

EVENTS

LOCALLY WED

Ingredients plucked from Long Island's bounty make for an inspired feast

BY CRISTI L. HANSEN



When NYC-based painters Melora Griffiths and Tad Wiley began thinking about the menu for their intimate wedding on Shelter Island, they conferred with their caterer, Aura Winarick, a private chef based in Sag Harbor. Winarick suggested serving an Indian-inspired menu that boasted bold flavors and would provide creative dishes for the vegetarian bride to enjoy. The couple knew they had chosen correctly once plates of green tea soba noodles with oyster mushrooms and chicken and cashew curry were presented by Winarick. What they were pleasantly surprised to learn, however, was that their wedding banquet had been locally sourced.

The “linguini” and clams that guests nibbled as hors d’oeuvres were constructed from oyster mushrooms grown by David Falkowski in Bridgehampton and mollusks from the Seafood Shop in Wainscott. There were mini fish tacos also filled with Seafood Shop offerings, and late-harvest tomato tarts with love

apples from Pike Farm Stand in Sagaponack. The smoked duck and fig summer rolls came from Crescent Duck Farm in Aquebogue via Cromer’s Butcher in Sag Harbor. During dinner, guests began with cauliflower soup from Country Gardens farm stand in Bridgehampton (the only stand that had cauliflower that early) with American caviar, and stir-fried greens from Dale and Bette’s farm in Sag Harbor, before tucking into black beluga lentil salad with pomegranate molasses, sweet potatoes and zucchini from Pike Farm Stand. Even the clearly Asian dishes included some local fare: The coconut jasmati rice included local edamame and mint; the miso-glazed striped bass had been swimming off Montauk just hours before.

“My mom grew the sweet potatoes for the lentils,” says Winarick, referring to her mother’s legendary garden on Shelter Island. “They were very gangly shaped, difficult to work with. Lo-

cal product is not always as uniform in size, shape as supermarket goods. But they were super tasty.” An infused punch included lemon balm from her mother’s garden and melons from Pike Farm Stand. And the cake—made by Winarick’s friend, private chef Anthony Leberto—was a dense almond concoction made with local organic eggs, layered with bittersweet chocolate ganache and apricot-ginger filling and decorated with hot pink dahlias and gold dragees inspired by the Indian flavors and colors.

“When Aura told me she used local ingredients I was thrilled,” says Griffiths. “I love using produce from the North Fork; it’s fresh, supports the nearby farms and it tastes delicious.” The tasty end result gave partygoers yet another reason to celebrate.

Although hosting a “local” wedding can be manifested in a number of ways—from the venue you choose, such as a nearby farm or neighborhood event space, to the indigenous flowers you place at every table—food is unquestionably the easiest way to go local, given the culinary riches that Long Island has to offer.

The typical cuisine offered up at wedding receptions doesn’t usually incite excitement or anticipation among guests. After having the age-old question posed to you—“Would you like the chicken or fish?”—expectations are low for eating an exceptional meal, especially when the caterers are cooking in heavy quantities. Right? Wrong.

Thanks to the culinary consciousness sweeping across the U.S., now *local* is more than a little-known buzzword. Dishes made of the freshest ingredients found in your city’s backyard are popping up in kitchens and on tabletops everywhere. Chefs are quick to let patrons know that their greens were sourced a few miles away and that the roasted chicken they’re enjoying was raised down the road.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the wedding menu can also be a place to feature local fare, in the most stylish of ways. In fact, for many East End caterers and bakers, using anything other than ingredients produced close to home has never been an option. “I’ve always been into local produce,” says Simon Sheridan, owner and chef of East Hampton–based Exquisite Food. “It’s obvious that a tomato grown four feet from your kitchen is going to taste better than one flown in from California.”

Using local food doesn’t only conjure up images of freshness and healthy living, however. Sheridan, who specializes in creating entire menus from homegrown goods, is also quick to emphasize the superiority in the food grown on nearby farms, such as Quail Hill and Wickham, and that his clients can immediately taste the



difference. Dishes like Montauk lobster and scallop risotto and Hampton weakfish with an organic *beurre blanc* are a mainstay for events given by couples who recognize and appreciate the quality of the food and know that their guests will, too. Sheridan recalls an event catered by Exquisite Food where the menu needed to be sourced within 15 miles from the location. One of President Bush’s daughters was in attendance, and as she was eating blueberry shortcake, he was able to point out the nearby blueberry bush where the berries were picked. “She was charmed and I think it just felt right,” he says. “It was almost like an exhale.”

But for wedding and event planners, considering more than just food may be essential to creating a certain place-based feeling. “It’s all part of the spirit,” says John Kowalenko, co-owner with his wife, Cheryl Stair, of Art of Eating catering in Amagansett. “Honoring the East End spirit and the bounty that we have—it’s our obligation to offer and show it to people.”

Consider the choice of venue. Instead of a previous generation’s preference for banquet halls, today’s nuptial couples are opting to overlook rows of grapes at vineyards, stroll among gardens and art at Long House in East Hampton or Madoo Preserve in Sagaponack, or achieve a mini-cosmopolitan feel by taking over a historic space in town, like Third House in Montauk or the waterfront Village Green in Orient, where guests at a recent wedding arrived by boat. “It was just absolutely beautiful,” Kowalenko says of a wedding he catered last summer that was held at the Hallockville



Museum in Riverhead. “We had long wooden tables set up inside the barn. The bride and groom came through these big barn doors. The guests looked through the doors onto an endless farm field.” Kowalenko, who is working with East Hampton Town to open certain buildings to event use, feels that more towns and villages will loosen restrictions as they realize the revenue-generating potential.

