

The Dish: Q-and-A: Ocean House and Weekapaug Inn Food Forager



Chef Paul McComiskey, the Ocean House and Weekapaug Inn food forager.

What does it mean to be a food forager?

We try to source everything we can within 150 miles of the properties: the Ocean House, the Weekapaug Inn, the Watch Hill Inn and our new venture in Mystic, Connecticut, Spicer Mansion. That 150 miles covers all of Rhode Island, Connecticut, Massachusetts and parts of upstate New York and southern parts of New England. A big part of the sourcing has to do with the locale of the item and the vision of the farmers who are raising the animals or growing the produce. Once in awhile, we go outside that 150-mile radius, but that's usually because we found something exclusive and in line with what we look for with our farmers. A big part of my day-to-day activities is finding out where these food producers are within the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic. I guess you could say I'm the match.com between farmers and chefs. I find the best of the best of what's out there, what's in season and talk to the chefs about it.

What was a cool item that you found and used in the menus?

There's a farmer in Exeter, Rhode Island, who had strawberry blossoms that were just starting to come out. They were dead-heading, which means they were pulling the blossoms off the plants in hopes that they would get more robust and produce a larger fruit. I visited the farm and asked what they did with the blossoms. They said normally they just throw them away. I talked to chef Jacob at the Ocean House and he was very interested. So I called them and asked if we could pick up the strawberry blossoms. It was something unique for spring. It fit right in line with our restaurant and seasonality.

What makes you excited about your job?

There is nothing I like more than walking into the restaurant and kitchen with a bag or box containing some interesting food items. I love seeing the chefs get excited and watching the gears turn in their heads about how they are going use it on the menu.

So you travel to farms and visit food producers and make personal connections?

It's important for us to know our farmers. There are the bumper stickers you see all the time that say "No Farms, No Food." It's a great sentiment and something I agree with completely. We all need to support the local farms. What's also important is to know your farms and how they are practicing their farming: If they're being sustainable, if they are practicing rotational planting. That's a big part of what I do. I am more than happy to talk to the farmer on the phone, do a visit and then I find out from there if they are in line with the expectations we have for our farms.

I know every day is not the same but can you describe a typical day?

Not only am I the food forager, but I am also the director of culinary education at the Ocean House. There's no such thing as a typical day. Some days I am running around to different farms and farmers markets, stopping by the dockside, picking up oysters or dairy farms picking up cheese. There are other days when I am in the Center for Culinary Arts at the Ocean House, our wine and culinary education center. I might be in that kitchen all day running daily classes and resort activities for our guests. There are private dinners that I do. Being the director of culinary education not only applies to the guests but also our young staff in the culinary department at the Ocean House. It really falls on my shoulders to educate them and keep them up to date with what we're using and where we are buying from.

What can guests experience for classes in the summer?

I have one class that is dedicated completely to tomatoes. The tomatoes we get come from Hillandale Farm in Westerly, White Gate Farm in East Lyme, Connecticut, and Our Kids Farm in Exeter. It's one of those summer food items in the Northeast that has become so diverse. We can go through hundreds of pounds of tomatoes within a two-day period at the Ocean House in the summertime. I like to dedicate at least one of my classes once or twice a week to talking about the different varieties, the places where we get them and how they've become a cornerstone of summer cuisine in New England. Another class I do is on pickling and preserving. That's toward the end of the summer when we look at crops that are starting to wean out. We like to start preserving summer produce because we are not able to get it in winter, especially when we are trying to be farm to table. Sometimes you want to be able to use cucumbers or tomatoes in the winter or have radishes around Thanksgiving. July and August are good times to start preserving. I feel like it's a lost art and people don't realize that there are just a couple techniques they can master easily. There are ways to do it now that are safe and foolproof.

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