

CHEFS

The Work of a Farmer: Creating a Menu from the Ground Up



A juicy grass-fed burger. A pour of Cabernet Sauvignon. The perfect arugula salad. What do all of these have in common? The touch of a farmer. Welcome to [The Work of a Farmer](#), an inside look at the people driving the farm-to-table movement, brought to you by [Tom Gore Vineyards](#).

Though we're used to hearing the phrase "farm to table," it is one of the most evocative ways to describe a style of cooking. It's a story in three words: It describes the place in which the vegetables, meat, and dairy were created, their short journey to the restaurant where they're being used, and their destiny as a component in a meal. It can be used to describe a fine dining experience, a local snack bar, and even wine. But it always defines one thing: the intimate relationship between the farmer and the person transforming the farmer's hard work.



Sometimes, however, the lines between farmer and maker are blurred. This is the case at Earth at Hidden Pond, a hyper-seasonal restaurant on a cabin resort in Kennebunkport, Maine. **Justin Walker** is the executive chef at Earth but also runs a 13-acre farm with his wife, **Danielle**, that provides a wide range of ingredients to the restaurant, from heirloom tomatoes to honey to goat's milk. Though it's a small operation in comparison to more industrial farms, its existence is essential to Justin's culinary vision, which hinges on specialty produce and heirloom varieties that are otherwise difficult to find in the area.



The result? Dishes like local seafood paella with English peas and pea greens; Pizza with goat ricotta, lobster mushrooms, and roasted garlic; Wood-fired mussels with goat whey bread, wood nettles, pickled nectarine, and ricotta salata. Though all the food is locally sourced at Earth, only about five to ten percent comes from Justin and Danielle's farm—a farm that's been in Danielle's family for 100 years. It's that small portion, however, that truly makes the restaurant's dishes special. Aside from simply not having the capacity to fully supply the restaurant with produce from the couple's farm, Justin doesn't feel the need to grow everything he serves at Earth. "I can buy beautiful field tomatoes all over York County, where we live, so I don't need to grow them," he says. "I'd rather grow something that I can't find."



Together, Justin and Danielle choose fruits and vegetables that they can cultivate and showcase within a dish but also have some longevity. "Chiles are great because they take all summer long to grow, and then we can preserve them," Justin explains. "Garlic is another good one because you can lacto-ferment it or preserve it in other ways so we can use it for months instead of just using it up right away." Other things they're currently growing include brussels sprouts, San Marzano tomatoes, and chard, Danielle explains. "We still have a second round of peas and shell beans—after the summer months we plant them again because they like the cold weather. Fire beans and all the trellising beans always look so pretty and full."

The two also have test plots, where they experiment with growing a small crop to see if it will work on a larger scale the following year. "We planted Oaxacan green corn, which is a variety that you dry to make a corn meal," says Justin. If that works out and the restaurant uses it to make pasta or bread, they'll put in a bigger crop next year. "It's all about planning ahead and using the plots we can use and do at home to supply a dish or two, or many parts of a dish for as long of a period as possible."



Because of its hyper seasonality—and because Hidden Pond closes during the cold months—Earth is only open six months out of the year. Justin and Danielle view this as a good thing. "It gives us time to step away from the restaurant and see it from a different perspective," says Danielle, explaining that this distance allows them to fully evaluate what worked and what didn't. "We have the luxury of having time to step away from growing produce in the winter, as well." It's during these months that they plan exactly what they'd like to grow—and what they'd like to test—the following season. It's also the time where Danielle focuses on animal husbandry. "We live on the farm year round when they take up animal husbandry." "We have three dozen dairy goats, and we have a dozen of them milking now. We make a goat ricotta, and Justin uses the whey in a goat-whey bread. I make a beautiful soap with whatever we don't use."



Both Danielle and Justin understand that the role of the farmer is as important as the role of the chef. They also acknowledge how lucky they are to have both a chef's and a farmer's mentality in one team. "If you talk to a farmer and ask him to plant San Marzano tomatoes, he'd be, like, 'what?'," says Justin. "They just want to plant field tomatoes because they grow well and produce a great yield." This, of course, makes sense: Full-time farmers want to make a profit on their crops, not grow a specialty item for a chef. "Having control over our produce is great because we can grow exactly what we want—things we can't get anywhere else."