

## Pallet to Palate By Jaime Lewis

The check-in table for Pallet to Palate's "Farm Fresh" Cooking Demonstration is festooned with a bulging array of fresh eggplants, artichokes, zucchini and strawberries. I am told that the produce comes from the Templeton Farmer's Market, and that I'm welcome to help myself to anything I like. A very good start.

While waiting for the doors to open, I chat with a woman from Atascadero who stumbled upon the event through the pages of EdibleSLO. The concept of "shake the hand that feeds you" struck a chord with her, so she's giving it a whirl. I munch on display fruit as she talks, acutely aware that I probably have fresh, organic, local strawberry wedged between my teeth.

We sit down to a two-hour, three-course meal demonstrated by Chef Robert Root of The Manse on Marsh. Any chef who leaves the fast-track to serve fresh, local food to elders in assisted living is alright by me, but Chef Robert is young, bright, and passionate to boot. He started Pallet to Palate a few years ago to strengthen the connection between chefs and local farmers, hosting annual public events that inspire, educate, and satiate. By all accounts, P2P has become an overwhelming success, and I'm about to understand why.

We savor a tender cold melon soup from Rocky Canyon Farms fruit as Chef Robert shows how it's made. A bottle of 2006 Silver Stone Sauvignon Blanc makes more than a few laps around our table, its brilliant, clean acidity the perfect match for the soup as well as our next dish: a fried green tomato and goat cheese salad with roasted walnuts and balsamic vinaigrette. Robert gives a round of shout-outs to the farmers who stand up looking a little overwhelmed by our enthusiastic applause and whoops of delight. They

are – deservedly – the rock stars of our afternoon.

Robert moves on to a pork stir fry with colorful veggies. When asked the correct way to chop vegetables, he retorts, "This isn't Thomas Keller's kitchen, folks – just hack it up!"

Next come the grass-fed beef sliders (beef



from Rancho Tierra Redonda Ranch), bursting with juicy, concentrated flavor. A bottle of 2005 Silver Stone "Keeper" red Rhone blend appears, providing substantial weight to match that of the meat. And just when I think the best dish is behind us, we are presented with a platter of perfectly-roasted summer squash shrouded in Chef Robert's "house herb mix." It's when the pluot tart with crème fraîche arrives that I stop taking notes because, honestly, my attention simply won't be compromised before this flaky, aromatic little slice of perfection. All I remember is "ooh" and "mmmmm."

When I return the next day for the Let's Be Frank symposium, I'm still high from meeting other local foodies and swapping favorite farmers like baseball cards. Thus am I perfectly positioned for a panel discussion with three experts: sustainable food entrepreneur Larry Bain, small-farming pioneer Judith Redmond and renowned American chef, Bradley Ogden.

If yesterday was designed for the pragmatist, today is for the intellectual. Our panelists are well-versed, policy-hounding advocates of sustainability, discussing Americans' constitutional right to good food in one breath and government

over-regulation of family farmers in the next.

"We can't take the cost of food out of farmers' hides," says Larry Bain, who took sustainability to the street with "Let's Be Frank" hot dogs in San Francisco. "The money has to come from somewhere."

Redmond asserts that sophisticated organizational support is the only answer to insurmountable regulatory barriers. Ogden's perspective is closer to the kitchen. "As a chef, I don't shop locally to 'pave the way.' I do it because I care."

The discussion works us up into a frenzy that can only be calmed by – what else? – foot-long hot dogs. "It's an affordable work of art – my haiku on a bun," quips Bain. "There are no VIPs in front of a big weenie."

The last day of P2P is for the conscious gourmet. It's the SLOcavore Party, offering more delectable goodies from farmers, chefs, and wineries than I know what to do with. There is a layered Labyrinth Pinot Noir, sweet Italian sausages from Charter Oak Meats, berry tarts in cardamom crusts from Two Cooks Catering, shepherd's pie from Margan Loring, and – my personal favorite – a roasted beet risotto cake from Catering Unlimited. Or is it the ginger snap ice cream sandwich from Full of Life Flatbread?

After two hours, attendees are shuffling wide-eyed from booth to booth in a local-food-induced stupor. Snagging someone between bites of fruit tart, I ask her impression of this year's P2P. "It's the best yet!" she grins, displaying a patchwork of sustainably-farmed strawberry in her teeth.

We should all be so lucky.

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