



# Veggie Tales

*By Marilyn Bailey*

*Photo by Aaron Dougherty*

## Trends



*How a non-meat-eater has found beef-loving Texas a welcome place for her particular palate*



*Top, Beverly Thomas of Cold Springs Farm outside Weatherford fills bins with Japanese white sweet potatoes, waxed rutabagas, red cabbage and red onions, the last of her winter harvest. Her bundles of fresh garlic stalks in a bucket, above, create a lovely still life.*

*Photos by Ralph Lauer*

**V**egetables Are the New Meat," read a November 2010 headline in *New York* magazine.

Well, not here, they're not. Not in this former Chisholm Trail stop with the historic Stockyards and the nation's oldest stock show and rodeo. Not in the land of chefs Grady Spears and Tim Love, of steakhouses, barbecue and Tex-Mex.

You've heard of some trends related to the headline: farm-to-market menus, locavore diets. But vegetables as the star? Even — gasp! — vegetarianism?

There's definitely something in the air nationally. Mario Batali, famous for nose-to-tail cooking of all kinds of cute mammals (pig jowls, anyone?), is doing Meatless Mondays in all his restaurants, and his new Eataly mega-market made headlines for employing a full-time "vegetable butcher." TV shows *Iron Chef* and *Top Chef* recently had their first vegetarian challenges, and Sotheby's held its first heirloom vegetable auction. Most startling of all, celebrity chef José Andrés declared on *60 Minutes* last year that "meat is boring."

Few chefs will agree with that in what is, for good reason, known as Cowtown.

But I've been eating meatless in Fort Worth for 12 years, and it feels like even here, something is changing.

In the 1990s, back when Reata seemed the hottest new restaurant in town, my option even at the best places was usually an indifferent vegetable plate that might have a little Texas flavor but so was starch-heavy it was hard to lift. (Not that this style isn't delicious — my last meal on Earth might involve Del Frisco's mashed potatoes.)

But lately, it's much more exciting for a vegetarian with foodie tendencies to partake of the best of Fort Worth's dining scene. I'm not talking about eating with like-minded friends at the vegan paradise Spiral Diner. In the best "fine-dining" restaurants in town, the produce side of the plate has definitely become more interesting — to me and evidently to the chefs.

**Consider our two** most buzzed-about newcomers: When Ellerbe Fine Foods was named one of America's 10 best new restaurants by *Bon Appétit*, the magazine featured chef Molly McCook's heirloom tomato salad — not her Southern spins on shrimp or pork or beef, but simple tomatoes.

# VeggieTales

And no dish at Casey Thompson's Brownstone Restaurant, just named one of the 10 best new restaurants in the state by *Texas Monthly*, has gotten more ink than her roasted beet hummus, which is served with impossibly tender raw baby vegetables. It is my favorite vegan dish in town right now (and may it never leave her menu).

At Ellerbe, of course, the whole concept is farm to table, and although my meat-eating friends probably haven't noticed, it's a wonderfully welcoming place for vegetarians. As McCook says, "I don't put a vegetarian option on the menu, but that's because I don't want it to be boring! I want to use whatever looks best at that moment."

She was a vegetarian herself for eight years. "Most people think you pick your protein, then come up with sides. But vegetables have always been more of a focus for me than the actual

protein. I look at what vegetables are interesting, then work from there."

This might mean fried Carter Farms okra, tomatoes from Scott Farm and arugula from Cox Farm — McCook talks about "her" farmers a lot, in person and on her menu. Later this season, look for her first squash blossoms — they're labor-intensive, but one farm is attempting them because of the restaurant's demand. "My farmers are inspired by what we're doing here, and they'll try to grow new things. I even look at their seed catalogs."

McCook grew up around her grandparents' vast vegetable garden, which still triggers intense memories (the restaurant's walls hold photos of her as a child in this garden on a street



*Ellerbe Fine Foods' Spanish-style heirloom tomato salad features Scott Farm tomatoes with Marcona almond pesto and sherry vinaigrette.*

*Photos by Jeremy Enlow*

called Ellerbe Court in Shreveport). She fondly recalls that feeling of digging in the cold dirt while feeling the hot sun on her body. "I grew up with these flavors, and I'm trying to re-create that." Fresh, seasonal vegetables are her "memory food."

McCook's pastry chef, Sydney Frey,

who came on board six months ago, shares her boss's passion for local, seasonal ingredients. She translates it into sweet treats such as butternut squash and creme fraiche tart with winter squash whoopie pies, and gingerbread with sweet

persimmon puree and tart cherry syrup. Look for Frey to whip up desserts based on whatever McCook brings in from the local farmers markets. "I'm not from here and haven't learned what's seasonal at any given time, so when the produce comes in, it's always a surprise," Frey says.

