

LODGING



Ocean House Forages for Farm-to-Table Fare

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The Ocean House, a five-star seaside resort in Watch Hill, R.I., is a foodie's paradise. The resort offers a myriad of activities, from fitness classes to croquet clinics, but its farm-to-table culinary program forges a true connection to coastal New England.

For president and managing director Daniel Hostettler, it was imperative the resort practice true farm-to-table sourcing. The Ocean House has a dedicated "food forager," chef Paul McComiskey, who acts as a liaison between the resort's chefs and local farmers. Dealing with small, individual purveyors is much more complicated than writing one big check to a major foodservice distributor, but Hostettler says he wanted to take an all-in approach. "So many people talk about farm-to-table and don't necessarily practice it. To me, it was important that if we were going to do it, we were going to do it right."

The resort's F&B options include Seasons, a fine-dining restaurant that exemplifies the farm-to-table concept, and The Bistro, which serves casual, seasonally inspired dishes. The Ocean House's sister property, the Weekapaug Inn, also serves farm-to-table cuisine at The Restaurant, which is intimate but not as formal as Seasons. In the summertime, the Ocean House opens The Verandah, an outdoor kitchen with a raw bar menu; Seaside Terrace, which offers sandwiches, salads, and other light fare adjacent to the pool; and Dune Cottage, a Mediterranean restaurant right on the beach.

Constantly changing menus to match the season is demanding for the chefs, which is why the food forager role has become invaluable to the property. While the position essentially began as an F&B purchaser, the food forager's responsibilities have since evolved to include culinary class instruction. "When we talked about farm-to-table, the guests wanted to go with the food forager to the farmers' markets and pick out the vegetables, go see the scallop boats coming in, or take a class to learn how to open an oyster," Hostettler explains.

The resort offers daily, complimentary culinary classes that not only provide an educational component for guests but also serve as a marketing vehicle for its restaurants. After taking a class, guests are more inclined to dine on property, rather than spending their dollars elsewhere, Hostettler says. Offering these free activities also justifies a higher room rate. "It started out as a way to keep the chefs honest and make sure we were really farm-to-table, and it has developed over time into an experience-building and revenue-producing opportunity," Hostettler says. The resort leverages the talents of its existing staff as instructors for the classes, which range from shaking up a mean martini with the bartender to making a soufflé with the pastry chef. "You're using resources that are already on property to create experiences for the guest," Hostettler says.

The classes became so popular, the resort team decided to build a permanent space for educational activities, the Center for Wine & Culinary Arts. They took the last bit of unused real estate on the garage level of the hotel and created a 3,000-square-foot space with two display wine cellars and an all-induction kitchen designed by Gaggenau, Hostettler describes. Approximately six to 12 guests can partake in free classes three times a day at the venue, which opened in mid-July, but they can also participate in more in depth, two-hour classes for a fee. The paid classes cost between \$50 and \$95 and range from preserve-making to barbecue cooking. The space also has a dining table for hosting Farm & Vine dinners, during which up to 12 guests can interact with the featured chef and sommelier as their meal is prepared. At \$300 to \$400 per person, these dinners provide an additional stream of revenue for the resort. "You would expect something with that price tag to not to sell quite as often, but it's just been enormously well received by the guests," he says.

In addition to these dinners, Ocean House offers a series of Farm & Vine classes, which cost closer to \$300 and are held over the course of a weekend. For these classes, Ocean House enlists local purveyors as guest instructors, such as a cheesemaker who teaches guests how to make mozzarella. The resort also hosts special monthly dinners that shine the spotlight on a featured farmer, who gets a chance to share his or her story while a visiting chef prepares a meal using the purveyor's items. "It's a way to pay tribute to the fact that we really are farm-to-table, but it's also a way to be different, so it's not just another visiting chef and vintner dinner," Hostettler says. "And the farmers love it."

Guests crave local experiences, and The Ocean House is in the business of creating those experiences. "Guests really want to immerse themselves into the culture of the area," Hostettler says. "So if you're deep in an agricultural region like we are, then it makes sense that you would embrace that."
