

# CELEBRATE THE SEASONS!

*And Find Value Right Under Your Feet*



I'm often badgered by my peers from distant sun-baked portions of the country about the "unique" upstate New York weather. They love to razz me about raking leaves, shoveling snow, and spring snowstorms. They tease me that our summer lasts only two months (give me a break – it lasts *three!*). They offer their pity, insisting I need more sun, that my growing season is too short, and that I truly live a marginal existence in my igloo, with pet penguins and polar bears tossing my garbage cans at night. What they fail to realize is that we here in the Northeast have something they'll never appreciate – *four distinct and wonderful produce seasons!*

As a chef peering out the kitchen window I see new produce opportunities every single day. In March and April it begins; the sun gets a little higher in the sky, the glaciers in the parking lots begin to recede, and I'm awaiting the first fiddlehead ferns, ramps, rhubarb, asparagus and morels. I rush out to the garden to see which herb pops its head up first – mint, chives, fennel or tarragon, usually quickly followed by sage, oregano and thyme. In another few weeks an entirely new onslaught of produce begins to show up, and the menu writing begins to warm up. By the time July and August creep in, it's on, baby! A full-blown kaleidoscope of colors, textures and flavors cascades from every market table. Farmers wheel and deal at the end of the day to make room next week for the bounty still swelling and ripening on the trees and in the fields. Produce is literally spilling out everywhere! And then, just when you thought you couldn't eat another ear of bi-color sweet corn, it's gone! Just. Like. That.

## LOOK OUT YOUR WINDOW

Our seasons up here are forever changing, and as chefs and operators our job is to capture lightning in a bottle and seize every week's culinary gifts – before they morph into something entirely new and different, or disappear altogether. The entire Northeast culinary calendar is completely fleeting, and that kind of anticipation and excitement makes us appreciate our food all the more. Unlike our spoiled neighbors to the south, who can go in the backyard and pick a lemon for their vodka and tonic anytime they want, our produce stands have character, they have edge, they have seasonal *passion!*

Now, more than ever, it is critical that we leverage our local seasonal produce on our menus and in our dining rooms. Diners are more and more receptive to more frequent menu changes, because they know chefs are becoming more interested in featuring the freshest and most seasonal produce. They *expect* chefs to know what's in season, they *expect* we know what grows locally, and they *expect* that it will be featured in our restaurants. Hey – the chefs on television know, so we should too, right? They're setting the bar for us now! Walk down any magazine aisle in any supermarket and look at the covers of all the food magazines. What do you see? Produce! Farms! Bucolic scenery, page after page after hay bale-strewn page! Why? Because that's what customers want! And yet, I still see menus in August that feature not a single kernel of local corn and only have one tomato dish – pasta with red sauce. We have to up our games. Our customers are holding us to a higher standard today, and if we don't meet it, they could go somewhere else.

## EVEN THE CHAINS ARE ON BOARD

Chain restaurants are already a step ahead of many of us. I used to think the independent restaurant could safely hide in the local and seasonal corner from the 600-pound gorilla. I used to think the chains were too corporate, cumbersome and unwieldy to even think about capturing the elusive and unpredictable local and seasonal produce concept. I thought it was all just too high maintenance and inefficient for the chains. And then I saw Seasons 52.



Chef Eamon Lee

# SAUTÉED FARM-RAISED TROUT

WITH LOCAL SWEET CORN, EXOTIC MUSHROOMS, TRI-COLOR FINGERLING POTATOES & SWISS CHARD

YIELD: 4 each Entrée Portions

097594	1 lb. Tri-Color Fingerling Potatoes, halved lengthwise
370864	4 oz. Extra Virgin Olive Oil
094746	4 each Indian Ridge Trout Fillets
000110	2 oz. Salted Butter
097420	2 cups Exotic Mushroom Blend
097151	2 cups Bi-Color Sweet Corn, shaved from cobb
097302	2 Tbsp. Fresh Thyme, stemmed
097155	4 cups Bright Lights Swiss Chard, stemmed, rinsed and 1" chopped
097471	½ cup Fresh Scallions, small pieces
345029	To taste, Sea Salt
345631	To taste, Black Pepper

