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crow

of

freshness

Chef Leather Storrs leads me through a horizontal brown metal door that opens like a coffin onto the roof. On top of Noble Rot, a fourth-floor wine bar in Portland, Ore., thrives a variety of planting beds, all six to nine inches deep. The west end of the roof, where the stairs surface, is homey and garden-like, with a creeping groundcover embracing concrete pavers and dotted with chives and lavender. Here it looks more like a living roof, blanketed with a layer of soil and plants, but elsewhere are traditional raised beds, constructed of two-by-eight planks, along with waist-high metal beds on legs, carefully arranged around gleaming metal components of the HVAC system. I can see the Willamette River glide by 10 blocks away, flanked by a glittering skyline and lush wooded hills beyond.

By Annelise Kelly

Having been involved in the design of this building — certified LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) platinum, from the ground up — Storrs is clearly excited about his secret garden.

“One of the neat things about doing this as opposed to buying stuff is you see things throughout their life cycles, like that Tuscan kale. You would never get the flowers from a farmer, and they’re delicious, try one.” He plucks a creamy yellow blossom with four papery petals from a bolted stalk. It tastes of mustard and pollen.

Noble Rot is among a vanguard of restaurants taking the increasingly familiar notion of Farm to Table a step further. In addition to sourcing produce from local, small-scale farmers, they are cultivating a Rooftop to Table ethic by growing ingredients right on their own roofs. Locally grown fruits and vegetables are now *de rigueur* in gourmet restaurants. Because they needn’t endure transit through multiple warehouses, they’re picked at peak ripeness, bursting with flavor and nutrition. Rooftop plots bring produce a few steps closer, allowing chefs to commission obscure varieties and the tenderest, most delicate items. Harvest is based on demand, which means less waste and shorter storage. As each crop ripens, it sparks seasonal inspiration in the chef below. Above all, local produce, from farm, garden or rooftop, contributes to a discernable sense of place.

From a broader perspective, the environmental advantages of a rooftop farm are myriad. The carbon footprint of a crop which is hand-cultivated and hand-delivered to a kitchen in the same building is admirably small. All plants benefit the urban environment by absorbing carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen, and rooftop gardens, in particular, help diminish runoff and reduce city temperatures. Rooftop farms are limited only by engineering concerns, available space and climate. They’re appearing on restaurants in northern climes like British Columbia and Toronto, as well as in sunny spots like Los Angeles and Texas.

As we tour the rooftop, Storrs says, “my cooks are much more sensitive to vegetables and vegetable cookery now. I wasn’t prepared for that and that’s been the greatest benefit. A lot of them didn’t know

what a radish looked like when it was growing or if an eggplant came up from the ground or was a fruit on a branch, so just having that close contact promotes respect for vegetables.”

We continue past two black plastic compost cylinders and approach clusters of large, glossy leaves erupting from dark soil. “This is my favorite thing right here, this rhubarb.” While he primarily grows annuals, there are a few perennials: rhubarb, woody herbs and strawberries. He takes me to the meadow-like bed near the top of the stairs. “These are so fragile and tiny, we have to use them the day of harvesting,” pointing out small serrated leaves of *fraises des bois*, the delicate woodland wild strawberry whose fruit is the size of a cherry pit — a culinary delicacy difficult to source any other way.

We descend to the dining room, where the first item served is exquisitely local: a glass of pure well water, tapped from an aquifer 300 feet underground, bountiful enough for the whole building, garden included. Next is the rooftop salad, a tangle of texture and color featuring assorted greens from right above our heads, accented with flowers like kale, borage and calendula. The tomato array offers a culinary exploration of the very concept of tomato, including tomato sorbet, a roasted tomato, tomato salad and a simple raw tomato, each featuring a different variety.

