

EATER INTERVIEWS HQ&A

John Mooney of Bidwell on Rooftop Gardens, Sustainability and More

by Christine Egan May 23, 2015, 10:00 @Chris_Egan

Chef John Mooney carries a head of Bibb lettuce through the dining room to the table. "Look at those roots!" he boasts like a proud parent while pointing to the leafy rosette's underside.

Lettuce actually stays alive until needed inside Mooney's kitchen at Bidwell, Union Market's only full-service restaurant, thanks to his expansive rooftop garden. "We pick fresh herbs every day, lettuce is living until use, and tomatoes never see a fridge," he states. The 70 aeroponic towers hiding behind the massive market sign supply about 60 percent of all produce used on Bidwell's eclectic menu.

"Sustainability means something personal, it's a lifestyle for me," Mooney says. "But I don't want this restaurant to feel like I'm trying to get you to 'drink the Kool-Aid.'" The chef shakes his head at those vegan and vegetarian restaurants that try to convince customers to "join the club."

Here, the aeroponic garden just seems to make sense. Lettuce grows to full size in only a few weeks, using just 10 percent of the water that traditional farming methods require. Tubers and root vegetables come from a farm near Lancaster in Gap, Pennsylvania. But the peppers, tomatillos, cucumbers and other produce thrive in the air and mist pumped through the towers instead of needing soil.

Mooney and his staff then use the year-round harvest in salads, sauces or even as cocktail garnishes. Sometimes they can or pickle it. The chef says the rooftop garden helps everyone on staff take ownership of the menu by helping to grow the food. The bartenders, in particular, always experiment. "They are constantly inventing new cocktails, the fresh herbs really keep the bartenders on their toes," Mooney says.

In addition to running D.C.'s only restaurant with a rooftop aeroponic garden, Mooney leads Bell Book & Candle, a restaurant in New York's West Village with 60 aeroponic towers. There, the bistro spreads across a quirky basement space in a 115-year-old building. "The restaurants are like two sisters," he jokes. "There is the New York older, evil one, and then the good, bright sustainable younger sister here in D.C. The two restaurant menus are similar, though, and rooted in a common mission—to showcase "responsibly sourced," fresh and local ingredients.

Bidwell's strategic location in Union Market helps Mooney do business with his neighboring wine supplier, cheesemongers and other vendors sharing the thriving and revitalized space. The restaurant also employs nearby Gallaudet University and organizes tours with the school's deaf students to spread awareness of sustainability. Tours are also available to the public on weekend afternoons.

But the rooftop science project growing the food of the future really makes all the difference here. As Mooney says, "Young people first learn about food choices at home. But I see these young families walking through the market, and I think this area is very forward thinking."



Chef John Mooney on the rooftop garden at Bidwell

R. Lopez

