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The
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a **ROBUST**
red wine
HEARTY
winter fare



American Culinary Federation
The Standard of Excellence for Chefs

eating clean
chefs and operators
know how

alcohol-free?
it's an option

celebrate fall
with pumpkin on
the menu

dish it up

Setting the table is in the details. / BY KAREN WEISBERG

You've paid close attention to the ambiance of your venue, you've even made sure the thermostat is set just right. The lighting is ideal for reading the menu, yet flattering to complexions. Background music is unobtrusive.

Each plate presentation has been tweaked to perfection, every element a reflection of your culinary skill and artistry. You can honestly take pride in every dish. But wait—could the plate you're serving on be a better reflection of you? More versatile? More colorful?

Before the holiday hubbub sets in, now may be the perfect time to kick your plate presentation up a notch. Don't be surprised if you prove, not for the first time, that guests really do eat with their eyes.

art-to-table

Innumerable chefs and restaurateurs make it their business to be part of the farm-to-table ethos, and many aim to know their growers face to face. But few go as far as Dave Becker, chef/owner of Sweet Basil, Needham, Massachusetts, in his commitment to sourcing plates locally. In fact, he crafts most of them himself, on a potter's wheel.

This one-man art-to-table philosophy of Becker's just might start a movement. Knowing—or perhaps being—the potter who creates your restaurant's plates from locally sourced clay may become a selling point worthy of note on your menu.

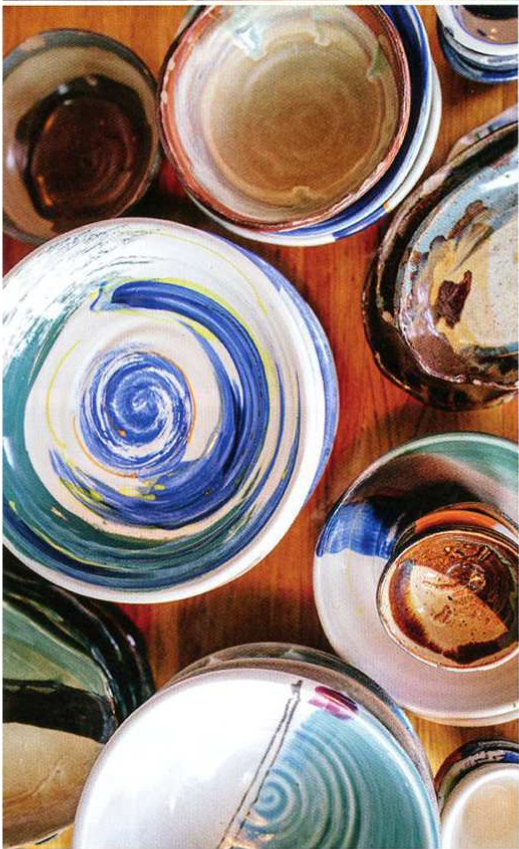
Plates and bowls being used at Sweet Basil have been produced in a rainbow of colors. Becker, a self-taught potter, glazes each one in various shades of turquoise or aquamarine. "I weigh the clay out, so all the plates or bowls are roughly the same weight. They're pretty thick and can take a drop on the floor," he says. "Plus, they're dishwasher-safe."

The pieces are crafted from locally sourced clay from Sheffield Pottery, Sheffield, Massachusetts, and are spun-fired at Feet of Clay Pottery, a cooperatively run studio in Brookline, Massachusetts.

Sweet Basil will soon be joined by 110-seat Juniper in nearby Wellesley. Well in advance of opening, Becker, has been stockpiling plates, typically producing 40 at a time.

He finds making pottery relaxing and meditative, and enjoys the whole idea of it. "Funky restaurant, funky pottery," he says. "If I don't have enough pieces, I'll buy from other potters—local, of course."

OPPOSITE Clockwise from top: 1) At the annual James Beard Foundation Sunday Supper event at Chelsea Market, New York, food is served on VerTerra Dinnerware's line of disposable plates. 2) Libbey Foodservice pairs a Coos Bay ceramic dish with a Syracuse Slenda Triform plate. 3) Dave Becker made these colorful plates and bowls from locally sourced clay.



TABLEWARE dish it up

fab fronds

VerTerra Dinnerware, New York, a line of disposable plates, bowls and trays, is produced from fallen palm leaves. According to Michael Dwork, CEO, the certified-compostable dinnerware is manufactured without the use of chemicals, glue or bonding agents, and is ideal for the steadily growing fast-casual market.

“A lot of restaurateurs are looking to open a secondary line, that is, a bit more of a casual venue with great food but less expensive,” he says. “We also work with stadiums, schools, etc.”

Fallen palm leaves are used as serving vessels in various countries, and VerTerra has industrialized the process, including sterilization and pressing the fronds into appropriate shapes for large-scale production. “The color of the plates is the color of the leaves, versus cane products that are bleached and dyed,” Dwork says.

On the catering side, the company works with Wichcraft, part of the Craft group of restaurants from Tom Colicchio, and the Statue of Liberty.

The James Beard Foundation, New York, uses VerTerra Dinnerware for off-premise events. Yvonne Ros, director of sponsorship and special events, doesn't think twice about dinnerware for such annual events as Chefs and Champagne, which serves 1,000 guests under a tent on the grounds of Wölffer Estate Vineyard, Sagaponack, New York. “We've worked with VerTerra since they started out,” she says. “We think it's appropriate to use biodegradable, sustainable disposables—we're mindful of that. It is slightly expensive, but we feel it's worth it. And, it's to the standard that we want to host events.”

