ■

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