



High-end hotels go locavore

The Four Seasons Resort in Nevis, West Indies, now offers private deep-sea lobster dives for culinary tourists who want to take fresh seafood to a new, shall we say submerged, level. Las Ventanas resort in Cabo San Lucas — always a property to outdo the competition when it comes to customized guest services — is now offering a “Challenge the Chef” activity modeled after a cooking reality show.

But of all the culinary hooks seen in hotels of late, the local/sustainable/seasonal movement is the one that seems to have staying power.

In the culinary scene as a whole, locavore practices are becoming a focus. But you know it's hit critical mass when even the flagship restaurants of big-box city hotels are returning to the local farmers market. And they are — with delight. The Peninsula Chicago offers Market Dinners Thursday through Sunday, featuring multiple three-course menus made entirely from local ingredients purchased that week from local vendors. A longtime regular at Chicago's Green City Market and other local farmers markets, Chef de Cuisine Cyril Calmet is heading up the locavore dining program.

In the country, chefs can take a further step back to basics, sourcing much of their produce and dairy from working farms on their own property. Buttermilk Falls Inn + Spa in New York's Hudson Valley has a 40-acre organic farm on the property. It supplies greens, fruits, herbs, veggies and eggs for the inn's new restaurant, which seats 60 and is appropriately named Henry's Farm to Table.

"Our farm has been a work in progress for the last four or five years," said Chef Paul Kelly. While even the first year brought forth a harvest of herbs, berries and veggies, Kelly estimates that five years in, only 15 percent of Henry's food comes from the garden — but he hopes to increase that percentage to 30 percent by next year, working together with the gardener to create a planting schedule more attuned to the kitchen's needs. Though there are no plans to be fully self-sustaining, Kelly hopes to form relationships with chefs who don't have their own farm and may want to buy produce for their kitchens.

"There's no question that guests feel good about the sustainability factor and appreciate our incorporating as many homegrown ingredients as we can," says Kelly. "Ultimately we'd like to introduce some programs that will enable them to get their hands dirty in our soil!"

While farmers would be the first to tell you that working the land isn't an easy life, many city dwellers have recently started to crave that "back to the land" experience. It's not enough for them to see the organic farm or vineyard just outside their hotel room window — they want to be out in it, picking veggies and de-stemming grapes and getting back to the land. Not permanently, mind you, but maybe for a week. Combining this with a luxury lodging experience might seem counterintuitive, but in places like Blackberry Farm, the genteel country farm in the heart of the Smoky Mountains, or 12th-century-castle-turned-country-villa Castello di Vicarello in Tuscany, guests pay top dollar for a few days in the gardens.

The other way to connect with one's food is, of course, by preparing it. The same people who once scorned the kitchen as a high-school home ec relic now are starting to realize that cooking, when not forced upon a woman, can be a relaxing and highly creative endeavor. Especially when one can practice

in a beautiful space like the shiny new teaching kitchen at Lake Placid Lodge in New York, where professional chefs are there to support the students, and if milk gets spilled (or burned, or boiled) no one will shed a tear.

In the most boutique inns and retreats, where culinary programs can be tailored around the guests, staff set the locavore tone and let the visitors interpret it their own way.

"Our culinary philosophy at Good Commons is 'true food.' Know where your food is coming from. Be responsible. Eat seasonally and locally when you can," said Matthew Wexler, a chef at Good Commons retreat in Vermont.

Owner/founder Tesha Buss invites guests to guide the creation of their menus the same way they determine what sort of experience they want. Chef Wexler trained at the French Culinary Institute but specializes in creating "a la minute" cuisine to fit any dietary restriction: vegan, gluten-free, "caveman" or kosher. The venue accommodates vegan yoga groups one week; and amateur chefs looking to tour charcuterie and cheese-making facilities the next.

Even room service menus are no longer what they used to be — or at least, not everywhere. Rosewood Sand Hill sets the standard in Silicon Valley, debuting a "room service renaissance" with five daily menus, with not a single stale club sandwich. Executive Chef Peter Rudolph aims for in-room offerings to mirror the menu at the hotel's Michelin-starred restaurant Madera as closely as possible. The New American comfort food menus will be updated twice monthly (earning thumbs-up from all of us road warriors who have noticed that most hotel restaurants update the in-room menus approximately *never*), It goes without saying, they'll feature naturally raised meats and local, seasonal produce.