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Bruce Sherman of North Pond talks the bounty of spring

Posted By Michael Gebert on 04.08.15 at 01:30 PM



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Bruce Sherman at North Pond

MICHAEL GEBERT

North Pond and Green City Market are a natural pairing. They have been since 1999 when Bruce Sherman first arrived at the restaurant, which overlooks the pond at the northern end of Lincoln Park, and the market, now the city's highest-profile, was just a year old. Sherman's been a member of the market's board for years and a familiar presence, which makes him doubly influential over what you see at the farmer's market: he's a buyer and he helps select the farmers and products you'll find there. With the arrival of spring foods (beginning with ramps, rhubarb, and asparagus) just around the corner, it seemed a good time to talk with Sherman about what he looks forward to cooking with personally and how getting your produce at the Green City Market has evolved over the years.

Michael Gebert: So are you looking forward to seeing what new things farmers all have as the season begins this year?

Bruce Sherman: I am, but we're also sensitive to not hurting the farmers who have developed a market for something, who have been growing it and been market vendors for quite some time, and making

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sure they aren't surprised by everybody in the market suddenly having the same thing. Not penalizing them for growing it well over the years. More people are getting into the game, which is great. It's great for the community, whether it's the retail community or the wholesale community. The adage that a rising tide lifts all boats is great for the food scene in Chicago.

And that's been really fulfilling and rewarding to see that the scene has changed that much over the years, to improve the quality of what's available. Both availability and the quality of the products that are offered. It used to be if you could find an organic, sustainably grown, fill in the blank—celery root—it might be knobbly and dirty and just not very good quality. And people used to accept that, because it was grown to a higher standard. Everyone's come together to recognize that just because it's grown better and tastes better, it's not acceptable that it be ugly or be inconsistent. So now we're getting awesome, local, seasonal product that's grown to a high standard—it's graded, for those of us in the restaurant community who need it graded, and it's available to the community itself.

Tell me some of the first things that you were excited to have in the markets.

Way back in the day? I remember miniature carrots, miniature beets—or I should say "baby," because the miniature thing was a thing in itself, the adorable, miniature product that was so miniature it hadn't developed its characteristic taste. But it looked adorable on the plate!

But baby beets, baby head lettuce, baby carrots, working with specific

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farmers to get the product to a place where it had developed both flavor character and aesthetic character. With beets it was finding a variety of beets beyond the industrial-looking red beet—whether it was golden or white or Chioggia. Lettuce—it was like a Little Gem lettuce or a butter or a red bibb that we could put a half a head or a head on the plate, and that would be a nice serving. And carrots, it was getting a variety that had the girth and the developed flavor that we could use it whether we were glazing it or roasting it or even shaving it.

Years later they're commonplace in the market. And they're not only available, but they're available from any number of vendors. That's good for the vendors that there's a market—before there was a limited supply, and you had to know who to talk to.

It used to be that the mindset of the fine dining chef was, the value of the exclusivity of the product. It's the classic mindset of the French chef who takes secrets to the grave. Who wants to offer something else no one else can offer, because it makes him or her more powerful—he thinks. And that defeats, or goes contrary to, the purpose of sustainability. If I've got a farmer who's growing a specific product for me and nobody else can get it, I suppose it's great for me that people have to come to my restaurant to get it, but it does nothing for the farmer or for the economy to not broaden the base and ensure that that's going to be available in years to come. That's changed over time.

What about meats? How has the Green City Market changed the way the chefs who use it approach using meat?



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There's certainly more available locally than there used to be. Though it's a little bit different because there are certain regions more inclined to raise certain meats. Everyone knows and associates beef and pork with the midwest, but other things are harder to grow. But if you're talking about local, meats are absolutely more available now than they used to be. And people are much more sensible and knowledgeable about what questions to ask about their meat. How it's raised and what it eats and so on.

