

Farm-focused Dining

Fresh-picked greens, berries and vegetables add panache and punch to summer dining

Warm weather pairs perfectly with fresh, local culinary delights. Throughout Connecticut, abundant summer bounty inspires recipes at restaurants that ardently support farm-to-table dining. With sustainability and local sourcing as their focus, Firebox Restaurant in Hartford, Francesca's Wine Bar & Bistro in Collinsville and Community Table in Washington prove that the finest ingredients can often be found right in our backyard.

Since 2007, Firebox Restaurant has upheld the belief that the best food travels the shortest distance. Located on Broad Street in Hartford, the restaurant puts its locally focused philosophy into practice year-round, and continues to establish strong relationships with area purveyors. General Manager Spiro Koulouris says, "In the seven years we've been open, the farm-to-table philosophy

has become more of a common-sense philosophy," noting the increased collaboration between restaurants and farms across the region. Firebox sources summer greens from Maple Knoll Farm in Somersville, beef products from Four Mile River Farm in Old Lyme, and goat cheese and feta cheese from Sweet Pea Cheese in North Granby.

The frequently changing menu is enlivened by a medley of bright, vivid summer staples, including field greens, sweet berries, herbs and heirloom tomatoes. "From a cook's standpoint," says Sous Chef Ed Jones, "there's nothing better than looking at your prep station and seeing it full of vibrant colors instead of all muted fall tones. It's the best time to be in the kitchen."

Palate-pleasing combinations include Stonington sea scallops with roasted mushrooms, English peas, fava beans and summer squash tossed with tomato vinaigrette.

FLOWERS ON THE TABLE: Maine scallops crudo with black garlic, pickled red onion and spring flowers are a specialty at Community Table. Created by Chef Joel Viehland.

According to Chef Jones, summer is an ideal time for quick, simple preparations that let ingredients shine through instead of being saturated with heavy sauce. A past summer favorite is Firebox's grilled fish with julienned zucchini linguini, roasted corn, grape tomatoes, bacon and a saffron corn coulis.

Through a partnership with adjacent Billings Forge Community Works, an organization focused on revitalization and community empowerment in Hartford's Frog Hollow neighborhood, Firebox picks products from Billings Forge's community garden and farmer's market. Even the cocktails boast local elements. "From lavender to rosemary,

Firebox picks products from Billings Forge's community garden and farmer's market. Even the cocktails boast local elements.

herbs take up about 25 percent of the garden here," says Koulouris, "and we make cocktails based on what's ready to be picked." In summer, Firebox bartenders frequent the farmers' market, see what's available and create cocktails based on their finds. A popular summer libation is Firebox's house-pressed lemonade infused with garden lavender and mixed with vodka; another is the blueberry basil Caipirinha, a seasonal spin on Brazil's national cocktail.

Firebox's profits help fund programming for Billings Forge Community Works that supports Frog Hollow families. To that end, Koulouris says, "It's nice to work for a place that goes beyond making food for the bottom line. The bottom line really has a purpose here."

In its quaint, bucolic Collinsville location, Francesca's Wine Bar & Bistro serves a Mediterranean-inspired menu of small plates, salads, antipasto and

other bistro-style fare in a casually elegant atmosphere. While the selections remain fairly consistent year round, the warmer months allow for an emphasis on local, seasonally focused dishes to complement the wine list. "We use a lot from the Collinsville Farmers' Market across the street from the restaurant," says owner Francesca Nadeau. "From produce to cheese, yogurt, honey and preserves, we buy local products to use in our dishes." According to Nadeau, a customer favorite is Hard Rain Farm's fresh figs paired with honey from Lamoth's Sugar House (both businesses are based in Burlington) mixed with locally made yogurt made by the Butterfield Farm Company in Suffield.

Since Nadeau started the restaurant in September 2012, the menu has grown. "We're trying to incorporate more items that people have requested," she says, "including vegetarian and vegan dishes, while still staying true to our style."

Whether complex or simple preparations, Francesca's offerings balance local flavor and Mediterranean flair. A popular summer dish is Caponata, a savory Sicilian recipe using local eggplant, tomato and onion, served with a fresh baguette from Collinsville Baking Company.

When opening its doors in Litchfield County four years ago, Community Table's mission was already clear: to support Connecticut's farming community while highlighting seasonal, locally sourced cuisine in an inventive way. With Executive Chef Joel Viehland at the helm, the Washington restaurant has since gained acclaim for its avant-garde menu and unwavering focus on sustainability.

Each week features a different menu, and modifications occur daily based on available ingredients. Prior to Community Table, Viehland worked at Noma in Copenhagen, known as one of the world's top restaurants and cel-



THRILL OF THE GRILL: Marwin Farm Duck, grilled ramps, fiddlehead ferns and salt roast delight fans of Firebox. Created by Chef Ross Effinger.

ebrated for its use of local and foraged ingredients. Viehland employs a mix of classic techniques combined with his own innovative culinary style to produce Community Table's New American cuisine. While the menu changes frequently, restaurant favorites, including a refreshing summer gazpacho and a roasted squash soup with bacon and spiced chocolate, reappear occasionally.

