

# Farm to Table Entertaining

Local party-planning experts weigh in on the critical ingredients for a great green dinner party.

BY JILL JOHNSON



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If you haven't heard the term farm to table, you haven't been eating out much. Restaurants with menus featuring fresh, local ingredients have been popping up around our towns like butternut squash and heirloom tomatoes in an autumn garden: Harvest Supper, the Farmer's Table and the soon-to-open Elm are three in New Canaan alone. The demand for food that is free of hormones and pesticides, as well as tastier than any dish prepared with more than a pinch of preservatives, has people crowding into these eateries. It only makes sense to incorporate this healthy and delicious food into your entertaining routine at home, too.

Annie Farrell at Millstone Farm in Wilton has seen a huge surge in the farm-to-table trend lately. Millstone supplies a number of local restaurants, including the Dressing Room and Le Farm in Westport and all six Barcelona locations. "I started doing this in the seventies and eighties, when a handful of chefs got it going in New York," says Farrell. "It gained momentum in the nineties, but now it's gone mainstream. People want to eat local food."

They also want to support their community. Dan Kardos, the chef at Harvest Supper in New Canaan, says "If we support small local farmers, we'll keep the land from being developed into other things, like shopping malls. In the next ten or fifteen years, I expect a big resurgence of five- or six-acre farms, if we support them."

"There aren't enough farms to go around," says Farrell. "What Millstone Farm is providing is the tip of the rapidly melting iceberg." Going farm to table at your next party means more than serving healthier, tastier fare to your guests. Entertaining with food found down the street, rather than a continent away, could help save the planet. "But what about saving my sanity?" you ask. "If entertaining gets any more complicated, I'll be hauled off in a white coat before my guests sample one forkful of goodness." Never fear: Going local, for everything from food to flowers, is easier than you think.

## Catered Affairs

If you're hosting a big event or just prefer to delegate to the pros, have a caterer with farm-to-table experience take the reins. Marcia Selden Catering and Event Planning in Stamford has organized green parties from New Haven to New York. "We just did two very large dinners at Yale, and every last thing was found locally," says Robin Selden, a partner in the company and daughter of founder Marcia. Food was sourced from area farms, including Millstone and Holbrook in Bethel. "On site we used beautiful farm tables and wildflowers to set the mood. One of the events was in Kroon Hall, in the School of Forestry and Environmental Sciences. The whole building is green."

In addition to traditional entrées, this caterer offers a seasonal small-bite menu that can be tailored for a farm-to-table event. Options for an autumn gathering include a balsamic-glazed apple tart with gorgonzola cheese; demitasse cups of warm roasted-butternut-squash bisque topped with a spiced crème fraîche and toasted pepita seeds; as well as skewers of heirloom tomatoes and pearl-sized mozzarella drizzled in olive oil, basil, fresh pepper and salt. Local ingredients up the flavor factor. "The salad in a bag stays green a long time for a reason," says Selden. "There are processes it goes through. Organic and local tastes better."

The farm-to-table trend is influencing more than just taste of the yummy kind. From potted herbs as wedding favors to paper goods made of potato, environmentally friendly is in. Says Selden, "There are still traditional black-tie events, but we seem to be moving away from that." That's not to say that green fare and a posh party can't coexist. Sarah Taggart—who recently opened her own event-planning boutique, A Polished Plan—has proven that. Prior to starting her own business, Taggart was the event planner at Wee Burn Country Club in Darien. There, in 2010, she coordinated Eat Green, Play Green, a golf outing followed by a locally sourced buffet menu. "The most interesting part of the menu was the dessert, a dirt cake!" says Taggart. "It was a chocolate layer cake in a terra-cotta flowerpot, served with a gardening trowel." The barnlike setting featured long farmhouse tables covered in burlap, with leek and sunflower centerpieces and candles in jelly jars.

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## Learning the Basics

Fairfield County has many passionate farm-to-table chefs who are eager to share their wonderful cooking and wisdom. Renting out one of their restaurants for a private party is an interesting idea, but there are other, interactive options that will leave you and your guests both full and full of ideas for how to entertain more conscientiously at home.

Chef Brian Lewis, formerly of the Inn at Bedford Post, plans to open Elm this fall. The restaurant, on Elm Street in New Canaan, will offer seasonally inspired, modern American cuisine in a seventy-person dining room, but that's not all. Guests at a private twelve-person table will be joined by the chef and a farmer. "We're trying to cultivate these small dinner parties with a farmer and me teaching not only how to prepare the food but how to procure it," says Lewis, who is on a first-name basis with farmers across the region. Elm will also have a chef's tasting counter, where four people can sit for a demonstration or a semiprivate cooking lesson. Either option can serve as a primer for hosting a green party at home.

