

Newsletter Is... Sustainability



VILLA GUSTO
la dolce vita

The Gourmet Debate:

Can a restaurant truly be sustainable today?

In an era where food is sometimes the expression of a fad rather than a culinary experience and some chefs opt to gimmick instead of gourmet their offerings, where supermarkets bombard the consciousness of consumers with glossy, genetically enhanced, mass-market produce, and TV chefs push the barrow of fast food chains, a question should be asked: can an eatery really be sustainable with its fruit and veggie supply? And, perhaps just as relevant: is sustainability even viable today?



Our answer is a resounding double...Yes! (with a serious qualifier)

The qualifier is the easy part. A restaurant on the main street of a major city, squeezed between high-rise towers, with minimal floor space, traffic and passer-by congestion, can't expect to be self-sustaining. There's simply too many other tides to battle, just to get the plate to the table. Yet, it is refreshing when an interesting organic vegetable or rare meat product appears on an up-town specials' board. Not just to enhance a menu but a way to divert a few dollars into the hands of a shrinking population of food artisans. Such a gesture could be seen as a spirited attempt to be a tad sustainable.



But... take that same restaurant and tuck it away in a cutesy country town surrounded by rolling hills and fresh, sweet, air. Surely it could.... indeed it should grow some of its own produce! Even if just a few fists of herbs hanging from a planter box off the back fence, or a half dozen tomato plants beside an old out-house? Or a mini grove of basil or parsley in a corner of the car park? ...anything!



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With sustainability a buzzword in kitchens, particularly country kitchens, there are still only a sprinkling of chefs and owners who can write 'homegrown' on their dining room chalkboards. (Most opt for sourcing their produce from local suppliers, albeit a level or two higher than a supermarket). With a little more effort they could make a world of difference. And let's be honest, the travelling public today know their stuff; they know what's real, and what's mass-produced. They're jaded at the sight of pesky oval stickers on their wax sprayed fruit. They want the 'sustainable' experience. And they don't mind a tiny organic spot on their radicchio leaf! It's the 'homegrown' they seek.

Villa Gusto strives to grow its own produce; we currently have in our garden: globe artichokes, strawberries, asparagus, beans, rhubarb, radicchio, broccoli, rainbow beets, beetroot, zucchini, eggplant, silver beet, spinach, red onions, mint, nasturtiums and marigolds.

As well as herbs: parsley, thyme, marjoram, sage, chives, rosemary, basil & garlic. We also have thirty Ox-heart tomato plants and a bathtub full of cherry tomatoes and snow peas. Oh, and five chestnut trees, several mature nectarines and plum trees, limes and lemons and.... what we don't grow we buy from local farmers or pick from the plentiful array of exotic fruit trees along our country laneway, such as the wild figs, dogwood and quinces.



Then there's our chooks, each named after a spice: Ginger, Poppy, Nutmeg, Cinnamon, Rosemary, Anise, Marjoram, and Szechuan. These girls are tossing eight eggs a day into our kitchen, reserved for chef Emma Handley's gelato, torte and canoli creations.



Sustainability nurtures a unique 'food' team environment, a hands-on experience not available on a main street. Our Villa manager, Alison (the driving force) designs our garden beds, selecting the produce based on seasonality and kitchen needs. She and Emma oversee the 'production' and (ultimately) the weekly harvest. Even our apprentice chef, Jordon spends five hours a week getting his hands dirty, tending the plants, learning about 'slow food'. And each Thursday to Sunday our produce appears on our plates. And, our kitchen scraps feed the chooks and we only use fresh mountain water from Devils Creek. It's hard work...sure... but it makes a difference to our menus... and our important clients.

So... can a gourmet food outlet truly be sustainable? Of course it can... if it tries, just a little! Come for a drive and see for yourself.

La dolce vita! Colin.



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