

A Chef's Secret to Great Food – Keep it Real

By Julie Hunter

Southern Utah is home to many restaurants though relatively few chefs. National chains with corporate-set menus and often pre-packaged ingredients tend to dominate the restaurant scene here, as they do throughout America. Though most of us have a favorite dish somewhere among the offerings, we all know that the craft and quality will always be higher in a restaurant created and helmed by a creative chef.

What's the secret to creating dishes that stand out? Long time chef Randall Richards, co-owner with wife Nicki of the Painted Pony, as well as their pub-style restaurant George's Corner (across Ancestor Square), has a dedicated following of foodies spanning from Los Angeles to Aspen and has earned a bevy of local, regional and national awards. His answer to this is simple: Keep it real.

"We improve and expand our menus by improving and expanding our ingredient control," Richards said and explained that the volume and uniqueness of the flavor an ingredient imparts is proportional to how and when it was produced. "Using organic, seasonally harvested food in dishes whenever possible is so important to the quality of the menu," Richards said. He and Nicki began an acre garden several years ago to grow herbs and produce for the restaurants, and have established relationships with many organic growers. They also started the Downtown Farmers Market in Ancestor Square eight years ago as an offshoot of their sourcing for the restaurants. "Nicki and I have always had a strong connection to and appreciation for the environment, and that has been at the center of what we have created with our restaurants and also with the farmers market."

Freshness is also a big part of the equation when it comes to dishes that are a cut above. Prepackaged or pre-prepared items lack the

flavor, nutrients and texture of its fresh counterpart so his restaurant kitchens are hopping often well before sunrise. "Above all for me is quality of flavor," he said. "We make our dishes from scratch at both restaurants so we start each day with a prep list that seems like it never ends. We're always chopping around here."

Richards is known for his ingredient-driven dishes that make multiple flavors and textures come together at once. The Painted Pony's apple stuffed, bacon wrapped roasted duck breast with its fresh celery root-infused potato puree is just one of several dishes there that allows diners to experience a flavor combination that is savory, sweet, rich and bright.

George's Corner may be pub style but it gets the same creative energy when it comes to flavors and ingredients. Randall's take on the classic veggie burger, for example, offers sweet bursts from locally grown organic sweet potatoes alongside earthy black beans, brown rice and shoestring onions. "We opened George's with a simple menu and over time we've swapped out ingredients with ones we've grown or produced ourselves or sourced from good, organic growers," he said.

The garden they maintain for the restaurants produces their heirloom tomatoes for seasonal salads as well as slicing tomatoes for burgers and sandwiches. In addition to the focus on tomatoes, they grow baby carrots, baby beets, turnips, cucumbers, parsley, chives, thyme, basil, mint and a variety of squash. They've added about forty chickens to lay farm fresh eggs for George's Corner breakfast menu and this year they plan to expand the pumpkin patch for a broader selection of fall squash.

Two restaurants, an acre garden and a flock of chickens equals a crazy amount of work, but in the end, it's worth it. "My favorite thing is eating in restaurants," he said. "This is what I love. My goal now is to figure out how to do more."

About the Author

Julie Hunter has lived in Southern Utah for the past 16 years. As a freelance writer, she has enjoyed many opportunities over the years to cover the community for St. George Health & Wellness, St. George Magazine, The Spectrum & Daily News, The Independent, and other area publications.

Chef Randall Richards leads his kitchen team through dinner at the Painted Pony.

