Grown in Miami

Miami’s burgeoning urban farming scene turns forsaken land into farm-to-table excellence, and offers both growers and diners more than just an exquisite meal.

By Bill Kearney

Photography by Mary Beth Koeth
OCEAN DRIVE

Page 2

Just west of Miami International Airport, planes roar overhead while cars and trucksumble by on a nearby overpass. But wedged between two shipping warehouses is row after resplendent row of potted plants, 50 kinds in all—Thai basil, Salanova lettuce, pungent Mexican hoja santa, and the new hybrid Brussels Kale. Walk 10 yards and you pass through layers of aromas from winter tarragon to mint and lavender.

At any one time, there are between 20,000 and 50,000 plants growing in this vacant, one-acre industrial strip that, until six years ago, was an abandoned railroad track. Now it’s part of an organic farming operation run by Rock Garden, a produce shipping company. The plot also doubles as an educational landscape for the nonprofit Miami GROW Project (short for Green Railroad Organic Workshop) run by Thi Squire. “GROW is about turning a situation where you would never think you could grow an edible, and making it work,” says Squire.

“Making it work” is the essence of urban farming, which is currently popping up throughout Miami’s burgeoning food scene. In South Florida, GROW and a handful of other small plots that make up Miami’s urban farm movement are producing leafy greens that will end up on plates at forward-leaning restaurants such as Michael’s Genuine Food & Drink, The Dutch, Tongue & Cheek, BLT Steak, and any of the Pubbykett spots, as well as in markets like Miami’s in Coconut Grove, the Upper East Side Farmers Market, and a growing group of CSAs (community supported agriculture), which dole out regular deliveries of fresh produce to members.

Miami’s urban farming has grown and found an audience as our restaurant scene moves away from showy South Beach joints to more eclectic, artisanal, and locally focused eateries on the mainland. Chef Michael Schwartz of Michael’s Genuine Food & Drink was one of the first to forge relationships with local organic farms in Homestead such as Paradise Farms and Bee Heaven Farm. To do so, he helped create, at least in Miami, the concept of restaurant food foragers, who act as a liaison between small area growers and chefs looking for local goods.

As foragers started seeking more and more sources, they found urban farmers, including GROW, whose genesis came out of a quest for certified organic grower of micro greens for the US. Kroger, America’s largest supermarket chain, has just picked up Rock Garden’s microgreens and is shipping them nationally. Chris Padin, who forages for all of Michael Schwartz’s properties as well as other restaurants, says, “When we started, we had a tough time breaking through, but in the last three years we’ve seen a lot more farm-to-table chefs pop up. It’s definitely on the rise.”

Drive north of the relatively domesticated El Portal and North Miami on NE Sixth Avenue and you’ll eventually notice a neighborhood that somehow seems more rural. Through an unmarked gate is Little River Market Garden. Unlike industrial Rock Garden, this plot feels more like Costa Rica, Jungle encroaches at the edges, dragonflies dart about, and what appears to be a free-range toddler wobbles through rows of lettuce, making a beeline for a mulberry bush. Farmer and mom Muriel Oliva scoops up the child, Bimini, and lets both of us pick a berry. It’s warm from the sun and tastes succulent and vibrant. “Bimini can just walk around here and eat,” says Oliva. “She knows what’s edible and what’s not.”

Oliva, who leases this three-acre plot, grew up in Miami and worked as a florist, but left the industry over concerns about toxic chemicals. Now she and friend Tiffany Noé use permaculture techniques to farm about half an acre here. That means no tractors, but rather doing everything by hand, so there’s no carbon footprint other than what it takes to drive to the Upper East Side Farmers Market 90 blocks to the south. Tractor-friendly monoculture drains the soil of nutrients; by contrast, their hand-planted and hand-harvested farm looks more hodgepodge. In between tomatoes, they grow beans; between slow-growing parsley, there’s quick-growing radishes.

As a means of moneymaking, urban farming is literally and figuratively a tough row to hoe.
Olvpere's crops go to her CSA and to the Upper East Side Farmers Market, run by the Urban Oasis Project. Noé’s crops also go to the farmers market, as well as to Mandalin Aegaean Bistro. “Small urban farmers can’t provide the convenience that a big distributor can, so for a restaurant that’s really busy, it’s hard for them to make the time,” says Olvpere. “My first target is retail price, which is the average consumer at the farmers market. Whatever I can’t sell through that avenue, I try to sell to Proper Sausages, Zak the Baker, Michael’s Genuina, and Meat on Heels, which is a nonprofit organization that does events and dinners locally.” Olvpere makes a “modest” living from the CSA, and her significant other has a job. Noé pulls a salary from Mandalin and has a business called Plantmater, which helps people and restaurants install and maintain small growing spaces for their own fruit and flowers. Even so, the women are looking to expand to an additional plot.