As an ecologically conscious opera-

tion, farm-to-table dining goes hand in hand with environmentally friendly practices. "That's another aspect that's important to us," says Manager Jeff Phillips. "We measure our water usage, we have photovoltaic cells on the roof, we recycle and most of our composting is even used to feed the pigs that we then buy from the farmers." Among its extensive network of area purveyors, Community Table procures some of its produce



FARM FRESH: Community Table's pasture-raised spring chicken, morels, fiddlehead and favas. Created by Chef Joel Viehland.



FIREBOX FAVORITE: Smoked Connecticut River Shad with buttered potatoes, watermelon relish, pea tendrils, English pea-mint coulis and a farm egg hits the spot.



JUST DESSERTS: At Firebox, organic beet cake comes with roasted beet lime ganache, house-made granola and sour-milk jam. Created by Chef Nate Smith.

from Holbrook Farm in Bethel, Wild Carrot Farm in Canton and Holly Hill Farm in New Preston. While embodying a deep commitment to the agriculturally abundant surroundings, Viehland and his team employ every method available to pickle, smoke and ferment ingredients in-house.

“We source from local farms when we can, and then we preserve all through the colder seasons,” says Phillips. “We’ve got a root cellar for canning, dehydrating and other techniques to make the food last as long as we can.”

FIREBOX GRILLED LAMB CHOPS WITH ROASTED CORN, ZUCCHINI LINGUINI AND HARISSA-ROSEMARY BUTTER

- 1 stick unsalted butter, softened
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1 tablespoon rosemary, minced
- 2 tablespoons harissa paste
- 3 ounces lime juice
- Salt and pepper
- Olive oil
- 6 ears native corn, shucked
- 2 cups zucchini, julienned
- 1 cup Sun Gold tomatoes, halved
- ¼ cup basil chiffonade
- 8 local lamb rib chops (4-6 ounces each)

In a small bowl, mix well softened butter, garlic, rosemary, harissa paste and ¾ ounces of lime juice. Season with salt and pepper. Wrap the butter in a sheet of plastic wrap and shape into a log. Twist the ends tightly to seal. Refrigerate until firm.

Preheat your grill to high. Place shucked corn on grill and brush with olive oil. Lightly char on all sides. Remove corn and let cool 10 minutes. With a chef’s knife, remove kernels from cob. Reserve.

On a mandolin or with a chef’s knife, julienne zucchini lengthwise; it should resemble linguini pasta. In a large pot of boiling salted water, blanch zucchini linguini for 10 seconds, then immediately shock in an ice bath. When completely cooled, remove zucchini linguini and place on a sheet pan lined with paper towels. Pat dry. Reserve.

In a large bowl, combine reserved corn, zucchini linguini and Sun Gold tomatoes. Season with good olive oil, the remaining lime juice, salt and pepper, and chiffonade basil. Toss well and adjust seasoning.

Season lamb chops with salt and pepper. Grill over high heat, turning once or twice, until nicely charred outside and medium rare inside (6-8 minutes total). Place a pat of harissa butter on each chop and serve over zucchini linguini mixture. **Serves 4.**

Emily Cahill is a food writer, marketing specialist, event planner and senior community manager at YELP.com. She lives in Hartford.

Diana DeLucia is a producer, author and photographer of Golf Club World, Behind the Gates, a 408-page coffee table book full of beautiful color photography, insightful interviews and fabulous recipes from golf clubs around the world.

FRANCESCA’S CAPONATA

- Vegetable oil for frying
- 2 eggplants (1 lb. each), cut into 1-inch cubes
- 2 red or yellow bell peppers, seeded and cut into 1-inch cubes
- 2 large yellow onions, cut into ¾-inch cubes
- 3 tender celery stalks, sliced
- 3 tomatoes, chopped
- 1 cup chopped pitted green olives
- ⅓ cup raisins
- 2 tablespoons capers
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
- Pinch of salt
- ¼ cup pine nuts, lightly toasted

In a deep, heavy sauté pan or fry pan, pour in vegetable oil to a depth of one-half inch. Place over medium heat. Heat until a piece of eggplant dropped into the pan sizzles and swims.

Dry eggplant well with paper towels. Working in batches and adding more oil to the pan as needed, arrange eggplant pieces in the pan in a single layer. Cook, stirring occasionally, until eggplant is tender and browned on all sides (7 to 8 minutes). Using a slotted spoon, transfer to paper towels to drain.

When all of the eggplant has been cooked, fry bell peppers until tender and lightly browned (4 to 6 minutes). Drain on paper towels. Fry the onions and celery together until tender and golden (7 to 8 minutes). Drain on paper towels.

In a large saucepan over low heat, combine the tomatoes, olives, raisins, capers, sugar and vinegar. Stir well and add the fried vegetables and salt. Cover and cook over low heat, stirring occasionally, until thickened (about 20 minutes). Add a little water if the mixture begins to dry out. Remove from heat and transfer to a serving dish; let cool; sprinkle with pine nuts. If time permits, cover and refrigerate overnight to allow flavors to marry. **Serves 6-8.**



Creating radiant spaces
for over 30 years.

VISIT www.duccikitchens.com

Ducci Kitchens Inc. is a nationally recognized kitchen and bathroom remodeling firm in Goshen, Connecticut

Visit our Design Showcase at the Rotary - Rts. 4 & 63
4 Old Middle Street | Goshen, CT 06756
Call **860.491.9999**