



wow, DOES THE GARDEN gROW!

We already know
Barboursville Vineyards
turns out fantastic wines.
Now we find its gardens
are having a great year too.

BY NATALIE ERMANN RUSSELL
PHOTOS BY MEREDITH COE



IT TAKES A GOOD 20 MINUTES BEFORE feeling in my tongue returns to normal. The “buzz button” (aka *Spilanthes*) I ate straight from a raised bed had a trippy numbing effect on my mouth almost immediately, a sensation that eventually spread to the back of my throat and cheeks, and even crept back toward my ears. “They’re like Pop Rocks on steroids,” says Barboursville Vineyards’ head horticulturalist Rob Sacilotto, with a friendly I-told-you-so smile. For what felt like an eternity, all I could do was stare.

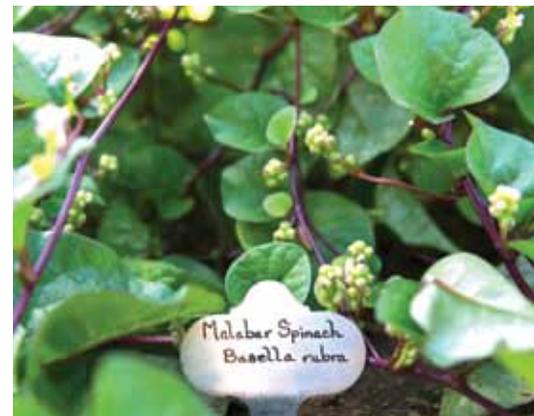
“Pretty cool,” I manage to mumble, contemplating if I will be able to politely gulp and swish—swish and gulp—the entirety of my water bottle. *Now.*

Sacilotto is the garden guru at Barboursville, a horticulturalist renowned in professional circles for his knowledge and massive collection of carnivorous plants sold at his Dyke nursery Botanique (yes, we’re talking about the Venus flytrap and other species that devour insects). Here at Barboursville, however, he focuses on plants that can *be* eaten.

In fact, most of what he grows in Barboursville’s five garden spaces finds its way onto the menu at the on-site fine-dining restaurant Palladio, where Sacilotto’s passion for interesting, unusual varieties meets executive chef Spencer Crawford’s passion for interesting, unusual textures and flavors. Mix in the bottles of vino made by resident winemaker Luca Paschina—who earlier this year won the Monticello Cup for his 2010 Petit Verdot Reserve—and you’ve got yourself an amazing Northern Italian experience by way of Central Virginia.

What these three guys adhere to is a philosophy of highlighting the terroir in whatever they grow and make on these bucolic 900 acres. The garden, the vineyards, and the restaurant—none is discrete, none stands alone. “These three parts are seamlessly connected,” says Paschina, who is from Italy but has been in the States for 26 years. “They create synergy and inspire each other—meaning chef, winemaker, and gardener.”

While each may play down his own role, plenty of collaborative work goes on behind the scenes. Well before planting season every year, Sacilotto sits down with Crawford and Paschina to hatch a garden plan. Then Sacilotto



locates the seed and suggests varieties. Some of their favorites heretofore have included the ‘Marvel of Venice’ yellow Romano bean, ‘Salanova’ lettuce, and ‘Shunkyo’ and ‘Beauty Heart’ radishes. Good for growing, good for cooking, good for eating.

Sacilotto also indulges his own inner garden-geek with oddities like the buzz buttons, to which a fellow horticulturalist opened his eyes after traveling to Madagascar. They might be too out-there to serve to patrons but, Sacilotto swears, they make a great drink mixer when pureed with pineapple juice. He’s also been known to blend them into andouille sausages for a surprising, mouth-numbing kick.

Paschina wanders up to the group, dressed impeccably casual in a button-down plaid shirt and jeans. Impeccable *and* casual—that’s a hard combination to pull off. He ushers us all into

Opposite, clockwise from top left: New Zealand spinach; Mexican sour gherkins; squash; clusters of almost-ripe wine grapes; buzz buttons; head gardener Rob Sacilotto. This page: Sacilotto and chef Spencer Crawford survey the Barboursville gardens.

an SUV and motors over behind the tasting room to the Hess Garden, named for a former farm manager. While his professional expertise resides among the vines, on the crush pad, and in the barrel room, he is also a gifted gardener (and mushroom forager) and is quite adept in the kitchen, having grown up in a family of restaurateurs and winemakers.

