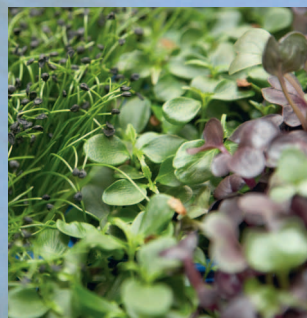




THE TASTE OF 'TERROIR'



Rosie Birkett talks to some top chefs who are using their surrounding vegetation to create inventive, exciting dishes that bring context and identity to their menus

Mauro Colagreco and David Kinch

"I'm bored with 'internationalist' restaurants – restaurants that could be in Tokyo, Barcelona or London – serving the same food wherever you are, and there's a lot of that now," says chef **David Kinch**, who, with his surf-style blond hair, board shorts and loose-fitting cotton shirt, looks every bit the definitive Californian. "Everyone is trying to cook like they're in northern Spain, but restaurants should be indicative – they should reflect where they are, and that's my driving force as a chef." For Kinch, whose two-Michelin-starred restaurant Manresa in California has an exclusive supply partnership with the nearby biodynamic Love Apple Farm, creating dishes that reflect geographical situation, or terroir, is one of the things that defines "really great restaurants". "We're not trying to cook in any one style," he says, "but we're trying to be a quintessential, contemporary fine dining Californian restaurant that is in the foothills of the Santa Cruz mountains, right by the Pacific ocean. We're surrounded by wineries – we have a lot of local wines, we grow all our produce locally – and we don't do it for political reasons: we do it because it tastes good." His signature dish at Manresa is 'Into the Garden' – an ever-changing item dependent on what is supplied to that restaurant that day from the farm. "We have 200 different products in the garden," explains the chef. "It's like a glorified salad – there are cooked elements, raw elements, leafy elements and flowers and seeds on top. Each leaf is different and the dish reflects the physiological nature of a plant on a plate. As a dressing we use the juices of the cooked vegetables combined and emulsified with lecithin (soy protein) and it goes on the ingredients like dew in the morning." It's this sort of expressive and imaginative approach to cooking that has won Kinch so much critical acclaim.

He admits though, that cooking with vegetables is what really drives him. "I find vegetables more exciting to work with, now, than meat proteins," he says. "You can be really creative and it challenges the skill of the chef."

And he's not by any means alone. Perhaps inspired by the Noma effect – the fiercely regional food of **René Redzepi**, whose restaurant in Copenhagen was voted number one in the San Pellegrino Top 50 – chefs have started paying more attention to the vegetation they can utilise from their vicinity, and the best ways of cooking it. Increasingly, we're seeing chefs who can, cooking with foraged wild foods from their locality and, in a few cases, growing their own vegetables, flowers and herbs, to bring a taste of their surroundings to the plate.

So what are the benefits of cooking from the terroir? For Michelin-starred chef **Mauro Colagreco**, whose Mirazur restaurant holds a unique position some 150m from the Italian border, east of the pretty Côte d'Azur town of Menton, it's a no-brainer. Before he arrived in Menton, Italo-Argentinian Colagreco had been working in Paris for five years (in the kitchens of Alain Ducasse and Alain Passard, who we'll come to later), a wildly different environment from the one he would come to in Menton, which experiences a favourable climate and is rich in vegetation and local plants. "Six months before I opened the restaurant I was living in Paris and I made many menus, but when I actually came here and opened I threw them the bin, because here in the Côte d'Azur is one of the best places for produce – fish, vegetables and herbs," he says. "My cooking style is fresh with a lot of green. I try to take out the green of the vegetables and express that on the plate, so my food is from my territory – from my garden and produce." Dishes such as 'shot of dulce seaweeds, shallot cream, diced granny smith apple and mint' perfectly encapsulate this idea, blasting the palate with

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an intense hit of fresh flavour, while his garden salad of green and yellow beans, juicy, sweet cherry and salty pistachio plays with texture and sweet/sour/salty flavour profiles with earthy, vital results.

Like Kinch, Colagreco is fortunate in that his geographical situation provides a veritable cornucopia of produce, allowing him to cook with ingredients that define Mirazur's geographical location, like Menton's lemons, (which are so celebrated that the town holds an annual lemon festival). He also sources produce daily from his vast, multi-level organic garden which boasts more than 250 different types of local herb and flowers, and 39 varieties of tomato, a multitude of different courgettes and carrots. Because the restaurant is just 150 metres from the Italian border, Colagreco can also call on specialist ingredients from nearby Italy, such as prawns from San Remo (an Italian coastal town 45km away) which are especially large and sweet, to create unique signature dishes. He serves them with lemon cream, red cabbage sauce and spinach candy – a succinct culinary expression of his location.

