

### Vegetables Come to Center Stage at McCrady's

I was lucky enough to grow up in Wise County, in the southwestern corner of Virginia. Life is still quite rural there, and the family garden is a very important part of life for most everyone. The food we ate came from those gardens – we never went to restaurants for dinner, not even for special occasions.

As a boy, I could often be found wandering through my grandmother's garden, eating anything that I could get my hands on – so much so that my mother likes to tell people that I “teethed on a stalk of rhubarb.” Growing up in an atmosphere so rooted to the earth gave me a deep appreciation for vegetables. Perhaps more than anything else, that's why I'm a chef today.

To many people, the vegetables in a meal are an afterthought – not the focus, but merely a side dish to accompany a nice piece of fish or steak. At McCrady's, we see vegetables differently. We actually write our menus and create dishes around what is currently coming out of the ground.

We have spent the last year establishing relationships with local farmers and buying everything we can at the farmers' markets. For us, this means more than just getting delicious vegetables. It also allows us to know where our products come from and who takes care of them.

Now we're looking to take this idea even further, and start our own kitchen garden. Our goal is to become a completely sustainable restaurant, at least as far as vegetables are concerned. In time, we'd like to be in a position where every vegetable we serve comes directly from our gardens.

We'd like to acquire a small farm, say three to five acres, and hire a full-time farmer to raise vegetables for us. We're already looking at several pieces of land, and reading every seed catalog we can find. I also hope to have each of the cooks at McCrady's take an active role on the farm, probably working there one shift each week in season.

Several of us are already growing vegetables in small gardens at home, and everyone is finding that taking care of vegetables changes our approach to cooking. When you push a carrot seed into the ground and stare at it for sixty days waiting for it to grow, you look at that carrot differently when it finally makes its way into the kitchen.

We're constantly brainstorming new ways to cook vegetables, too. As a young cook, I learned how to blanch vegetables from Thomas Keller's [Big Pot Blanching](#). In fact, I could probably recite the page number in the French Laundry cookbook, and go into great detail about why this method was used.

Today, however, things are much different. Big pot blanching is nearly obsolete in McCrady's kitchen. Instead, we've discovered many new ways to cook our vegetables, including pressure cookers and vacuum chambers. We're very big on the idea of cooking vegetables in their own juices instead of water.

There is incredible pride that comes along with cooking and serving something that you have personally taken care of. I hope that our guests at McCrady's will enjoy eating the vegetables we grow as much as we enjoy growing and preparing them. As we near the completion of this project, we're getting very excited about what it will add to the future of the restaurant.

In the family gardens back home, the knowledge and seeds are always passed down from one generation to the next. I visited there just a couple of days ago, and brought some of our family's seeds with me to help us get our gardens started. And of course, in keeping with tradition, we'll save seeds for the next generation, too.

---

Here's a easy recipe for a flavorful pesto that works well with just about everything. We especially like it with farm-fresh tomatoes.

### **Arugula Pesto**

¾ bag of arugula  
3 roasted garlic bulbs  
150 grams parmesan cheese  
100 grams toasted pine nuts  
1 gram xanthan gum  
Salt and black pepper  
250 ml grapeseed oil  
100 ml olive oil

Place everything except the oils into a blender and puree. When mixture is smooth, slowly incorporate the oils. Drizzle over just about any dish, and enjoy.