At Gurney’s Inn in Montauk, where the 60 or so Saturday and Sunday wedding slots between May and October sell out each year, the vernacular accents often include post-reception bonfires, complete with mellowing pillows, blankets, and s’mores. “Instead of traditional after-hours party at a bar or at someone’s hotel suite, it keeps the party going,” says John Ovanessian, banquet sales manager. “Sometimes the most interesting stuff at the wedding happens at the bonfire.”

But honoring the East End spirit, according to Kowalenko, also means accounting for the impact of all decision making, no matter how large or small. In some cases, that means choosing to use the same plates or cutlery throughout the meal or avoiding disposables. During the muggier months, many outdoor wedding locations are sprayed for mosquitoes the morning before the event, but Kowalenko employs East Hampton-based Treewise to spray a nontoxic mix of garlic, rosemary and cayenne that is fragrant and effective. “You’re making low-impact decisions and keeping money in the community,” he says. “Instead of busing all the staff and equipment and produce out here from the city, you go with a local outfit.”

For Claire Hartten, who recently returned to the East End to get married after many years working in sustainability circles in the United Kingdom, a field-to-fork menu “reflected the care and concern you have invested in the planning of the wedding and the enjoyment of your guests.” But it also meant serving tap water instead of bottled, ordering a cake from a Scandinavian baker who has developed a reputation for almond-tinged cakes layered with whipped cream and local berries and topped with wild flowers from Shelter Island, encouraging guests to take the Long Island Railroad or Hampton Jitney and “unwind along the way and see the local scenery shift from the urban to rural,” using “creative and compostable” centerpieces assembled from shells and pebbles from the beaches of nearby bays and lighting locally made beeswax candles “in order to support the work of pollinators.”

She notes that the owners of her wedding venue, the Pridwin Hotel on Shelter Island, were thrilled to be able to invite neighboring businesses—from fishers to musicians to florists—to get involved. “What they learn from one wedding is transferable to the next,” says Hartten, “and so the chain of local sourcing becomes easier and easier for them to offer guests.”

Although there is a rising eco-consciousness happening in eastern Long Island, Winarick also says that her enthusiasm as a local caterer is contagious for the clients who are curious but not fully convinced. “I believe in the integrity of the ingredient, but I also like to have fun,” she says. “Twisting familiar flavors and concepts keeps people comforted and surprised at the same time.”



At times, guaranteeing that an ingredient will be available can be difficult, and so can securing the amount a caterer will need for a large party. But many planners, special events caterers and chefs have formed strong relationships with the farmers they support, and Winarick is grateful for the abundance of produce made available on Long Island and the variety of options.

Kowalenko of Art of Eating notes that a slow wedding isn't always the simplest or cheapest option. "Many companies talk a good talk and say 'local, organic, in season,'" he says. "Some clients will change their mind when they see the difference in pricing." He has had to steer clients, from doctors to politicians to high-ranking members of environmental groups, away from imported endangered fish and toward striped bass caught just a day before. Art of Eating actually has "a farm shopper" who visits various farms, fishmongers and orchards depending on what the event menu calls for. "Sometimes we pick up blackberries on the day of the party and wash them at the party."

Jill Gordon, of East Hampton-based jill gordon celebrate, is another planner who has long subscribed to the idea of *local*. Before opening her own company, Gordon started out working in the catering industry in New York City. Then, once she began volunteering at a farm in Amagansett, her appreciation for exceptional food was fostered.

"As a city girl, it was a fascinating way to learn how your food grows," she says. Gordon has also noticed couples who are becoming increasingly aware of having an eco-friendly event, which

trickles down to the menu, often the centerpiece of a party. "I think the people in eastern Long Island are sophisticated eaters," she says. "And I'd say they want to eat what comes straight from the earth."

Miche Bacher, of Greenport-based Sacred Sweets, creates more than 20 wedding cakes a year from local and organic ingredients. Although the majority of her clients seek Bacher out for her local slant on desserts, she's also converted brides who had low expectations for an organic cake, afraid it would taste bland. After scheduling a tasting and experiencing the depth of flavors that come with using fresh fruit sauces and syrups, they quickly convert to Bacher's way of baking.

And even though your cake may look traditional, the flavors are anything but. On the menu are fresh options like butter cake with peach Champagne filling and ginger sauce or a lemon poppy seed cake with lemon curd, which are satisfying for their light taste. Some couples choose to move away from a cake, opting instead to serve a plated caramel apple tart or berry gelato with basil syrup. For Bacher, working to create a dessert is all about nurturing the couple and their guests. "There is an inherent difference when using local, organic ingredients," she says. And it's in giving them the healthy infusion of herbs, fruit and organic sugar that her clients begin to appreciate the multitude of local options available to them for their wedding menu. "I don't care how and why you come to eat local," says Bacher. "But that fact that you do is cool." 