In this particular patch, Paschina and Sacilotto point out several heirloom and rare



Clockwise from top left: Octagon is a blend of estate-grown Bordeaux varieties. Winemaker Luca Paschina in the vineyard. Rose bushes flank the rows of vines.

varieties that are thriving. There's 'Bilara,' a pointed red tomato with an intense, rich flavor. "To the best of my knowledge, I'm the last source for 'Bilara' seed," says Sacilotto, who makes a point of getting to work in the summer by 6:30 a.m., when the heat of the day hasn't yet taken hold. That was six hours ago. Right about now, the temperature can best be described as oppressively sweltering.

Just in front of us, climbing taller than the trellises, the oversize 'Dr. Martin' lima beans look as if they're props in an otherworldly sci-fi flick. Another heirloom variety, they have the skin and texture of butter beans but are noticeably bigger. The size makes them easy to shell, which appeals to chef Crawford, as does their subtle honey flavor.

Just a few feet away, in the spot where angled loofah gourds grow, Sacilotto explains that to eat them, you simply skim off the ridges with a vegetable peeler. "The loofah has a grassier flavor than regular squash," he says, adjusting the sweat-soaked bandana tied around his head. "And it's also a really pretty plant."

If some of these unfamiliar varieties seem like they might be hard to find, they are. Once Sacilotto gets his hands on a rarity, the only way to continue the supply is by saving the seeds year after year. And for extremely hard-to-come-by ones like 'Bilara,' he becomes the seed source, donating some of his stash to the Seed Savers Exchange (of which he is a member).

"I'm happy to see a tremendous surge in interest for the preservation of varieties," he says. "There has been a renaissance in growing heirlooms and an expansion of the varieties of which one can save seed."

Admittedly, saving seeds can be a tedious, messy process. With malabar spinach, for instance, the purple berries that appear in fall are mashed and fermented so the pulp falls away, usually turning hands purple in the process.

The minutes click by, and with every story, it's hard to decide if Sacilotto is a walking botanical encyclopedia or simply a horticultural genius. If it grows, he knows about it. And he has a story to tell.

"Dahlias were first used as food plants, grown for their edible tubers, which some say have a slight pineapple flavor," he explains of the pompom blooms that are in full display. "But then came the discovery of potatoes, which are much more productive and efficient, so farmers chose those instead."

At his house in Greene County, Sacilotto is just as adventurous, if not more. Think that spending all day with plants at work might tire him of the botanical world? Nope. It's a clear and deep passion. He has "many thousands" of plants thriving at home, with a seed bank of more than 350 varieties.

Highlights include groundnuts, Korean purple sweet potatoes, and a whole lotta peppers, with names like 'Peruvian Aji Amarillo' and 'Red Cheese,' the latter of which is candy-sweet, squat, and pleated. There are hardy kiwi

fruit, honey berries, che fruit, horseradish, passion fruit, wasabi, 'Night Velvet' shiitake mushrooms, pawpaws, galanga, Thai kaffir lime leaf, Thai finger ginger...and on and on.

Of course, all of this food has to go somewhere, so Sacilotto is constantly tinkering with recipes in his own kitchen. In a standing-room-only freezer right now, he has 'Apios' bean bisque with smoked pasilla, pawpaw puree, passion fruit juice, green and yellow beans, an Asian grass-like green called *oka hajiki*. On his pantry shelves are pickled veggies—from cucumber to bamboo shoots—as well as many, many gallons of hot sauces. With all of this food put up, it's easy to see how his garden season becomes a year-long affair.

Without much ballyhoo, Paschina hops on his ATV and rides away toward his rows of grapevines. He's checking on the progress of his fruit, something he does throughout the summer but even more frequently when harvest is imminent.

