

FOODSERVICE NEWS

Menu More

Urban Ag Lab Gives Chefs More Flavor Options

BY NANCY WEINGARTNER

4



Café Levain uses microgreens from Spark-Y to top its short ribs.

Café Levain buys three kinds of lettuce, microgreens, unripe strawberries for pickling, red-ribbon sorrel and, coming soon, wasabi, from Spark-Y, and in return, repays the nonprofit with food scraps to feed the “Urban Ag Lab’s” worms.

“Their stuff is less expensive and tastes better” than the suppliers to many four-star restaurants,” says Levain chef Jordan Young. “The watercress is some of the most peppery [I’ve tasted], and the red-ribbon sorrel is super lemony.” Immature strawberries are pickled as garnish or used as a sour contrast to the mature, sweetened strawberries already garnishing their shortcake. Compared to wild produce, the hydroponic-grown version is pure and the flavors are heightened, he adds.

Spark-Y is also open to growing other items, such as the expensive and sometimes hard to source, wasabi.

“They’re committed to getting it right,” he says about Spark-Y’s experiment with wasabi growing.

Minneapolis-based Spark-Y is more than just a vertical hydroponic garden in a 1,700-square-foot

office building. The 501(c)(3) organization is training Twin Cities youth to be leaders while enjoying a hands-on version of science and supplying schools with student-grown produce—all while solving ecological challenges, such as saving water and agricultural land. But what has attracted local chefs is the flavor-intense produce.

Adding the restaurant program to its youth-oriented mix was the idea of Spark-Y Operations Director Sam Menzies, who like the executive director of the program, Zachary Robinson, started as a volunteer and then designed his own job. Menzies joined the group in 2014 and after seeing the future of growing garnishes extraordinaire for local restaurants, it was decided he'd make it into a job, by supervising high schoolers to tend to the indoor crops and then 50 percent of what he sold, he could keep, Robinson says.



Spark-Y's Executive Director Zach Robinson inside the Urban Ag Lab.

The microgreens—primarily sunflower, radish and peas—take about 10 days to grow and sell for about \$25 per pound, says Robinson. Basil and edible flowers are two other popular crops. “The potential is there. This is just the tip of the iceberg,” he says of the restaurant program. Robinson refers to collecting the restaurants' food wastes as “captured calories.” It also saves the restaurants having to pay someone to haul it.

The crops are planted in lava rock or clay pellets that retain the water, and now a new product, Growstone, made from recycled glass. Water is cycled through the two tiers of plant beds (think bunk beds for plants). The lower level is stocked with Koi fish, whose contribution to the growing process is natural fertilizer. At some point the Koi will be replaced by tilapia, which can be sold to restaurants as well.

Scraps from restaurants are helping feed the containers filled with dirt and worms, but the egg shells are used in the hydroponic process to introduce calcium back into the plants' root systems, and floating bananas provide phosphorus. The soil is to eventually replace topsoil for outdoor farms. Coffee grounds are heaped into plastic bucket towers with holes cut into them for mushrooms to grow out of. “We're working on [getting] iron,” Robinson says, adding, “There's no waste stream in nature.”

And everything basks in the pink glow of LED lights, giving the room an eerie futuristic look.

The school program was founded in 2009 as an interdisciplinary curriculum enhancer. Through a partnership with 12 schools, Spark-Y teaches around 650 youngsters a year how to grow food, without abusing the limited resources of water and land. At Roosevelt High School in Minneapolis, the students participating in the project grow 60 pounds of kale and lettuce, which ends up in the salad bar the next day, Robinson says.

College students volunteer to help out in schools, along with retired engineers and other concerned citizens.

The program recently got a ringing endorsement: The Bluewater Leadership Project in Canada, with a headquarters in Minneapolis, just awarded a \$100,000 grant. Spark-Y beat out other projects around the world. What makes it especially gratifying—besides the money—Robinson says, is a jury made up of scientists who are global leaders in conservation and sustainability singled them out as doing good work.



On the menu at Café Levain: Lettuces grown at Spark-Y with hazelnut, olive, and tomato vinaigrette.

There is no shortage of ideas at the nonprofit. One, Robinson mentioned, is teaming up with another nonprofit that refurbishes donated pianos and using the shells that aren't needed as planters for gardens for public spaces.

They have a partnership with the University of Minnesota, as well as Tanglewood Gardens. Several restaurants are on board, and if the delicious salad I had at Café Levain is any indication, more restaurants should light up their menu with this Spark.

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