## DIRECTIONS

1. Toss potatoes with olive oil and roast at 400°F until cooked through and light brown. Season with salt and pepper and reserve.
2. Season trout fillets with salt and pepper and sauté over high heat in a non-stick sauté pan until light brown. Place on baking sheet and finish cooking in 400°F oven, about 3 minutes. Reserve.
3. While trout is resting, melt butter in non-stick pan over medium-high heat.
4. Add mushrooms and saute 2 minutes. Add corn and saute another 2 minutes.
5. Add thyme and chard, lower heat to low and cover. Cook 2 minutes to wilt chard. Season with salt and pepper.
6. Place trout fillets meat side down on plates. Carefully peel back skin and discard.
7. Arrange roasted fingerling potatoes and sauteed vegetables around. Finish dish with a drizzle of olive oil and fresh scallions.



If you took comfort in similar feelings, that the big chain couldn't squeeze itself into the local and seasonal niche, think again. Take a quick look at their website, [www.seasons52.com](http://www.seasons52.com). While many of us took comfort that what worked for the past 20 years should work for the next 20, they were busy figuring out how customers' needs have *changed* over the past 20 years, and how they were going to change in the *next* 20. As if that isn't sobering enough, guess who owns Seasons 52; the same folks who own the largest and most successful chains in the country. Great. Now what?

## DEFINING YOUR TERROIR

The answer is right under your nose, and in many cases, already in your own kitchens at home. The answer is in the little specialty shops around the corner and at your farmers market. The answer is in your weather, your nearby rural fields, and right under your feet in the dirt you're standing on. The French have referred to all of these things in one simple but meaningful word: *terroir*. And *terroir* may be the answer to a previously unlocked treasure chest of value at your restaurant.

Defined by Wikipedia, "Terroir is the special characteristics that the geography, geology and climate of a certain place bestow upon particular produce... It can be very loosely translated as "a sense of place," which is embodied in certain characteristic qualities, the sum of the effects that the local environment has had on the production of the product." In essence, *terroir* sets your little corner of the world apart from every other. *Terroir* makes your food, your restaurant, and even *you* special. Your particular *terroir* cannot be duplicated or reproduced. It's your "brand" if you will, and it can only be had in your restaurant, served only by you. *Terroir* is salt potatoes in Syracuse, Beef on Weck in Buffalo, and Speedies in Binghamton. *Terroir* is what makes your peppers, corn, jams and honey sweeter than the chains, and customers will pay more for that because they know they can get it only in your restaurant.

I know... this whole fancy French *terroir* thing may sound a little *heady*. But is it really? Maines put on its best annual Food Show ever last spring, headlined by none other than Guy Fieri. His show, *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*, is as wildly popular as it is specifically because of *terroir*. Think about it. Guy's producers seek out unique, out-of-the-way places serving up wildly creative fare that cannot be had anywhere else in the world. The show is so successful that we'll blow night after night on the couch just watching other people eat! What's up with that!? I'll tell you – what drives our passion is the thrill of discovering, learning and experiencing something new and unique. That is what you need to identify and celebrate in your restaurants. Leveraging your *terroir* will never fail.

## Buzzing with Terroir

Many of you know I keep honeybees. The greatest lesson I've learned is that no two types of *terroir* are ever the same, and the greatest expression of this is in the plants we eat. Honey is simply plant nectar collected and concentrated by the bees, and no two honeys have ever tasted the same. Produce is no different. Sometimes we get too busy and overlook the nuances that make the produce we use special. Take a day and learn what those differences are, and start telling the story on your menu that makes your restaurant different from all others.



So, you may be asking, where do I find this terroir you speak of? I recommend you start at your local farmers market. Bring your smart phone or camera, a note pad, and a stack of business cards. Go early, before they officially open, and start at Booth 1 and work your way methodically down the line. Introduce yourself as a local chef who wants nothing but the best and the most one-of-a-kind items your local area has to offer, and that you are here on a quest to find them. Meet the people who grow or raise these foods, and listen to their story. Here is a list of questions I would ask:



## A CHEF'S FARMERS MARKET QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What is the name of your farm?
2. Where is it located?
3. What is your name? (Farmer)
4. What do you grow, raise or produce?
5. What do you feel you produce that is special and unique to your area?
6. If there was one thing customers should know about you or your produce, what would that be?
7. If I were able to try only one thing at your stall today, what would that be?
8. What would that item be in July, August, etc., and why is that item special then?
9. Give them a business card, thank them for their valuable time, buy something (anything!) and move on to the next stall.