Ellerbe is hardly alone, although McCook puts the farm-to-table concept at the forefront and changes her menu more frequently than most. When *Food & Wine* came to town last year for a long feature on urban-cowboy chef Tim Love, it photographed him in his ample vegetable garden. At Classic Café in Roanoke, chef Curtis Wells has started growing a lot of his own produce out back.

But one man who's been cooking this way a long time is Jon Bonnell of Bonnell's Fine Texas Cuisine, which celebrates its 10th anniversary this fall. He's bemused by my mention of Batali and Andrés. "Every time there's a national trend, whether it's molecular gastronomy or foam on everything, the biggest-name chefs are suddenly supposedly on the forefront of that trend.



*A former vegetarian herself, chef Molly McCook embraces locally grown produce for her ever-changing menu at Ellerbe Fine Foods.*



*Beverly Thomas of Cold Springs Farm supplies local restaurants as well as members of her CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) with organically grown vegetables such as this Bibb lettuce.*

*Photos by Ralph Lauer*

But I've always been a part of this."

From the start, in fall 2001, "I wanted as many local products as I could find. I only wanted stuff that made one trip in one truck. You don't want something that spent five days in one cooler, then was transferred to another, maybe sat on a truck overnight. I don't want it to take two or three weeks to get an onion. That's always been our concept."

He, too, mentions his farmers by name: Scott Farm, La Casa Verde, Tassione Farms. Though Bonnell's is known for the highest-quality Texas meat and game, this chef also handpicks each green that goes into his salad mix and can go into some detail about it. "The big rage for a while was spring mix, and most of it comes from California. You had all those different types of lettuce, some going bad at different rates from others, and a lot of fillers in there, stuff people don't much like, like frisee." He discovered Young's Orchard, with a great selection of greenhouse-grown greens. "I like the green oaks and baby romaines. There's about five that we like, and we get 'em with the root balls still attached — we get 'em alive from Charlie, Texas."

Bonnell has always taken this kind of care with everything on his plate, but even he will grudgingly admit there's been something different going on recently. "I think there is a general trend toward more than just the steak." About a year ago, he started listing his sides in detail on the menu — "truffled mushrooms, different baby vegetables, little zucchini. We found that people like that.

"You know, I've never called Bonnell's a steakhouse. I have more fun as a chef in variety. On the meat side, we do venison,



buffalo, pheasant, quail, pork — I want to do a little of everything. So I don't want to just put asparagus on the side of everything."

Vegetarian palates are treated well at this meat-and-game palace, just like everyone else's. "My favorite vegetarian entree we do is the chile relleno. At first when we opened, we'd just do a veggie plate, but I decided, 'Let's create a dish that's so good nobody even realizes it's the veggie entree.' "

**It's gotten easier** to bring local produce home, too. New farmers markets have sprouted up the last couple of seasons in Keller, Colleyville and elsewhere. At weekend markets all over the area, you'll bump elbows with the chefs we've been talking about — McCook likes one in Hurst, and both McCook and Bonnell can be seen shopping at Cowtown Farmers Market in west Fort Worth.

The newest way to take home the best of our regional produce is through Cold Springs Farm's CSA. Farmer Beverly Thomas of Weatherford (we featured her exquisite heirloom melons in a past issue) will not have a booth this year at Cowtown Farmers

Market and instead will sell only to her restaurants — Brownstone is one, and those are her veggies alongside that fabulous beet hummus — and to the rest of us through her CSA (Community Supported Agriculture). You buy a subscription for a season and get weekly deliveries of whatever organic produce the farm is harvesting right now. It's a boon for anyone who likes to cook and to explore at the dining table — but ideal for vegetarians (we get into cooking ruts, too). The 10-week, \$320 spring program starts in April and will include lettuces, baby greens, radishes, kale, Swiss chard, root vegetables, Asian baby greens and a variety of seasonal herbs and fruits. Summer will bring multiple varieties of tomatoes, peppers and much more, for 10 weeks beginning in June. To learn more about Cold Springs Farm's CSA (or stock your kitchen with the same stuff going to Brownstone and Bonnell's), go to [www.site.coldspringsfarmcsa.com](http://www.site.coldspringsfarmcsa.com).

Five years ago, I was barely aware that we had local farms producing food, and I certainly didn't know the names of any farmers. Thomas talks to her CSA customers at the weekly drop-off points (which vary) and through social media to get feedback, just as she talks to the restaurants she supplies. Even home cooks get to be closer to the farmer.

The fact that the food scene here excites a vegetarian, both dining out and at home, is a welcome sign that Fort Worth's culinary life is maturing. We helped put meat-heavy cowboy cuisine on the map, as is only right. But even a carrot-muncher like me is feeling a lot more welcome.