Tomorrow, he and his crew will finish picking the white varieties, which typically means pinot grigio first, followed by viognier, chardonnay, and vermentino. As for the reds? "The Bordeaux blend grapes—which we use in Octagon—are 80 percent to where they need to be," explained Paschina before he left. "I can rest easy knowing it'll be very-good to good. This is important because selling to restaurants nowadays is so competitive."

At the end of each row of grapevines sits a single red rose bush, the viticultural version of a canary in the coal mine. "A disease called powdery mildew shows up on roses before grapevines, so historically winemakers would see it as a warning," he had told me. "Now there is technology we can use instead, but they still look pretty, don't they?"

While Paschina is off with his grapes, I'm



Clockwise from top left: Palladio's executive chef Spencer Crawford. Plump figs and house-cured ham from Barboursville-raised hogs. The dual tones of 'Zephyr' squash. Giant 'Dr. Martin' lima beans.

getting another tour of another garden space, this one in front of the tasting room. It's a beautiful, edible patchwork of oddities. "Visitors enjoy looking at the different gardens," admits Sacilotto. "And educating them is an inevitable result of planting a cool mix of edibles."

That cool mix includes malabar spinach, with its deep-red stems and flowers that make for a kicky edible garnish. "Spencer likes this," he adds, "and I give him bags and bags and bags of it." Last year, he also grew water spinach, a plant in the morning glory family with what some say is a slight onion flavor. It wasn't planted again this year because Crawford found its color didn't hold up as well as other varieties—like the malabar and New Zealand—when sautéed.

Just a few feet away are the dangling pods of the Taiwan black-seeded yard-long bean, which Sacilotto obtained from renowned seed-saver Alberto Vazquez in 1983. Sacilotto's pods have measured as much as three feet, with a mild, pleasant mushroomy flavor.

As any gardener knows, the summer glut of the garden is mirrored in a great surplus in the kitchen. "Summer can be overwhelming because everything comes in at once," says Crawford, who took over as executive chef in February 2015 from local chef-erati Melissa Close-Hart, having serving as her trusty right-hand man. "I'll arrive on Wednesday after two days off, and the fridge is full of so much squash. So much I don't know what to

do with it all. *So much....*"

To make but a dent, he first splits the bicolor 'Zephyr' squash lengthwise. These are the perfect size—picked small to capture peak sweetness. Tonight they're going into a delicate tart with fresh herbs, roasted-pepper purée, and goat cheese. Any squash he can't use are given away to staff. The remainder are sold in the tasting room to patrons who are more than happy to pay.

Back in the kitchen, Crawford gets to work, quartering some plump figs for a straightforward dish that also includes house-cured speck ham, made from Barboursville pigs that forage on pasture and woodland. Crawford turns the meat from those hogs into prosciutto, pancetta, nomo, speck. He even has two refrigerators reserved just for curing.

"I'm paying \$60 for 12 pints of these figs," Crawford adds. And then, as if reminded by his own words, he asks Sacilotto about the progress of their fig tree. The goal was to have enough Barboursville-grown figs that he wouldn't have to buy from outside, but with the early warmth and late freeze this past spring, the tree was killed to the ground. Next year, however, it will likely resprout and hopefully will be producing fruit a couple of years after that.

Assembling the plate, Crawford brings to mind that old cliché: chef as artist, the plate his blank canvas. Only it's very clear that this artist lets the high-quality ingredients speak for themselves. A drizzle of the finest Italian olive oil, a crushing of black pepper, and the dish is done. "I'm into the less-is-more concept," he explains... simply.

Back from his trek through the vineyards, Paschina enters the kitchen, holding out a cup of what looks like apple cider. "Try it," he offers. At this point, my mouth has recovered from the buzz-button high, and my taste buds have recalibrated. It is the sweetest, most complex, most heavenly bit of grape juice I've ever had.

"It's good, no?" Paschina says, explaining that even this "must," from the moscato harvest last fall, has practical uses in the kitchen—now on the menu as part of a cold peach soup. Must from the merlot harvest is also put to work, curing some of Crawford's house-made charcuterie.

The chef pushes forward the composed plate of figs and speck, indicating he's done, as he smiles to himself. One can only assume it's because he knows the ingredients with which he works—the ingredients grown right *here*—are pretty much a chef's dream. 🍷