While Olvpere and Noé are considered leaders in the recent urban farm upswing, another farm making a run of it is the one-third-acre Little Haiti Community Garden, run by Gary Feinberg and Tamara Hendron. With boyish enthusiasm, Feinberg offers up a leaf of the aptly named wasabi arugula, which packs a wicked but fun punch, and a bud he calls “toothache.” A nibble sparkles on the tongue like powdered lemon Pop Rocks. Feinberg co-owns Brownes & Co., a full-service salon and spa in the Design District and South Beach, and started the garden as a hobby on a vacant lot that was once used for a restaurant. To avoid contaminated soil, he spent a year remediating the dirt, putting down a layer of cardboard and topping the entire lot with 15 inches of new soil and mulch. He now runs it as a permaculture operation with no tillage, which would release valuable carbon. In 2011 he acquired nonprofit status and received a grant from the Miami Dolphins Foundation, which allowed him to hire a part-time employee, Prevenal Julian, who came from Haiti after the earthquake. With Julian’s help, their own daily labor, and selling to spots such as Essence Restaurant + Lounge, Crunch on Park North, and Harry’s Pizza, Feinberg and Hendron say the garden is now self-sustaining.

To date, Miami lags behind other cities’ urban farm movements as there are not a lot of growers and not a lot of plots. “The urban farm scene has been small, but it’s about to explode,” says Bill Squire, Th’s husband. The explosion he’s excited about is a new, outsized urban farm called Verde Community Farm and Market in Homestead. At 22 acres, it’s vastly larger than any urban farm in the region, if not the country, and could expand to twice that size. And it’s all thanks to Hurricane Andrew.

After the devastating storm in 1992, the housing and recreational complex for the Homestead Air Force Base was abandoned. “I would say that 100 acres was flattened,” says Squire, the director of the farm’s community outreach. The base was downsized, and the land sat for 20 years, overgrown with 10-foot-tall cane grass. Then, a couple of years ago, the federal government gave about 50 acres to the Miami-Dade County Homeless Trust and affordable housing developer CarDour Supportive Housing. They brought in the Urban Oasis Project to run a 22-acre organic farm.

The results are an urban farm, in that it’s reclaimed land but on the scale of a suburban development. The project also includes a 4,000-square-foot farmers’ market and restaurant, and housing for formerly homeless families, whose adults will work on the farm and in the market and restaurant. At press time, Squire and his team had cleared five of the 22 acres, and by the September planting season, all 22 will be working. Some of the vegetables will show up in the kitchens of the Baptist Health System, but lots will end up on plates in trendy Miami restaurants.

Restaurants in Miami are not only buying produce through foragers; they’re also now planting and growing their own. Esensia has a garden, as do Lorenzo and Ricky Thai Bistro in North Miami Beach, too, such as The Broken Shaker and Blackbird Ordinary, have herb gardens. The eatery that’s made the biggest commitment, though, is Mandalin Aegaean Bistro, whose owners, husband and wife Ahmet Erkaya and Anastasia Koutsiouka, converted a 3,000-square-foot lot behind the restaurant into an intensive garden managed by Tiffany Noé.

The garden is too small to serve all of Mandalin’s needs, but it’s potent. They pick their produce at 9 AM and serve it within hours. “My favorite reaction is when people order our field green salad. Everyone says, ‘Oh my God, what’s this dressing? It’s so peppery and delicious.’ And it’s not the dressing, it’s the ingredients,” says Koutsiouka.

The access to a living (but limited) garden has pushed creativity. “Tiffany will tell our chefs what will be available, and we create a dish around it—keeps us on our toes,” says Koutsiouka. For example, the sweetness of its Sungold tomatoes prompted the team to pair them with a salted cheese, grilled haloumi—a match they might not have dreamed up otherwise, but it was a smart hit. “It’s a huge investment, but the payback comes from the excitement from our patrons,” she says. “They want to walk back and see the garden. It creates a message. It allows you to appreciate what you’re putting into your body. This is about being connected to the food we’re creating.”

Stull, urban farming is difficult. Why get your hands dirty? Why fight for zoning variances? Why go through the hassle of changing the menu every day and buying locally? “Forme, it’s the common-sense approach—keeping the money in the state and supporting small businesses,” says Schwartz. “Having the food travel less, so we’re using less energy. How it tastes. It goes back to knowing where your food comes from. If you’re eating stuff that just came out of the ground, chances are it’s going to taste better.”

It might be that in this digital epoch of virtual connections, we’re beginning to crave visceral connections, a privileged class craving the artisanal, the noncommercial, the one-of-a-kind. “It’s the beautiful contrast of Miami,” says Koutsiouka, whose restaurant is steps away from the luxe-intensive Design District. “We have both of the luxuries: Being able to eat food from a garden, harvested that day, is just as luxurious as buying a hand-stitched bag. There’s no difference.”

The Mandolin kitchen garden salad with wild edible greens.