

# Unusual veggies find a home in French Laundry's organic garden

By Debbie Arrington, Sacramento Bee

While visiting France, restaurateur Thomas Keller nibbled a crunchy blue-leafed spinach that he'd never seen before. It tasted faintly like oysters – and Keller immediately texted his staff.

The French Laundry's garden got another addition.



Adam Keefer shows off baby carrots. Photo/Debbie Arrington/Sacramento Bee

“It took us a little while to track down the seed, but we got it,” said chef-turned-garden manager Adam Keefer, who oversees the French Laundry's large organic garden. “It's actually a succulent and only grows on the moors of Scotland.”

Now, the appropriately named oyster-leaf spinach is occasionally part of the menu at the famed Yountville restaurant, known for its nine-course meals with no repeats among the named ingredients. It's usually used to complement oysters or other seafood, accenting its own unusual flavor.

“It has a delicate blue flower in late summer,” Keefer noted. “It’s actually become one of my favorites.”

It’s just one of more than 300 varieties of vegetables, herbs, berries and edible flowers grown for Napa’s farm-to-fork landmark. With chefs just steps away, it’s the ultimate kitchen garden.

“How many people get to grow vegetables in a location like this?” said Keefer as he marveled at the Napa view.

With deep farming roots, Keefer came to the French Laundry to cook, but transitioned outdoors about four years ago.

“I started working out in the garden and just loved it,” he said. “My grandfather had a berry farm, so it’s in my genes. Gardening and culinary (work) are both part of the same genre; it’s the flip side of food.”

Located on 3 1/2 acres on Washington Street, the garden is open daily to the public. It supplies about 40 percent of all produce used by Keller’s three Yountville restaurants: French Laundry, Bouchon and Ad Hoc.

“People ask us if they can buy some, but we use it all up,” Keefer said. “If we tried to grow everything we used, we’d need all 3 acres just for onions.”

Instead, Keefer concentrates on unique taste sensations – such as the oyster-leaf spinach – or vegetables that lose flavor rapidly after harvest.

“Taste this arugula,” he instructed after sampling some himself. “It’s got this wonderful peppery bite you only get with fresh-picked. That totally disappears after only a few hours. Tomorrow, that bite is gone. But there are lots of other examples. Celery tastes different straight out of the ground.”

The manicured garden’s wide grass paths between the vegetable

beds accommodate restaurant patrons who wander over.

“We’re educational as well (as producing food),” Keefer said. “People come for dinner, then come back in the morning to the garden to see what they ate.”

Also getting an education are chefs.

“They learn seasonality,” Keefer said. “Chefs are always planning for the next hour, the next service, the next day. In the garden, you plan months ahead. A big part of what we do in the garden is teach chefs. They harvest with us, so they can truly appreciate what it takes to grow this food. It’s not just a commodity; it’s back-breaking hard work.”

Among the unusual vegetables growing this spring is cardoon, an artichoke cousin valued as a harbinger of spring. Celtuce, also known as stemmed Chinese lettuce, is just reaching its peak. A vast swath of fava beans replenishes the soil as well as flavors recipes.

White strawberries, which will ripen by summer, attract bees from nearby hives. A large bed of golden, black and red raspberries, brought by Keefer from his own garden, begins to bud out.

Twenty varieties of gourmet leaf lettuces and microgreens are trimmed by hand from raised beds.

“I love a new one, Salanova,” Keefer said. “It’s a beautiful lettuce, like a chrysanthemum. It’s a stunning look.”

White Satin carrots, which look like edible icicles, mix with familiar baby Nantes and Chantenay. Cherry Belle radishes grow near heirloom baby beets and Tokyo turnips.

“In the summer, we’ve got 14-foot-tall sunchokes,” Keefer said. “The tomatoes are in 6-foot cages. You can’t see across the garden; everything is so big and lush.”

A movable enclosure allows the French Laundry's flock of little bantam hens to feast at different locations. The chickens produce small but flavorful eggs that are served at the French Laundry.

Inside the hoop house, seedlings await transplanting. This summer, Keefer will grow 46 varieties of tomatoes, 20 different peppers and 10 kinds of eggplant.

"I'm really excited about the Shisito peppers; they're the new hot thing," Keefer said. "They're similar to Padron."

As for tomatoes, Keefer prefers Brandywine and Amish Paste as his personal favorites. He knows his chefs will want something different.

"Chefs are funny," he said. "They'll get really excited about something new, but after five days of cooking with it, they'll want something else."