

MUSEUM & ARTS

Foraging for Dinner

BY WALTER NICHOLLS

Before the dawn of the supermarket express lane, fluorescent lighting, and endless refrigerated display cases, dining tables were laden with local provisions. Proud farmers, each with their seasonal specialty, welcomed neighbors to their fields and barns to choose the freshest-possible ingredients. Foraging, a tradition still popular in Europe, is still possible just beyond the beltway in an afternoon's outing.

From the fertile flats of the Eastern Shore to our own San Joaquin—the Shenandoah Valley—in every direction from Washington, there is a culinary adventure.

Moreover, thanks to demanding Washington chefs, small farms are thriving. With no fear of freezer burn, jet lag, or chemical adulteration, shoppers trust what they see when they see it grown. Forget pawed-over produce and beyond-expiration dates. This stuff is right out of the ground, just off the hoof, ripe for picking.

Charles Coiner of Berryville, Virginia, recognized the trend toward specialty produce nine years ago when he made the change from a typical fruit and vegetable truck farm to edible flowers, herbs, and baby vegetables. "For us small farmers it means a bigger cash crop," says Coiner.

Coiner's farm manager Linda Newsome runs the Rock Garden, a 20-acre, organically fertilized, trickle-irrigated farm two miles north of Berryville. "Eight years ago I was working in the summers picking tomatoes for Charlie. Now I'm here year-round, 50 to 60 hours a week." A Fergie lookalike in overalls, Newsome directs a full-time staff of eight in the planning and propagation of 69 varieties of herbs, 23 kinds of edible flowers, and assorted infant vegetables. Once used only as a snappy garnish, flowers no longer get pushed to the edge of the plate. From their peak of popularity as a food during the Renaissance, flowers, leaves, and stems are back in a big way.

Multicolored fields of pansies, hollyhocks, nasturtium, and day lilies are yours for the picking at the Rock Garden. Each has its own distinct taste and purpose.



Linda Newsome at the Rock Garden photo by Walter Nicholls

"One customer fills snapdragons to the brim with a chocolate mint mousse; anything would be appealing peeking out of one of our squash or day lily blossoms," says Newsome.

When choosing a salad bouquet, include some blooms that are just opening. Pass up the squash and day lilies if they are not to be used that evening; they'll be mush by morning.

The Rock Garden supplies flowers and herbs to restaurants all over Washington, including the Tabard Inn and Nora, whose lush entrance garden was planted by Coiner.

Eight miles north of Coiner's Rock Garden, along country roads lined by peach and apple trees, watch for the wrought-iron bird that marks the farm of Paula Brunner Abelow, her husband Ira, and her son Gene. Stray pheasants darting out of a nearby ditch are another tipoff that you have reached Noble Run Ranch.

Originally dairy farmers, the Brunners switched to raising ring-necked pheasants four years ago. "Dairy farming is so unpredictable, with drought and fluctuations in milk prices. We needed reliable income," says Paula.

From the hilltop where their pale pink

stucco farmhouse is situated, four states (Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, Pennsylvania) are visible beyond huge cages, sprawling netted circus tents the birds call home.

A native of Czechoslovakia, Paula would rather be painting in her studio, working in pastels and oils for commissioned portraits, but there is always a job to do in this family-run operation. The Brunners raise several varieties of pheasants on their 475-acre preserve, for area restaurants such as Dominique.

With the exception of turkey, pheasant has the lowest cholesterol of any meat or fowl, and the birds of Noble Run Ranch are known locally to be especially prized. "It's the diet," says Paula, "natural grains, no chemicals, outdoor conditions. They are fit for royalty."

Through the ages this glitzy bird has been pursued for dinner, by rich and poor. The Romans were fond of presenting pheasants with beak and feet gilded and plumage back in place.

To allow the subtle flavor to emerge, Paula Brunner recommends simple roasting rather than more elaborate preparations. Some prefer the taste and texture of the hen to the cock, but the