

## The Lake Effect

by Monica Kass Rogers

# From Seed to Table SERVING UP BIG BOWL'S CROPS

Marc Bernard's chef coat is blindingly white against this blue-sky, farm-field backdrop. He'd just as soon be in blue jeans and a t-shirt working down in the dirt with the farmhands, but Bernard is in chef-instructor mode today. He's leading a team of line cooks, servers, dishwashers and busboys from Big Bowl in Schaumburg, Illinois up and down meandering rows of vegetables at the Heritage Prairie Farm. The farm is growing the vegetables for use in four of the restaurant's Chicago locations.

The summer foray to the La Fox, Illinois farm will be the first time many of the Big Bowl staff has done any kind of gardening. But the sweaty experience, weeding long rows of organic produce for several hours under the mid-morning sun, gives the staff a feeling of pride and ownership in the vegetables they'll soon be serving at their restaurant.

"It's fun and gratifying just seeing where all the produce comes from," says Paul Ceisel, a bartender participating in the fieldwork. "It will be cool telling people that I had a hand from beginning to end in the squash that we will be serving. It makes you feel good about the product."

"The program is working," says Executive Chef Bernard, who gave birth to the idea of not just serving locally grown produce, but also contracting with farmer Bronwyn Weaver, to grow two acres of sustainable/organic crops. Crops that are grown from heirloom seeds, selected by Big Bowl, and cultivated on the farm with help from the restaurant staff. "Now, we're serving more than 700 pounds of produce per week at each of the four Chicagoland locations," says Bernard.

To make this happen, line cooks and location chefs are required to





participate in the work on the farm each season. Other staff members, like servers, busboys, and dishwashers, are also invited to work on the farm and are paid for their time. “The staff goes to the farm on our time,” says Dan McGowan, president of Big Bowl, “which is our way of demonstrating the importance of this effort to them.”

The produce from the farm is harvested in season and incorporated into the Big Bowl menu. Harvested first on the farm this summer and served at the restaurant was all the lettuce—Bibb, Red Cyrus, Hermosa and Winter Density Romaine. Next, garlic scapes came in, followed by Red Long of Tropea onions and sugar snap peas. The ingredients are used in menu staples for as long as the farm can supply them. “So, it’s not just for specials—it’s fully integrated,” explains Bernard. “The onions are used in dishes that call for onion, the snap peas are on the stir fry bar, and the lettuce is used for the prime Thai beef lettuce wraps.”

The 2011 crops are the first fruits of Big Bowl’s collaboration with Heritage Prairie. In preparation, Chef Bernard did extensive research, selecting heirloom seeds that would thrive in the soil and climate in La Fox and that would be a good fit with the Asian food niche. He also mapped out the growing season to determine when each type of produce would be harvested and how that progression would work on the menu. The nineteen inaugural crops include everything from lettuce, peas, garlic and onions, to green beans, bok choy, Napa cabbage, and sweet Hakurei turnips.

While there’s no way to directly quantify the seed-to-table program’s impact on sales, “What we do know is that guests who have asked about the farm relationship are excited about it,” says Dan McGowan. There’s also the flavor benefit. “Food just picked, that’s grown locally, tastes different from something that’s sat in cold storage and was picked before it was truly ready.”

The passion shared by the Big Bowl staff for this farm-to-table program is evident in their dialogue with the restaurant guests. “You have to try the lettuce wraps! I was just out on the farm where we grow the lettuce, helping with the weeding, and that lettuce is delicious!” This goes a lot farther than the standard “Welcome to Big Bowl. May I interest you in an appetizer?” Guests are intrigued when they learn their server is knowledgeable about the produce and had a hand in growing the food they are now eating. “It’s a real conversation starter,” says McGowan.

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— Dan McGowan, President, Big Bowl



## Big Bowl Farmers Market Vegetables and Chicken Stir Fry

*Serves 2 with rice as a complete meal,  
or 3-4 as part of a larger meal.*

This simple and elegant stir fry puts all the emphasis on the fresh ingredients from your local market. You can use any number of fresh vegetables that are at peak season.

- 8 ounces boneless chicken breast, diced
- 2 tablespoons cornstarch
- 1 teaspoon sesame oil plus a few drops
- 2 tablespoons oyster sauce
- 1 tablespoon light soy sauce
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- ½ cup chicken stock
- 1 cup peanut oil
- 3 small fresh shiitake mushrooms, sliced
- 1 teaspoon Chinese salted black beans
- 2 teaspoons Fresno chili peppers, julienne
- 2 teaspoons fresh ginger, chopped
- 2 teaspoons fresh garlic, chopped
- ½ pound fresh vegetables, trimmed and cut into 2-inch lengths
- 2 teaspoons cornstarch mixed into 2 tablespoons water

1. Mix the chicken with the cornstarch and sesame oil, and set aside.
2. Combine the oyster sauce, light soy sauce, sugar, and chicken stock; set aside.
3. Heat 1 cup of oil in a wok, when hot add the chicken, cook, stirring, just until the chicken turns color. Remove to drain; reserve the oil.
4. Heat a wok over high heat. When hot, add 3 tablespoons of the reserved oil. Add the mushroom slices and cook, stirring until browned slightly and soft. Add the black beans, chili pepper, ginger, and garlic, and cook, stirring. Add the vegetables and toss until well coated in the seasonings. Add the oyster sauce mix and bring to a boil. Re-add the chicken and cook, tossing, until heated through. When the sauce boils, re-stir the cornstarch mixture and add. Cook over high heat until the sauce thickens slightly and clears.
5. Remove to a serving bowl and garnish with a few drops of sesame oil. Serve over or with jasmine rice.

“The guest understands the farm-to-table approach, but not the seed-to-table, because I think we are a little ahead of the curve with this [in the restaurant setting],” muses McGowan. “The seed-to-table is the next stage—something more involved. Few restaurants are mapping the growing season the way we have; [we’ve said] ‘here are the seeds we’ve chosen, because we want this particular vegetable, at this time in the season, and then, we want this afterwards.’”

Bronwyn Weaver, who owns Heritage Prairie Farm, agrees the program with Big Bowl breaks new ground in the chef/farmer relationship. “What they’re doing is deeper than what we’ve seen in the last three to five years between chefs and farms,” she says. Due to the extent of Weaver’s contract with Big Bowl, which will push her supply limits this season, it is unlikely she will be in a position to work with another multi-location restaurant to provide their food. Still, there is room for other farmers to follow the Big Bowl/Heritage Prairie lead. “We hope this begins a trend in casual restaurants, so that everyone—not just those who can afford fine dining—has access to affordable, locally-grown, clean food,” Weaver concludes. *ec*

**Monica Kass Rogers** is a recipe sleuth. When not writing for *Edible Chicago*, she is restoring recipes of days gone by at [LostRecipesFound.com](http://LostRecipesFound.com). Her detective work has taken her on several off-beat journeys in the name of culinary history. She also writes for the *Chicago Tribune*.

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