Like many of his peers, Lewis personally sources his ingredients by driving out to farms in the area to select what he needs. Individuals can't always go directly to the farmers as chefs do, but many of the same products are available at farmers' markets and some stores in our area. [Click here for a dinner menu created by Lewis.](#)

If you like the idea of honing your farm-to-table skills under the tutelage of a culinary professional before going solo for a party at your home, a more hands-on cooking class is offered by Julia Deane. This New Canaan resident is part of the family that runs Kitchens by Deane. You can use her classes

to become better versed in farm-to-table food prep, or even turn the class into a party by inviting a group of friends to join in on the fun. “Because people are so busy in Fairfield County, they like to set time aside for their friends,” says Deane. “They all cook with my assistance in a relaxing atmosphere and in a kitchen they don’t have to clean up.”

One piece of advice that Deane shares with her students is to keep it simple when orchestrating a green meal, because, ultimately, the goal is to enjoy yourself and your guests at your own party. “If you use seasonal items, they taste so good that the preparation doesn’t have to be complicated,” she says. If you’re planning a party in the fall, choose a dish such as heirloom tomatoes with burrata cheese from the Darien Cheese Shop or Balducci’s and grilled peasant or rustic bread from Le Pain Quotidien in New Canaan. Deane also recommends preparing small meat and seafood courses instead of one big entrée. When seafood is on the menu, be sure to support a local seafood market, such as Fishtails in New Canaan. “Ask what is fresh today,” says Deane, “and get their ideas on preparation and quantity. They will help you have a successful dinner party.”

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## Do It Yourself

Local culinary professionals are great sources for advice on how to throw a great farm-to-table fête, as are savvy hostesses who know where to shop, how to prepare simple yet irresistible dishes, and what type of party décor pleases guests and Mother Nature.

Mary Ellen Murphy Cavanna, who lives in Rowayton but raised her family—on a vegetarian diet—in Darien, has a simple philosophy for entertaining: Let the farmers’ markets drive your menu. “I try to hit all three local markets, in Darien, Rowayton and New Canaan,” she says. “And with the bounty available in fall, it’s easy to come up with recipes that will wow your friends.” Cavanna, who also organizes vegetarian cooking classes through her site [vegelicious.com](http://vegelicious.com), suggests taking raw corn off the cob and treating it like ceviche: squeeze lime juice onto it, then add olive oil, salt and cilantro or parsley. For tomatoes, slightly roast them with a bit of garlic and salt in the middle and then put them on bread. Cavanna is also a fan of fried green tomatoes and of squash soup, and warm cauliflower salad is one of her favorites. To prepare it, roast the cauliflower and then toss with greens in a vinaigrette made with flavorful vinegar, mustard, honey and lemon juice.

Leslie Lawrence, who lives in a “green” house in Rowayton (which, she notes, was not more expensive to build) also relies on farmers’ markets for the ingredients she needs when planning gatherings. In July she hosted a farm-to-table dinner party for friends visiting from Singapore, which included New Bedford goat cheese; cured meats from Berkshires-bred organic pork; lamb bought from Beaver Brook Farm in Lyme; and local yogurt, cucumbers, onions and herbs from Riverbank Farm in Roxbury. For dessert, she served a Pavlova made with local eggs, cream and berries. Libations included Wolaver’s organic ale. “I cook ahead of time and have everything done the day of the party or the day before,” says Lawrence. “Then all I have to do is grill the meat and we’re done.”

Lawrence used to have a plot at Fodor Farm in Norwalk, a community garden she describes as “wildly successful,” but is now planning an edible garden for her own yard. Either approach is a great source for food. Another option is to become a member of a Community Supported Agriculture program, or CSA. Members pay for a share of the produce grown by a local farmer.

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## Finishing Touches

A truly green party involves more than just local food. “Flowers that come from a farm in the area are fresher, less expensive and will look more beautiful,” says Sarah Taggart.

Sarah Worden, a floral designer who is originally from Darien, has built her business on this philosophy. Sarah Worden Natural Design in Litchfield uses only local and seasonal flowers and materials. “The vast majority of cut flowers sold in the U.S. have gone through Holland and may have come there from another continent,” she says. “They are bred to withstand travel, rather than bred for aesthetics or smell.” When planning your next party, cautions Worden, resist the urge to buy flowers from afar. Go local, or at least look for Veriflor-certified flowers, which are grown in better conditions. Worden also suggests thinking outside the standard bouquet. “Use things that have interesting shapes: herbs, vegetables, fruits and vines.”

When it comes to décor, a fittingly rustic feel is easy to pull off. Robin Selden has covered tables in burlap, and she’s wrapped raffia around napkins. One of her brides hand-painted names onto stones and used them for place cards.

From exploring farms and farmers’ markets to letting nature define the décor, the prep for your next party could turn out to be as much fun as the event itself.