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CHEFS PUT DOWN ROOTS

Restaurateurs expand into land, building country homes and growing gourmet ingredients—when crops cooperate



JOSE GARCES, chef-owner of 15 restaurants in the U.S., paid \$750,000 for a 40-acre farm in Bucks County, Pa.



ZAKARY PELACCIO, founding chef of Fatty Crab and Fatty Cue in New York, has a 30-acre farm in Old Chatham, N.Y.



DAVID BOULEY, chef at New York's Bouley, farms 1 acre in Kent, Conn.

BY KATY MCLAUGHLIN

SAUNTER INTO THE YARDS of chef David Bouley's house in Kent, Conn., or chef Jose Garces's country home in Bucks County, Pa., and you'll stumble upon the ultimate status symbol for today's culinary crowd. It isn't a wood-burning pizza oven or whole-hog rotisserie. It's a farm. "I seed, I weed, I cultivate, I do everything," said Mr. Bouley, owner of Michelin-rated restaurants Bouley and Brushstroke in New York City. Now in his second year of farming, Mr. Bouley drives a John Deere tractor and works his 1-acre plot, where he experiments with growing conditions that

will yield the tastiest and healthiest produce. Farm-to-table has become a popular food-industry catch phrase—even McDonald's launched an ad campaign celebrating farmers earlier this year. Now, chefs are cutting the farmer out of the deal by becoming farmers themselves. And in some cases, they are quickly discovering that farming is tougher than expected: There are many things that can go wrong—and often, expensively so—in a tomato's journey from heirloom seedling to heirloom Caprese salad. This summer, Mr. Garces harvested his first crop of French heirloom melons, padrón peppers and white sweet corn. He also collects eggs from his 75 Rhode Island red and barred-rock chickens. In season, the 40-acre farm

yields 1,000 pounds of produce a week. The harvest is served at 10 of Mr. Garces's 15 restaurants, which primarily serve Latin foods, including Spanish, Mexican and Peruvian. Farming is notoriously laborious, costly and prone to the vagaries of climate and nature. And chefs, regardless of their stature in the culinary world, can face a steep learning curve. Mr. Garces spent \$35,000 for a tractor, \$30,000 on a deer fence, \$25,000 to build a greenhouse, \$12,000 to dig a new well and \$10,000 for an irrigation system. He says he pays a local farmer "as much as a high-level sous chef" to work the fields. Still, his fields flooded last fall and again in the spring, destroying some of his tomatoes and wiping out

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nearly the whole potato crop. "I think it happens more when you're inexperienced. That's been a big problem," Mr. Garces said. Eric Skokan, chef at the upscale Black Cat Farm Table Bistro and gastro pub Bramble & Hare in Boulder, Colo., farms 130 acres and bases his cuisine on his farm-fresh ingredients. While learning how to farm, he took some ribbing from a fellow farmer. "He walked by and said, 'Hey, Eric, I like your baby carrots' sarcastically," Mr. Skokan said. The farmer explained to Mr. Skokan that he could make his carrots grow thicker by mixing sand in with the seeds. That reduces the number that sprout in one hole, giving each carrot more room to grow. Mr. Skokan took his advice and soon harvested a crop of fat carrots, the pride of any farmer. "That one trick saved me, like, 100 labor hours," Mr. Skokan said.

Few of these A-list chefs see themselves as gentleman farmers. Instead, most expect to see a return on their investments in land, implements and time. Some of that return comes in the form of premium ingredients at a lower cost, but there is also bang for the buck in touting the farm-fresh nature of their food to customers. "If you asked me two years ago, I would have said our tomatoes cost \$40 apiece. I taught myself to drive a tractor. If you look at my first rows, they look like a cardiograph," Mr. Skokan said. Today, his American Mulefoot hogs yield delicious boutique pork for a competitive \$3.05 a pound, and heirloom tomatoes cost him about 20 cents apiece, he said.

Some chefs have taken advantage in the downturn in real-estate prices to get their farms started. Mr. Garces spent about \$750,000 for his Ottsville, Pa., land and house, which also serves as a family weekend home. "We got a good deal," Mr. Garces said. By farming, Mr. Garces also pays lower real-estate taxes, he said. Business aside, the farms provide bucolic retreats for chefs and their families. Mr. Garces renovated a 3,000-square-foot, early-1800s stone farmhouse on his property, using the same interior-design firm, Black & Poole, that redid his Philadelphia home. He added a 2,500-square-foot deck and outdoor kitchen with a double basket fryer, two double-deck ovens and a 24-inch plancha, which he uses to fry up bacon, arepas (South American cornmeal pancakes) and eggs—the classic "Garces breakfast."

"The kids collect eggs, they help us harvest—not without some kicking and screaming. It's been a great experience for them," Mr. Garces said. Zakary Pelaccio, the founding chef of trendy New York restaurants Fatty Crab and Fatty Cue, traded the city earlier this year for a farm in Old Chatham, N.Y., near where he is planning to open a new restaurant later this year. On the 30-acre former dairy farm, Mr. Pelaccio renovated one barn for use as his home, preserving its 18th-century hand-hewn beams and 20-foot ceilings, while adding a poured-concrete floor and a "giant" kitchen, he said.

He uses another barn as a storehouse for homemade fish sauce, bean-and-borage kimchi, aged butter and other delicacies made from produce he grows on the land. "I definitely live a healthier lifestyle out here. I go to bed earlier, don't go out as much, don't consume as much," Mr. Pelaccio said. Daniel Marquis, executive chef at Quay in Chicago, said he saw an opportunity to plant 20 acres that had been in the family for 80 years and hire his brother to farm it. Today, the brothers, along with their father, grow everything from black kale to Chinese eggplant to chocolate peppers to sell to Mr. Marquis's restaurant and four others. David Bouley's 1-acre farm isn't intended to be profitable or to supply his restaurants, he said. Instead, see it as a living laboratory, and to that end he has his vegetables analyzed for their nutritional content. He is currently shopping for a much larger farm he can use to grow food for his restaurants.

Chef-farmers delight in getting their hands on ultra-fresh produce without competing with other restaurants for it. But there's a tall trade-off in the form of extra hours of work after already long days in the kitchen. "I'm a workaholic and I've got a tolerant wife," said Mr. Marquis.



FARMER BOULEY

In Kent, Conn., Chef David Bouley, above, on one of his tractors, a Kubota. He is currently shopping for a much larger farm he can use to grow food for his restaurants.

