

TORONTO'S
FROM ROOFTOP
TO
RESTAURANT

DAVID GARCELON, EXECUTIVE CHEF
AT THE FAIRMONT ROYAL YORK

BY ANNETTE BURDEN



Fresh produce can take days or more getting from field to fork at most urban restaurants. Increasingly, for chefs like David Garcelon, Executive Chef at the Fairmont Royal York in Toronto, it takes just five minutes. Garcelon and his brigade of more than 110 chefs pluck herbs, fruits and vegetables directly from the hotel's rooftop garden.



The building's eighteenth story supports several planter pots and 372 square meters of raised containers. Seventeen wooden beds hold everything from five types of basil to Japanese shiso for sushi, wine grapes for salads, blueberries for baked goods and mint for mojitos. Garcelon especially loves to grow ingredients he can't buy, such as the alpine strawberries he introduced last year and this year's new breed of rosemary.

The hotel serves more than a million meals a year, so the roof produces just a small fraction of the ingredients required. A dozen apprentices weed, feed and water the garden as part of their training. "In terms of the bottom line, it's mostly a break-even proposition," Garcelon says. But, along with the satisfaction of reducing the hotel's environmental footprint, he prizes having the finest and freshest ingredients and a story to share with customers.

Last year the roof's buzz reached new heights with the installation of three beehives—joined by three more this year. Today the hotel's ice-cream shows off the honey as does the famous field-mushroom chowder at EPIC, the fine-dining restaurant.

Now in its twelfth season, Toronto's rooftop wonder has blazed the trail for other hotel chefs. Today, chefs' gardens grow on roofs and terraces at other Fairmonts in Canada, Singapore, Hawaii, Dallas, San Francisco and Washington, D.C. The concept fits neatly into a corporate-wide policy of incorporating earth-friendly practices whenever and wherever possible.

Another green-minded company, Kimpton Hotels & Restaurants, stands solidly behind Executive Chef Simon Dolinky at the Hotel Palomar Los Angeles-Westwood. Dolinky set up a hydroponic growing operation on top of the 19-story building last year. "Gas prices were skyrocketing," he says, "and everyone was thinking about costs going up." He had a sponsor, SoMoCo Hydro, to provide the equipment. He had a friend at Advanced

Nutrients to supply the organic plant food. And he had dreams of recreating his Wisconsin boyhood's summer garden under the California sky.

The soil-free system includes grow lights. The lights switch on when the sun goes down, affording summer growing conditions year-round. Two trays grow microgreens for salad. Two more grow herbs and vegetables—including "basil leaves as big as your hand." The microgreens shoot from seed to salad size in a week.

"It wouldn't be practical or even possible to grow everything on the roof," Dolinky says. Instead, he maximizes his advantage by showcasing the intense flavours of house-grown herbs and microgreens and supplementing with locally-grown organic produce.

At the Four Seasons Hotel Chicago, Executive Chef Kevin Hickey shares a roof garden with residents in the same building. A private-access stairway leads from Seasons restaurant to the tenth floor, where Hickey's staff gathers herbs and a few vegetables from their own six-meter planter box. The garden is part of Chicago's green-roof initiative, a cousin to the City Hall Rooftop Garden designed to test the cooling effect of green roofs on the urban environment. It works.

The benefits of urban rooftop gardens range from saving the planet to saving money to tantalizing the taste buds of hotel guests. In Berlin, Danijel Kresovic, Head Chef at Swissôtel Berlin's Restaurant 44, created a perfumed-paradise on a rooftop terrace overlooking the Kurfürstendamm last year. Guests dine among pots of tropical sage, African lemon savoury, Ecuadorian lilac chile, Peruvian hot pepper and Persian mint while savouring their flavour in Kresovic's dishes. "It is just impossible to get fresher and more aromatic herbs than the ones from your own garden," he rhapsodizes, echoing Garcelon's sentiment: "Fresh is always best."