In May, VerTerra was on the table for the annual James Beard Awards when 2,000 people were at Lincoln Center. “At the James Beard House, we use Lenox, but we've expanded with VerTerra for all off-site events,” Ros says. “They really are outstanding—they look beautiful.”

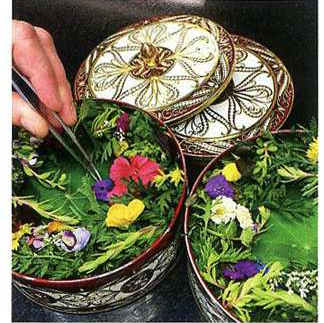
down-to-earth gourmet

Executive chef Marco Moreira uses elements of the Gourmet Collection from Degrenne Paris at 120-seat Botequim, a Brazilian concept in New York. One piece he especially likes is a charcoal-gray crock. “It's deep and holds the heat pretty well—we have it in the plate warmer under the heat lamps until it's filled and served,” Moreira says. “I serve two things in it: the beans part of feijoada, as well as *moqueca*.”

Traditionally, feijoada, a famous regional dish in Brazil, is prepared and served in a terracotta clay pot, and cooked in a wood-burning oven. *Moqueca* is a saltwater fish-based stew.

From top: At Sweet Basil, most of the plates and bowls were made by chef/owner Dave Becker. Below: Becker works at his potter's wheel in preparation for the opening of Juniper, his second restaurant. One from bottom: Coos Bay is a line of small, colorful ceramic dishes from Libbey Foodservice. Bottom: A piece from The Gourmet Collection, Degrenne Paris.





“At Botequim, the food is quite rustic, but the restaurant itself is quite modern,” Moreira says. “So this bowl is a much sleeker, modern presentation, but it reflects the sensibility of the black terra cotta dishes used in Brazil. If I were to design a sleek version of the traditional ones, this would be it.”

At Moreira’s 120-seat Tocqueville, New York, a white dish from the collection is used to plate diver sea scallops with seared Hudson Valley foie gras, braised artichokes and porcini mushrooms, one of his signature dishes.

little plates with pop

Among more than 400 Libbey Foodservice items presented at the 2014 National Restaurant Association Restaurant, Hotel-Motel Show in Chicago was Coos Bay, a line of small, colorful ceramic dishes from the company’s World Tableware brand. With rustic textures, interesting shapes and bold colors, they reflect some of the new trends in dinnerware.

“The new Coos Bay bake-and-serve handled stoneware trays from World Tableware are ideal for oven-to-table shareable appetizers and side dishes,” notes Susan Dountas, director of food-service marketing for Libbey Foodservice. “They’re available in four vibrant colors, olive, chili, pumpkin and butter, and four shapes, square, oval, round and rectangular.”

For a double pop, the Coos Bay tray can be served centered on a larger plate, such as the Syracuse China brand’s Slenda Triform.

building memories

Each menu item served at Juni, the 50-seat boutique restaurant opened in 2013 in Hotel Chandler, New York, has its own plate. For example, chickweed, black sea bass and tapioca are served on one type of plate, while spring emulsion, Berkshire pork tenderloin and pickled onions are on another type. In fact, a guest might receive as many as 15 separate plates during the meal.

“I don’t think there’s anything even remotely similar, since I’ve personally purchased each vessel,” executive chef Shaun Hergatt says. “These are more conceptual pieces, things that we’ve put together with a connection between the vessel and what we’re serving.”

Keeping seasonality in mind when creating the menu for Juni, Hergatt aims for a progression of flavors during the meal, from light to heavier, building momentum. “Plus, we’re building the visual momentum leading to a crescendo—to make sure when you’re eating the food that it keeps your palate interested,” he says.

“We want to make sure we’re growing that experience. Everything we do in the restaurant is to build lifetime memories, so 20 years down the road, they can’t get it out of their heads.” ■

MEMORABLE MEALS

At Juni, New York, each menu item has its own unique plate.

- For a canape of black truffle balls, executive chef Shaun Hergatt painted driftwood black, then set the black truffle balls in black cups in niches within the driftwood, creating a candelabra effect.
- Quartz plates are used seasonally to plate sugar snap peas filled with herb puree and garnished with a bit of ocean trout.
- Cookie tins from the 1950s are used to serve Hergatt’s ham and cheese amuse: two Breton cookies flavored with Parmesan and coarse-grain mustard, and an Iberico ham chip, surrounded by edible flowers.
- Fresh bread, baked a half dozen times each evening, becomes part of a monochromatic visual piece when set out with a gold bowl of saffron spread, a lidded silver bowl filled with green olive tapenade and a ceramic butter dish from Germany containing Vermont butter.

NEW YORK-BASED AWARD-WINNING JOURNALIST KAREN WEISBERG HAS COVERED THE ISSUES AND LUMINARIES OF THE FOOD-AND-BEVERAGE WORLD—BOTH COMMERCIAL AND NONCOMMERCIAL—FOR MORE THAN 25 YEARS.

Above left: The Farm Table place setting from VerTerra Dinnerware.