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In another dish, which he calls 'Little Garden' – the chef presents a selection of precisely-cooked garden vegetables such as baby courgette, mini carrots, radish and turnip with a thin, acidic parmesan bouillon poured on top to contrast with the fresh vegetables. That his menu is much more focussed on vegetation than it is on meat and fish proteins comes as no surprise when you hear him speak about his "inspirational, creative" time in the kitchen of mentor Alain Passard, the three-Michelin starred chef renowned for his vegetable-focussed cuisine. In 2001 Passard made headlines by announcing that his menu would no longer include red meat, but instead focus on vegetables, which he then went on to have grown specifically for the restaurant, and delivered daily from his farm 240 km south-west of Paris.

Simon Rogan, the Michelin-starred chef of Cumbrian restaurant L'Enclume is in a similar position, having taken over local organic Howbarrow farm last September, which now provides many of the ingredients for his menu – such as sugar snaps and Paris market carrots, which he serves with ham fat and nasturtiums. Rogan will visit the farm in the morning to harvest produce for the day's service. "There was a time when I got a bit sidetracked with ingredients from all over the world on my long tasting menu - but then about a year and a half ago I decided that we needed to get back to what we were good at, re-establish our identity and what connects us to our surroundings," he says. "We try to cook things with simplicity and purity, so rather than deconstructing a carrot and cooking it in many different ways, we're now trying to cook a carrot perfectly."

Indeed, on one occasion when Rogan ran out of his home-grown carrots and bought some in, he found himself unable to use them because the taste varied so drastically. "They just didn't compare and I didn't feel like I could put them on," he says. "I like to see things from start to finish and it's amazing to see the process from seed to plate." The restaurant's new menus reflect that, with L'Enclume's two 15-course menus - one containing meat and fish and one that is 'minus meat and fish'. "The minus menu is there to showcase everything we use on the farm and everything we grow wild," he says. Like Kinch and Passard, Rogan is finding renewed inspiration from that which is grown in the ground. "A couple of years ago people



Alain Ducasse

were moving on to cheaper cuts of meat because they were more interesting and showed the skill of the chef, now it's moving on to vegetables – there are lots of interesting things you can do with vegetables and this menu will reflect that," he says.

Of course, not every chef has the luxury of a rural location like Rogan, Kinch, Colagrecio and **Alain Ducasse**, who creates seasonal cookpots from the garden produce at his Provence hotel and restaurant La Bastide de Moustiers. But even chefs in more urban areas are getting creative with their surroundings. At his

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Michelin-starred restaurant in Nottingham, **Sat Bains** has taken on Danish foraging expert Nanna Vestergaard as a development chef. The chef explains that using foraged produce reflects not only the seasons, but his restaurant's specific situation near to the river Trent. "Our location gives us a very unique offering," he says. "We have loads of stuff growing here in abundance – we're on the river Trent and it's a wild area. Nanna picks things like fresh chamomile, elderflower, honey nettles, shepherd's purse, horseradish flowers, violets, roses and rosy garlic – all from around 100 square feet around the restaurant. It's a taste of the area and it gives the dishes an identity."

Even Portugese chef **Nuno Mendes**, whose restaurant Viajante is in the depths of the über-urban Bethnal Green, utilises his environment, foraging with his chefs in the surrounding parks and, as unlikely as it sounds, council estates of east London, for herbs and flowers to complement his dishes. And aside from the personality, freshness and flavour such produce can add to the plate, long-time champion of healthy fine dining chef **Chris Horridge**, reckons that cooking local could even have its own health benefits. "What I believe is that if you're eating local produce you're eating local bacteria, local pollen and everything else like that, and therefore possibly building up an immunity to your local area," he says. "Honey is a good example, because there have actually been papers done that show that consuming local honey can have different beneficial effects on people."

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SAT BAINS

Compounds Spices Glazes Grains Aromes Pulses Aromes
Salt Snails Wines & Spirits Boullions Charcuturie Dressings
Mustards Olive Oil Salt Truffles Chutney Caviar Colourings
Herbs Fruit purees Compounds Spices
Glazes Grains Aromes Pulses Aromes Salt Snails Wines &
Spirits Boullions Charcuturie Dressings Mustards Olive Oil
Salt Truffles Chutney Caviar Colourings Herbs Fruit purees
Oils Pasta Seaweed Compounds Spices Glazes Grains Aromes
Pulses Arome **DELIVERING EXCELLENCE** Charcuturie
Dressings Mustards Olive Oil Salt Truffles Chutney Caviar



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