After a day of this you will surely have a better feel for what your particular area has to offer in the way of produce, and you will probably have learned what grows well in your area, the varieties and strains, and the colorful names sometimes associated with them. You will also have learned a lot about when to expect certain produce. The people you will meet also have a story, and you will learn a lot about them. This is important. Who grows these items is often as important, if not more so, than the items themselves. (The Farmer is the next TV star – book it!) Where and how the produce is grown, and the back-stories, all help to define their terroir. Write it all down and head back to the kitchen. When you get there, call your Maine Territory Manager and ask them the same questions about our produce, meats, and seafood. If they can't provide you the back-story or terroir of a particular product, insist they provide you with it. You'll be surprised!

I did this in Syracuse a number of years ago, and not only did I make a host of new friends, one of whom is now one of my best, but I never wrote a menu the same way again. To a chef, nothing is more inspiring than learning about the produce you work with and the story behind it. I swear I also never wasted a scrap of produce again! Whereas before I was just buying items that were cheap, convenient or familiar to me, I found myself experimenting with new produce – and my customers loved it!



Will the enhanced experience add value to the restaurant's brand? Will the customers, after meeting the chef and talking to the server, feel like they have a stronger connection to the people who work at the restaurant? Will these customers be more likely to return to this restaurant, or, more importantly, will they almost always consider this restaurant when they choose to dine out? Yes, yes, and YES!

With all of this said, does this mean you have to change your whole concept or else be gobbled up by the competition? No. But do I think featuring a few dishes like these from time to time will send your customers a strong message that you are engaged in your local area, that you seek out and sell products indigenous to your community, and go to great lengths to bring a unique and special value to your customers that they can't possibly get anywhere else? Absolutely!

The recipes in this edition of *Essence* are designed to express the most passionate sensations of summer. When it comes to replicating them in your restaurants, be sure to leverage the identities of the produce you are using in your own special local area! Have fun with it!

*Happy Cooking!*  
*Chef Eamon*

# Leverage local ingredients in your menu description.



At first glance this caprese salad doesn't look like anything special. But when we went to the market, we learned (and wrote down) what the farmer told us. We learned the tomatoes grown at Tassone's farm are an heirloom variety called Brandywine, the purple basil is called Opal Basil, and the mozzarella is actually from real water buffalo! The chicken from Indian Ridge is free range; the sweet corn grown in Bridgeport, New York by Jones Farm is the sweetest around; the onions are called bunching onions; the

mushrooms are from Franklin Farms (it was on the box), and they sell a thyme that smells like lemon. The apples we used are one of the earliest pie apples available, Early Cortland; the cheddar cheese we buy from Maines is actually produced from New York milk in Jefferson County; and the honey is from Lee's Bees and is actually Goldenrod honey available only in late summer and early autumn. Now, through a different set of eyes, maybe our menu could look like this:

## SET YOUR MENU APART FROM OTHERS

### BEFORE: Caprese Salad

*Herb Roasted Chicken Breast with Fresh Corn, Mushrooms, and Onions*

*Apple Pie with Cheddar Cheese and Honey*

### AFTER: Tassone Farms Brandywine Tomato Salad with Buffalo Mozzarella, Virgin Olive Oil and Opal Basil

*Free range Chicken Roasted with Lemon Thyme and Franklin Farms Mushrooms*

*Jones Farm Sweet Corn, Caramelized Bunching Onions*

*Early Cortland Apple Pie with Goldenrod Honey and New York State Cheddar*

Sounds a little richer, right? It looks like something worth going out of the way to eat. **It looks like the chefs went to great lengths to source unique local ingredients and learn about who grows them.** It sounds like my dollars spent at this restaurant will probably stay, for the most part, in New York State. The menu will probably engage the customer in a discussion with the server and perhaps even get the chef out of the kitchen and answer any questions they may have. Above all, it looks like I won't be able to get a meal like this using these ingredients anywhere else. These menu items are the epitome of terroir; they will set this menu apart from all others, and are, without a shadow of a doubt, produced in New York in late summer-early autumn. You aren't getting this in Sarasota, Florida folks!