What hasn't happened yet—and I'm not sure it will happen—is more awareness of the seasonality of certain meats. Think about grass. If I have to serve beef all year—I don't have to, but commercially I have to—they're not slaughtered 24/7/365. If they're raised on pasture, the pastures have to be lush and growing and fertile. And that doesn't happen in the wintertime. At least there's been a huge step to get people to ask the questions they ask now—about hormones, how it's raised, how it's finished, do they spend any time in confinement. Heck, when we get to the point where the industrial fast-food players are considering where they source their eggs and what conditions the chickens are in—we wouldn't have comprehended that when we were younger!





MICHAEL GEBERT

It's easier for fish and aquaculture because they naturally have a season, or they spawn certain times of the year. An easy to grasp example is halibut or wild salmon, because those fisheries are managed so well that they have a season. But we're used to getting things that are ranched, like a chicken or a steer, all around the year because they can be grown anywhere.

Speaking of seafood, how do you think the market for midwestern seafood is developing?

Midwest seafood is Great Lakes seafood or aquaculture; it's great, it's delicious. But for me, at the level of this restaurant, it's hard because of the nature or lack thereof of the nobility of the product. I can do it more easily at brunch than dinner, whether it's trout or whitefish. I still do it when I can, but it's a little bit harder. When faced with a choice between whitefish and Alaskan halibut or John Dory or something . . . it's pretty clear to me what I would be ordering.

And it's hard sometimes to convince a whitefish eater that there's a way to do it besides fried, or broiled with onions. Try to do something fancy with it, and they're not interested! So a creative way to do it is to pair it with something that's higher on the food chain, I guess.

Turning to this year, has anything started to come in at this point?

Locally, no. I mean, there's some baby greens from some of the greenhouses. I just saw the rhubarb from my garden peek out for the first time. Typically the first thing we'll get is ramps, which have started in southern Indiana and northern Tennessee, and they'll move our way in the next few weeks. Then asparagus comes, rhubarb will come. So is there anything from the midwest yet? Not really.

On the other hand I'm much more interested in using spring product, seasonal product, than I am in local product. So I'm not going to wait for local product to start using it. For us the unveiling is traditionally the Easter menu, where we'll introduce asparagus and artichokes and green garlic. Which, to go back to your first question, is one of those things that was hard to find and I had to convince some farmer to grow it, and now it's not a problem.

But it's important for people to understand that for me, as long as I've been here at North Pond, it's always been seasonal first, local second. It's great when they dovetail, but as a cook I'm much too interested in cooking with great products even if they don't happen to be local.

But if you can get anything from around the world now, any time of year, how do you decide what's close enough to be seasonal?

I won't go—let me think about this before I make a sweeping generalization—it's *rare* that I would go outside the confines of the 50

states, because we grow it all here. Well, I should add Mexico as the 51st state! But if I can't get it there, chances are it's not in season and I don't need it. Looking at the calendar, I'd say, in season within the 50 states.

Is there any time that the farmers just show up at the market with something that you're like—what the hell do you do with this?

Oh, sure. Sometimes farmers will show up with stuff that we know what to do with it, and they didn't know if there was really a value to it. Sometimes they show up with stuff and we'll scratch our heads and say, *What were ya thinkin'?*

