

World Chefs: Michael LaScola makes sustainable mean something



By Chris Michaud
Tue Jan 15, 2013 5:49am EST

([Reuters](#)) - Sustainable and locally sourced foods have been at the forefront of American cooking trends for at least a decade, but the approach takes on a fresh set of challenges when the locality is a small island off the coast of [Massachusetts](#).

Nantucket chef Michael LaScola has found the approach widening his culinary talents, which champions regional American cooking, while also boosting the sense of community so integral to small island life.

Several years ago, LaScola switched from a regional concept to a menu based on local sourcing, which means seasonality, ushering in a unique set of opportunities and challenges at Nantucket's 25-year-old American Seasons restaurant, which he has owned since 2004.

"It gives us more freedom to go crazy," he said.

LaScola talked to [Reuters](#) about the challenges of living and working on an island and local sourcing.

Q: What motivated you to abandon the regional concept in favor of a local, sustainable approach?

A: "We used to have to try to force things to fit the categories like Southwestern, which is really not my style. Especially being up in New England, it was a challenge. It limited creativity. But now we change things constantly, as soon as things come into or go out of season. The menu used to change three times a year -- now we can change it on a weekly basis."

Q: Has it made things easier or more difficult?

A: "It's so much easier this way. When something pops into season I can make a dish out of it and just put it on the menu."

Q: Are there particular challenges of using the sustainable concept on a small island, versus, say, chefs working in the California salad bowl?

A: "It's challenging, but what's going on here is pretty special. We're a small island out at sea, but there are four different farms here growing vegetables. We have a mushroom guy who cultivates mushrooms. We have Nantucket cranberries, oyster farmers, scallopers and in summer lobster, flounder, fluke and clams, all stuff that is found locally.

"Even the pig belly is from local pork raised on Nantucket and fed with Nantucket products. It's finished on blueberry mash after they make the blueberry beer. So it's a small chain, and what we can't get, we get on the boat from as far up as Maine, the Cape (Cod) and New England. We're not totally sustainable yet, but people have backyard gardens, they keep bees for honey and chickens. There are so many people doing eggs out here now you don't have to buy an egg off-island, and they're fantastic."

Q: But does it really matter to diner's taste buds if an egg comes from Nantucket or an equally fine egg guy on the Cape?

A: "A good egg is a good egg. But when I get my eggs around here, I know those chickens are happy chickens, they're running around having a cool time. Now, would an egg from a small farmer off-island taste the same? Yeah, it might, but it's also a matter of supporting the people out here -- and them supporting me as well."

Q: Do you think it's possible for sustainability and local sourcing to go too far? Are there limits?

A: "Being completely sustainable on an island is very, very hard to do. We're not there yet. I think it's possible, but there's only so much room. To have a cattle farm out here would be really expensive and there's no room for it. But people are talking about setting up a slaughterhouse so we don't have to send our livestock, lambs and pigs off-island to get slaughtered and brought back, which gets really expensive."

Q: What about the challenges of New England's relatively short growing season? In the dead of winter you can't just serve potatoes, apples and root vegetables -- or can you?

A: "That's easy for me because we close down the second week of December until early April. But having three seasons, and it's like, you can't wait for tomatoes and corn, then you're over that and can't wait for apples and squash and cranberries. By the time we hit December we're over that and can't wait 'til spring. Whatever is in season, you're just flooded with it, and during those times of excess the challenge is making different things with those ingredients and making it exciting and new for you, and also the customer who says, 'Wow, I've never had it prepared in this way.'"

Q: Where do you think American cuisine is headed now?

A: "It's hard to say, because we're in such a great spot now because it's so diverse and people are pushing the envelope. Everybody in this country is trying to get the best ingredients they can now. No matter what style they're doing, it's all focused on the quality of ingredients, which is just pushing producers in this country to do a better job.

"The change in the last 10 years has been incredible, with things going back to where they used to be. People want little butcher shops now or cheese shops or small bakeries. They're done with going to supermarkets that are the size of an airport hangar. They want to discuss the products, and that's huge."

Seared Day Boat Scallop with Cauliflower Veloute, Golden Raisin and Almond Butter:

2 pounds day boat scallops (under 10 per pound)

Veloute:

1 head cauliflower cut into florets

1 clove garlic fine dice

1 cup heavy cream

1 teaspoon each salt, pepper, sugar

In a medium pot, add 1 quart water, garlic, salt and pepper, bring to a simmer, add cauliflower and simmer for 30 minutes. Strain, puree in blender, slowly add cream and puree until smooth. Season to taste, with salt, pepper and sugar.

Brown butter vinaigrette:

1/2 pound (two sticks) butter

1/4 red onion, small dice

3 tablespoons sherry vinaigrette

3 tablespoons golden raisin

1/4 cup toasted almonds, sliced

1 teaspoon capers

1 teaspoon each salt and pepper

1 tablespoon sugar

Place butter in a medium pan, brown over a medium heat. Place all other ingredients in a bowl and whisk in brown butter.

Scallops, clean and dry:

Warm oil in a pan until hot. Place scallops in pan and allow to caramelize; turn over to warm through. To serve, spoon veloute onto plate, place scallops over veloute and sauce with vinaigrette. Yields 4 to 6 servings.