



WINE&DINE

WORDS FOOD & WINE EDITOR DAVID SLY



Gourmet surrounds

Never mind planting a kitchen garden – this restaurant has 125 acres to choose from.

PROVENANCE IN RESTAURANT food can be closer than you think – especially if your dining room and kitchen is located in the middle of Adelaide Botanic Garden. Chef Paul Baker (*pictured*) is on trend with his inkling for foraging, although he has the added advantage of a vast kitchen garden and myriad plant varieties to explore at his doorstep, and is taking full advantage of this for his menus at Adelaide Botanic Gardens Restaurant.

His menu obliterates the notion of food miles and amplifies the reality of garden freshness as he prowls the Botanic Garden each morning, sourcing many of the herbs, vegetables (including eight varieties of tomatoes) and garnishes from the Economic Garden and Garden of Health.

The resulting use and identification of more than 50 garden items on the menu has been a revelation since Paul arrived eight months ago at the Botanic Gardens Restaurant (which is operated by Blanco Food & Events). Staff say he's the first cook to source ingredients directly from the surrounding garden plots – and the first to befriend the site's gardeners to find where all the best hidden food plants are located.

Most importantly, this fresh produce has a profound influence on the best dishes of his menu; the last autumnal figs are served with cubes of baked ricotta, topped with pomegranate jewels, oregano leaves and a delicate wafer of herb-infused meringue, creating a delicious and careful balance of fresh flavours and contrasting textures. Even a simple side salad of fresh leaves is delicious for its simplicity, vibrant flavour and modest vinaigrette dressing.

Paul was aiming for this type of authenticity when he was previously cooking at Grace The Establishment

in Norwood, but never had the easy access that the Adelaide Botanic Garden could provide. He is making the best of his current situation, in tandem with retaining preferred boutique suppliers, such as Hahndorf Venison. Still, with his newfound confidence and inspiration, Paul is pushing ingredients in unexpected directions. Medium-rare venison loin is crusted with ground coffee, teamed with tangy barberries, roasted *agrodolce* radicchio (a sweet-sour seasoning with raisins, vinegar and toasted pine nuts) and presented on a vivid bed of confit purple congo potatoes.

Looking beyond the garden to the gulf, he makes a fist of using smoked

tommy ruffs with a sharp radish-driven pickled salad – the small fish's gutsy flavour and rich, oily flesh being a smart companion to a rich mussel sauce and fennel-spiked creamy remoulade.

The striking hallmark of all these dishes is their clean, bright flavours – not masked beneath weighty sauces or starchy veg, but speaking clearly of their region and provenance. Some chefs merely give lip service to promoting farm-to-fork dining experiences. Botanic Gardens Restaurant, in a modest and perfectly poised menu, captures the essence of this farm-fresh ethos not only in its ingredients, but also in smart, delicious dishes.

LITERARY LINK

American chef Dan Barber has emerged as a figurehead for the farm-to-table culinary movement, thanks to the impact of his powerful food philosophy book *The Third Plate: Field Notes on the Future of Food* (Hachette Australia). In it, he argues for a much closer understanding between chefs, farmers and local growing conditions to arrive at truly sustainable agriculture and diets.

"We have to start eating in a different way, to not just cherry-pick the elite ingredients but to best use everything nature has to offer," he says, "and chefs can play a big part in steering this direction."

The esteemed chef from the restaurant Blue Hill at Stone Barns, a farm in New York State,

was in Adelaide to speak at Writers' Week, and was delighted to learn that some issues raised in his book are resonating powerfully with local chefs. He was especially impressed by the embrace of native Australian ingredients by Jock Zonfrillo

at Orana, and pleased about the close farm connections of the Erkok brothers at Celsius Restaurant (featured in *SALife* April 2015), and Paul Baker at the Botanic Garden Restaurant. "Chefs need to connect to the earth. If we dig in for true sustainability, giving everything the farm provides, it results in better flavour and more dining pleasure." Despite making public addresses to big, attentive crowds as a consequence of his book's international success, Dan dislikes identifying himself at the head of a movement. "I'm an articulator of what I'm seeing around me. I'm not leading anything; I'm just synthesising what other chefs are doing. And there's a lot of them around me, nicely tethering food to what is in danger of being lost."

Will this celebration of the farmer/chef be an ongoing philosophy, or a popular fad? "I'm confident of the future of closer connectivity between farmer and restaurant, because we don't have to give up pleasure to be involved. We get to benefit from more delicious food if we get involved. Everybody wins."