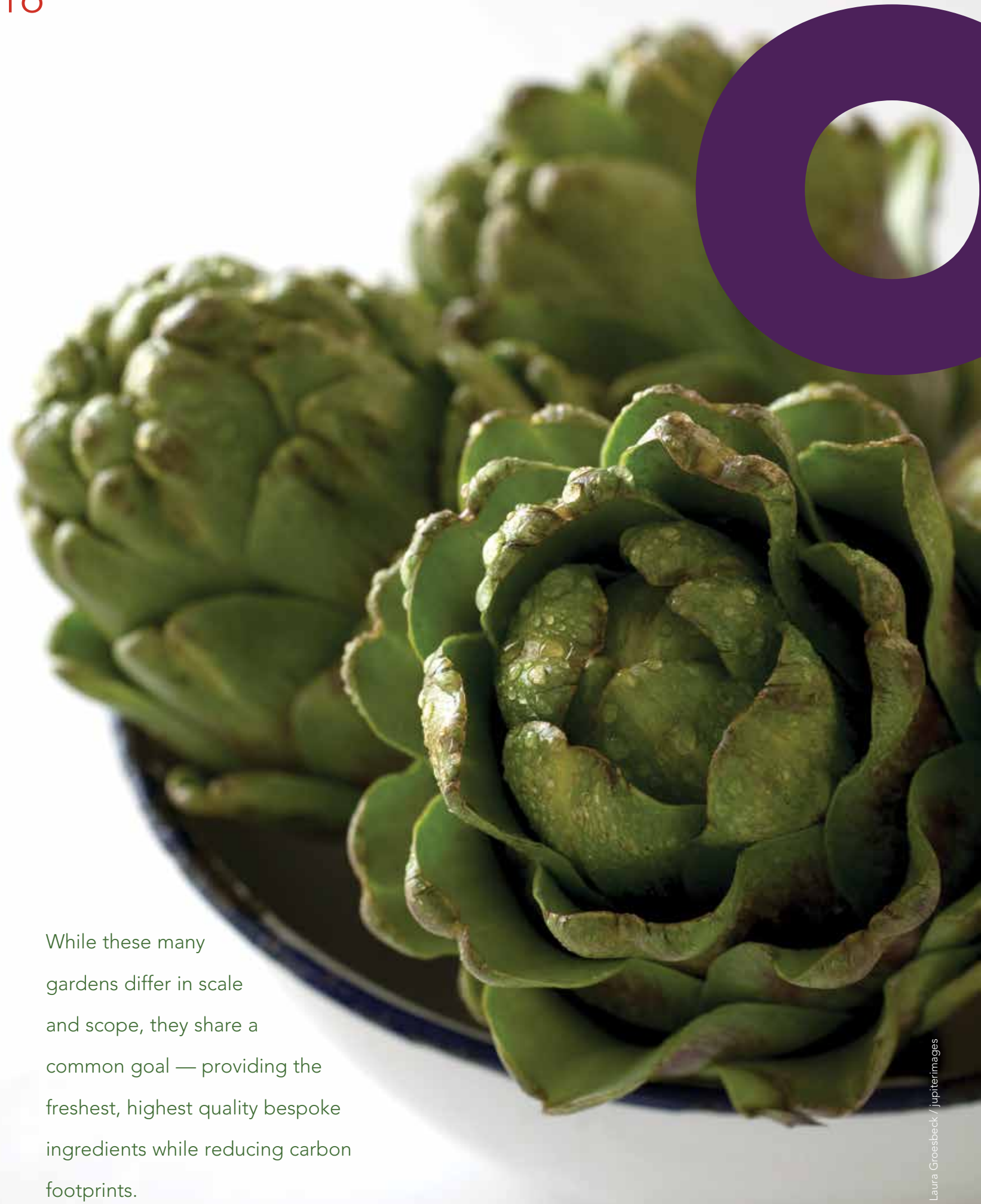


Bastille Cafe and Bar

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While these many gardens differ in scale and scope, they share a common goal — providing the freshest, highest quality bespoke ingredients while reducing carbon footprints.

In the other end of the country, another restaurant has even greater rooftop ambitions. John Mooney, chef at Manhattan's Bell Book & Candle, intends to supply 60 to 80 percent of the produce on his menu from the aeroponic rooftop garden. Several times each day he climbs six flights of stairs from his ground-floor restaurant to maintain and harvest the 70 varieties of herbs, vegetables and fruits thriving in futuristic white PVC towers. In this soil-free system, nutrient-enriched water floods the roots of over 1,000 plants tucked into openings on 60 towers. With easy access to nutrition and sunlight, his plants reach maturity faster than ordinary earth-bound produce. Also, the system weighs less than a conventional soil-based rooftop farm, so it's better suited to the 1904 building.

Mooney is a devoted champion of this technology, affirming that the restaurateur benefits, saving money on refrigeration and storage space; the environment benefits, as fewer trucks ply the highways and New York streets; the chef and the diner benefit, from excellent produce at its peak.

Back in the Pacific Northwest, a lush rooftop garden complete with beehives tops Bastille Café and Bar in Ballard, Wash. Chef Shannon Galusha focuses on crops that mature quickly, like French radishes and salad greens such as deer tongue ("a leafy, very crunchy, wet lettuce"), purslane ("a succulent with a great texture, offering a nice surprise in salad") and crystal lettuce, which looks like it's been dusted with sugar. Perennials on the rooftop include fennel, bay leaf, dwarf stone fruit trees and Szechuan pepper. Cane fruit like blackberries will be part of an upcoming expansion, doubling the growing area to 10,000 square feet.

Cultivating the rooftop garden has educated Galusha in unexpected ways. "When we first opened Bastille, I would go through the farmers' market and try to get a deal at closing time. After working on the garden and having the program on the roof, my thoughts have really changed about that. Now I know that it is so much work to get crops planted and harvested. Vendors really are scratching out a living. I won't go out at closing time for bargains anymore — I always pay full price."

He also learned that while it can be expensive to retrofit a building to accommodate a rooftop garden, they're not costly to incorporate into the design of many new buildings. "I'd love to see them integrated into schools. So many new schools are being built. There's no reason not to put a garden up there and educate kids about their food."

From coast to coast, the rooftop garden is appearing in a variety of guises. Some are narrowly focused, like the "salsa garden" topping Rick Bayless' Chicago restaurant Frontera Grill, featuring tomatoes and peppers. Likewise, Pura Vida in Atlanta focuses on peppers, cultivating dozens of varieties to spice up their Latin small plates menu. In contrast, there are ambitious gardens like the one crowning Pyramid Restaurant & Bar in Dallas, where fall diners savor rooftop figs, along with pumpkins, watermelon and heirloom tomatoes. Uncommon Ground in Chicago uses its certified organic rooftop garden as a teaching space as well as a culinary resource, encouraging urban dwellers to adopt this accessible approach to self-sufficiency.

While these gardens differ in scale and scope, they share a common goal — providing the freshest, highest quality bespoke ingredients while reducing carbon footprints, improving the environment and inspiring urban communities with a vision of a positive, self-sufficient future. They proudly illustrate that even in the city, truly local fruits and vegetables can be cultivated just a flight of stairs away.



Noble Rot, John O. Porter | iStockphoto.com (2)

