

# Farm to Menu



Chef Byron Gomez is fired up about using local ingredients in the kitchen at 7908.

Chef/farmer partnerships connect locally harvested food to Aspen's restaurants.

By Ali Margo

*“You can’t trust food when you don’t know where it comes from.”*

— Robin Humble

When Chef Byron Gomez witnessed the first crop of spring garlic being harvested last April at the Colorado Rocky Mountain Permaculture Institute, he immediately ran back to his kitchen at 7908 Aspen and whipped up a colorful compound butter with spring garlic tops and pickled Fresno chilis. He preserved other ingredients he’d acquired at CRMPI too, making a compote from the Brazilian cherries and kumquats and artfully lining the shelves of his pantry with colorful ingredients in labeled glass jars.

“What’s important to me as a chef is to get excited about an ingredient and let that inspire me creatively to make a dish that is unique and tastes



A portrait of purple basil grown by Jerome Osentowski for a local restaurant.

really good,” says Gomez, who came to Aspen two years ago from top restaurants in New York City and has recently garnered national exposure competing in Season 18 of “Top Chef” on Bravo TV.

It’s precisely this kind of discovery—local, seasonal, and other quality ingredients sourced from a remote farm on Basalt Mountain—that makes a true collaboration between farmer and chef the proverbial secret sauce for many chefs in the Roaring Fork Valley.

“I thought for sure he was going to come up here and want me to grow specific crops of specialized products he thought he would need for his menu,” says CRMPI Founder and Director Jerome Osentowski, who

previously hadn’t worked with a restaurant for almost 10 years. “Instead, he got so excited about what he found here that it’s going to be the other way around. He let my crops inspire his menu.”

Farmer/chef partnerships in the Roaring Fork Valley have evolved in recent years with an ever-growing interest in local food. What began a couple decades ago when Mark Fischer introduced farm-to-table as a restaurant concept at Six89 in Carbondale and Chef Ryan Hardy purchased a Crawford farm to exclusively grow food for his kitchen at The Little Nell has become an industry standard for many local restaurants. A proliferation of local producers has made that connection even easier: specialty farms like Sustainable Settings in Carbondale and Two Roots Farm in Basalt, local ranches including Nieslanik Beef, dairies (Avalanche Cheese Company has a farm in Paonia and creamery in Basalt), and food distributors such as Farm Runners, which delivers custom-harvested products year round throughout the Western Slope.

“My respect for local farmers continues to grow,” says Robin Humble, co-owner of Free Range Kitchen & Wine Bar in Basalt, who has partnered Executive Chef Chris Krowicki with Erin’s Acres Farm in Carbondale for sourcing and for special farm-to-table dinners and events. “Their heart is in it. Their eyes are on it. They’re touching it with their own hands, caring for the animals, for their crops. That is their pride and joy. That is their baby.”

A breast cancer survivor, Humble developed an interest in local and organic food for personal health reasons, but as a restaurateur it became a responsibility to others. Her philosophy is simple: “You can’t trust food when you don’t know where it comes from,” she says.

For Gomez, the partnership with CRMPI’s Osentowski is exclusive, giving him access to year-round tropical gardens that produce exotic fruits and other ingredients not readily available in the Rocky Mountains. It also gives Gomez peace of mind after COVID-19 and local wildfires disrupted the supply chain last year. Most of all, it’s about sharing that love and passion for food.

“I think people who leave a mark in this world have something special like Jerome,” Gomez says. “He is so passionate about his crops, and I can relate to that. It’s a privilege just to get to know him, let alone work with him.”

## Find It

Find more Roaring Fork Valley restaurants that use local, seasonal ingredients in *Edible Aspen’s Spring 2021 issue. The Local Food Source Guide in that issue also lists the farms and ranches that supply them.*