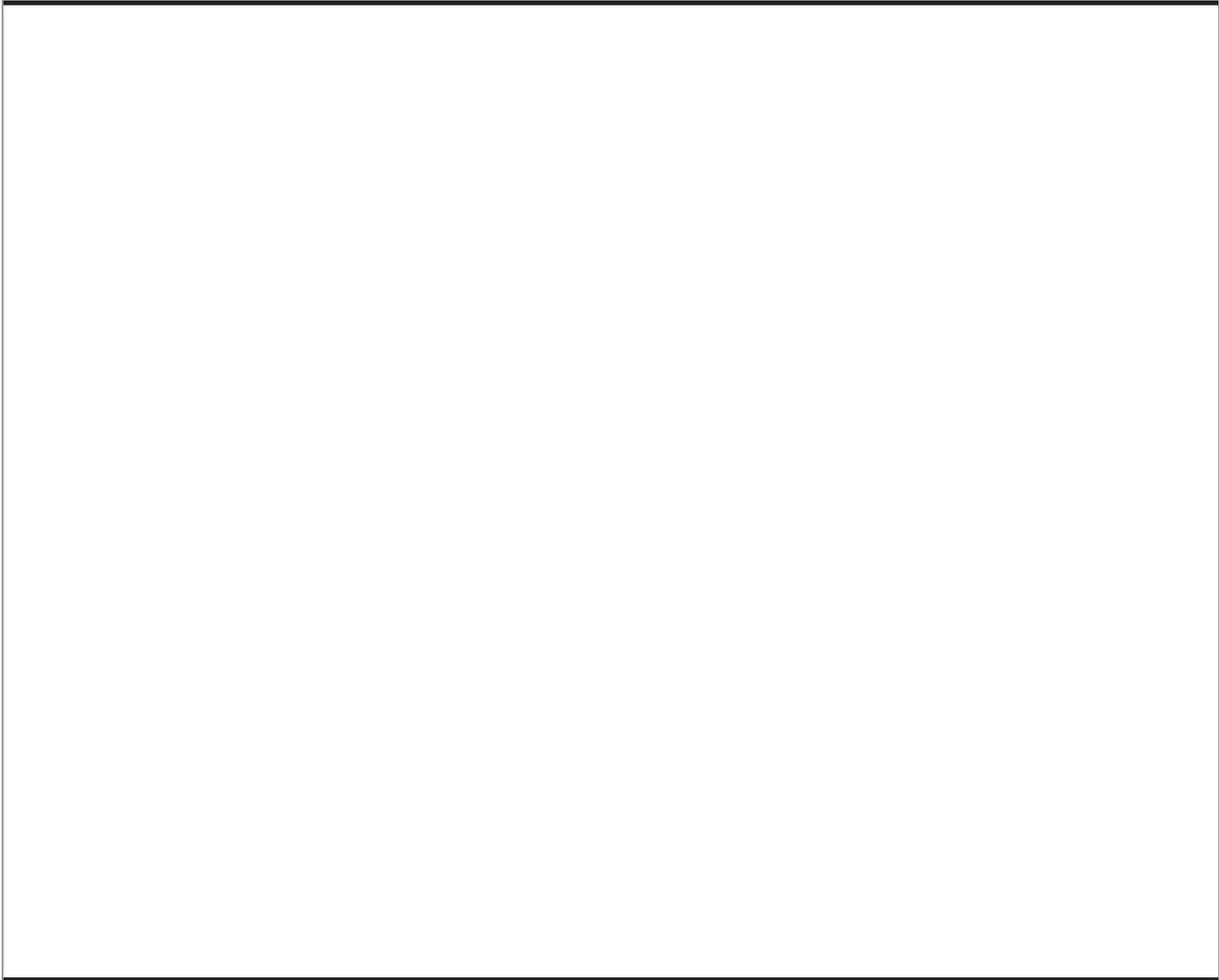
However, there is that contingent of cooks and chefs who want to be able to use something simply for the curiosity value of using it. I'm from the old school; I'll be like, why would you want to use that? But someone somewhere has cooked with anything and tried to make use of it, and there are places here that specialize in the wacky stuff. So yeah, people show up with stuff. It's just whether it's economically sustainable for that to keep growing it—

I was thinking more like fiddlehead ferns, which are cool looking but have no flavor, but always turn up on menus in the spring.

I'm completely with you on that. They're really cool looking, but they taste like slimy grass. So I'll pickle a fiddlehead because it covers up the taste. But I'm not a big fan. And if some of the guys want to bring them in I'm not averse to them, but they don't do anything for me.

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