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CHEFS AND RESTAURANTS [IN THE WEEDS \(/MAGAZINEFRONT/1398431\)](#)

From Urban Spaces to Full-Scale Farms, How to Build an On-Site Garden

by Cindy Arora — MAY 15, 2022 1:40PM



Sandra Holl PHOTO: VERDURA

In an ideal restaurant scenario, the produce is plucked from an on-site solar-heated hoop house, edible flowers and herbs fill lush, conversation-piece garden boxes, and you have enough yield to serve your menu and cater to the community. But limited space, extreme temperatures, and time constraints

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make gardening on-site a challenge for most restaurants. But we found three chefs who've made gardens—big and small—a vital part of their businesses and missions.

Rooftop Real Estate

Chef **Sandra Holl** is used to small spaces. She started **Floriolen Bakery** in a 10-by-10-foot stall at Chicago's **Green City Market**. Her dream of moving to a brick-and-mortar came true in 2010, when she opened her Lincoln Park bakery with the goal of having a garden where she could grow greens, tomatoes, and peppers. But with limited outdoor space, she had to get creative—and realistic—about what made sense.



White Chocolate, Thai Basil, and Yuzu Tart, Sandra Holl, Floriolen, Chicago PHOTO: SANDRA HOLL

“The rooftop was the only place to put a garden. It’s more of an emergency exit, but it felt like the next step,” says Holl, who tapped culinary garden designer **Sara Gasbarra** to set up a space that would work best with the seasons and her menu. “It’s important to focus on things that have high yield for what your kitchen needs,” says Gasbarra.

Holl found it was a better use of the 35-square-foot space to focus on edible flowers and herbs she can hand-pick during prime blooming season. When the temperatures drop, she turns her focus to cold weather-friendly, heartier varieties like lemon thyme, rosemary, and lavender, while summer is lush with calendula, chrysanthemums, Thai basil, and sorrel, many of which show up in tarts and garnishes. “I love telling people about our rooftop garden or that the scented geranium in the pastry cream grows outside. It makes everything more beautiful,” says Holl, whose gardens help her cut costs when it comes to more expensive and fragile herbs. “This way we don’t have to order questionable flowers that go bad before we even get to use them,” Holl says.

Gasbarra checks on the gardens and works closely with Holl to select herbs and flowers that yield the most harvest from May to October. “In the past we planted tomatoes and peppers, but we couldn’t produce enough to use in their kitchen, so we focused on herbs and edible flowers. It made perfect sense for them,” she says.



Chef D. Brandon Walker and Alma’s co-founder Richard Garcia PHOTO: THE ART ROOM

Community Connection

At Compton-based Alma Backyard Farms, it’s not unusual to see kids digging in the dirt or enjoying outdoor storytime. The 9-year-old nonprofit provides fruits and vegetables to food deserts in East Los

Angeles, South Los Angeles, and San Pedro, as well as events and programming for the community, and jobs in its farms and farm stands for formerly incarcerated workers.

Their mission resonated with Chef **D. Brandon Walker**, owner of **MV Grab & Go** in Los Angeles, who started sourcing produce from the farm in 2021. “We’re excited about working with urban farms. It’s a second chance for the land, and for everyone involved. It’s something smack dab in the city that we all get to use,” says Walker, who visits Alma weekly to pick up ingredients for his menu. “I think this is the future for sustainability.”

Located about 17 miles southeast of MV Grab & Go, Alma supplies half the produce used on Walker’s all-day menu, including radishes, chard, green onions, kale, celery, snap peas, favas, eggplants, bananas, grapefruit, lettuce, and cilantro. The partnership resonated with Walker, who left the fine-dining and private chef world and later became a teacher at the Culinary Training Program at St. Joseph’s Center, a school for students who couldn’t get into traditional culinary programs due to lack of education, income, or skills. He realized he wanted to use his experience to provide food for vulnerable communities, to heal disparities in food and labor security, and to find new models to help people find jobs and get back on their feet.

This spring Walker opened **The Art Room** in downtown L.A., a restaurant-gallery hybrid whose menu will also rely heavily on produce from Alma.



Chris Gadulka and Rick Rigutto PHOTO: SYLVAN TABLE

On the Farm

Space isn't an issue for the year-old **Sylvan Table**, a restaurant housed in a 300-year-old barn and set on a property in Sylvan Lake, Mich., complete with a three-acre farm, three hoop houses, wall planters, a solarium, and an apiary. The team there—including two full-time farm hands, restaurant staff, and owners Nicole and Tim Ryan—grows more than 100 varieties of crops, from fruits and vegetables to herbs and edible flowers, with peak seasons from April through September. Pigs and chicken were part of the original plan, but it didn't quite fly with the neighbors, at least for now.

"We're doing it the hard way," says Chef **Chris Gadulka**, who was hired in 2020 by the Ryans, a West Bloomfield-based couple who own a restaurant-focused construction company. The Ryans had a vision to open a full-scale farm/restaurant in 2015 and needed the right chef to take over a menu that would change every two weeks. With experience at restaurants like **Fleming's** and the **Toast Restaurant Group**, Gadulka was eager to apply. He cooked for the couple (20 dishes to be exact) using fresh produce from his own gardens and got the gig. "I was humbled and honored," says Gadulka, who works closely with farm manager Rick Rigutto. "We get to see our staff invigorated by what we do. We make it educational; people get to work on their techniques and be part of the farm," he says.

Rigutto picks plants to grow inside the hoop houses, including salad greens, Asian greens, kale, endive, garlic scapes, kohlrabi, Persian cucumbers, hot peppers, radishes, bulb onions, and thyme, just to name a few.

"We choose items where you can produce high volume within a relatively small growing space," he says. "For instance, you can grow more than 100 heads of lettuce in a 35-foot bed or salad greens that can be cut multiple times. As opposed to crops such as sweet potatoes or acorn squash that our kitchen would run through quickly."

During spring and summer, the kitchen cans and dehydrates tomatoes, peppers, herbs, apples, mushrooms, asparagus, onions, garlic, berries, and peaches to be preserved for winter sauces, pie fillings, and garnishes. With Michigan's frigid weather, including 12-degree F nights that can hold steady through May, Rigutto holds off on planting crops like cauliflower and carrots until late spring. Daffodils and tulips let him know when the ground is ready.

In winter, the greenhouse is where it's at, yielding sugar snap peas, baby mustard greens, radishes, rapini, spinach, green onions, turnips, and red bulb onions. In March, Rigutto began to seed for heirloom tomato season, planting them in late April. Depending on how they fare, everything from Purple Bumble Bees to Black Cherries should arrive on the menu in a salad or in a vegetable "pot-au-feu."

The Sylvan Table team has taken on a lot, but they believe in leaving some produce to the experts. "We made a conscious decision not to grow cherries, corn, asparagus, or potatoes, because we know we can get it from someone close by doing it better than we could," says Gadulka, who pursues partnerships with local farms, many within 10 miles. "That's another focus of ours: having a symbiotic relationship with other farms."