



Cultivation nation

Farmers and eateries are upending the notion that farm-to-table eating is not possible in tiny Singapore.
BY DESIREE KOH

Around the world, an increasing number of eateries are embracing the locavore movement, with farm-to-table eating topping the American National Restaurant Association's most important trends for three years running. And in Singapore, a handful of food and beverage outlets are trying to follow suit.

But on the tiny island – it is little more than 700 sq km – the conventional thinking is that going locavore is not feasible because there is no space for farming. However, according to the

Agri-Food & Veterinary Authority of Singapore, the space-challenged country is already producing 25 per cent of its eggs, eight per cent of its fish and seven per cent of the leafy vegetables it consumes. Plus, there are small farms turning out more exotic items like frog and quail.

And a group of chefs and bartenders who are committed to procuring their ingredients locally – like the two in our story – are uncovering under-the-radar farms to buy from and growing their own greens, spices and herbs.



FROM GARDEN TO TABLE

The patio leading to modern Mediterranean restaurant Artichoke (artichoke.com.sg), in Sculpture Square, is lined with stacks of crates. Colours of crops in various stages of cultivation burst forth from them like little fireworks. From green tomatoes, capsicum and sorrel, to beetroot, mint and tarragon, these boxed gardens are the result of the restaurant's partnership with urban farmers Edible Gardens.

This patio sets the tone for chef-owner Bjorn Shen's (left) personal policy of dedicating 30 per cent of his menu to local produce. It's an approach Shen brought home from his days as a chef in Sydney, where shopping for produce meant interacting with farmers at the market and "putting a face to the guy who grew my parsley". When

he opened Artichoke, he drove deep into the Kranji farm district in Singapore and discovered small family operations not found in business directories to add to the variety of locally farmed produce in his kitchen.

"I believe in running my business in a way that makes me and people feel good. If this creates constraints on my menu, I'm happy to live with them," says Shen, explaining that it stretches him and his staff to have to think about how to work with limited ingredients.

And Edible Gardens' Bjorn Low shares more than Shen's first name. He too believes in the robust flavours and undiluted nutrition of fresh produce. "When you eat something freshly plucked from the garden, you can feel the life in it," says Low, who hopes to bring farming capabilities to more restaurants.

GOING AU NATUREL

Thirty minutes on the expressway, and you are whisked from the concrete of Singapore's downtown to a place of greenery and nature. In what has been lovingly dubbed the Kranji Countryside, farmers produce everything from organic vegetables to American bullfrogs.

A day out here can mean traipsing through Bollywood Veggies' (bollywoodveggies.com) outdoor gallery of organic fruit and vegetables – which includes over 20 varieties of bananas. Or seeing goats, frogs, quails and other animals at Jurong Frog Farm (jurongfrogfarm.com.sg), Hay Dairies (haydairies.com.sg), top) and quail farm Lian Wah Hang (unclewilliam.biz). Plus, you can buy items like quail meat and eggs, goat's milk (try the chocolate flavour), and frog meat and hashima (a product made from the frog's oviduct that's purportedly good for the complexion) – at farm prices.

Head a little further to Oh Farms (ohfarms.com.sg) in the Nee Soon area and you can see vegetables grown hydroponically – in liquid nutrient solutions rather than soil. Visitors can also take home a Hydroponics Gardening Kit, which comes with everything you need to grow greens at home. You just need to add water.

