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In Theaters
Now

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Hotels Take 'Locally Grown' a Logical Step Beyond

By TANYA MOHN

David Garcelon, a chef, says he enjoys checking on the little alpine strawberries, Malabar spinach, mojito mint and several varieties of wine grapes in his small [garden](#). But he is not out in his backyard; he's on the 14th-floor roof of the Fairmont Royal York in Toronto, where the view is of the steel, glass and concrete of nearby skyscrapers.

"You can just grab a handful of ripe [tomatoes](#) and they're ready to add to a dish for a small lunch for a board meeting," said Mr. Garcelon, executive chef of the hotel. "It is a much more interesting way to eat. It is almost inevitably fresher and better."

Eating local, homegrown cuisine is not new. There are plenty of practicing "locavores," and restaurants have been serving fresh, [local food](#) for a while. But now, hotels are "going local," establishing partnerships with area farmers and growing food in rooftop gardens as they begin to cater to travelers seeking to eat healthily on the road.

Nor are the hotels' efforts limited to growing fruits and vegetables. Some hotels are now keeping [bees](#), whose honey sweetens tea and soups, desserts and cocktails.

"There is almost not a more versatile product," Mr. Garcelon said. The hotel installed hives in 2008, and last year harvested about 450 pounds of honey.

Mariano Stellner, a corporate director of food and beverage for the hotel's parent, Fairmont Hotels & Resorts, said the company encouraged its chefs to "stay local, stay seasonal, whenever possible."

Fairmont's property in Montreal, the Queen Elizabeth, for example, adopted a goat whose milk is used to make fresh [cheese](#), and the Fairmont in Washington features honey-based drinks. Eleven Fairmont hotels in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Kenya and China keep bees, overseen by local groups or resident beekeepers, and almost half of the brand's 64 properties worldwide keep gardens.

"Hotels have long had ornamental gardens," said Marion Nestle, professor of nutrition, food studies and public health at [New York University](#), and author of "[What to Eat](#)" (North Point Press, 2006). But food-producing ones will "make them more friendly and help connect with the community, in ways I don't think hotels have done in the past."

Jim McIntosh, a senior vice president for Colliers International, who travels frequently selling industrial real estate, said that when he stayed at the Fairmont Vancouver Airport recently, the menu highlighted items from the hotel's garden. "It caught my eye," Mr. McIntosh said, adding that even though he is not a foodie, it was "kind of comforting."

The number of hotels with working gardens and bees is quickly rising, said Bjorn Hanson, divisional dean of the Preston Robert Tisch Center for Hospitality, Tourism and Sports Management at New York University. "It is kind of the ultimate version of local," he said. "It creates a positive image, and people will pay a premium for it."

The Chicago Marriott Downtown Magnificent Mile has its own garden, too. But it also cures its own meats, makes its own cheeses and [pastas](#), and even stomps grapes in the lobby (with guests' help) to create [wines](#), said Myk Banas, executive chef and director of food and beverage operations. "If you order mac and cheese, we make the macaroni, and we make the cheese and the cheese sauce."

The hotel also has bees in its ninth-floor rooftop garden, and some of the honey is used in Rooftop Honey Wheat Beer, made in partnership with a local brewery. "It is so local, it's only sold on one block," Mr. Banas said.

Some hotels do not have their own gardens but establish close relationships with nearby farms. "We change our dinner menu up until 5 p.m., depending on what products we get," said Jason McLeod, the executive chef the Elysian Hotel in Chicago, which opened in December. It is more difficult than ordering everything through one distributor; because the hotel deals with a

number of local farms, he said, “on some nights, we call 20 to 30 farms to place orders.”

The hotel has gone one step further by reserving land at Heritage Prairie Farm in Elburn, Ill., to grow produce specifically for the hotel, and to keep its bees. On a recent visit to the farm, the culinary team, which included bartenders and servers, planted seeds for [Green Zebra](#) and Cherokee Purple heirloom tomatoes, used for its homemade ketchup. The staff also sometimes assists with the harvests at farms. “You have to commit fully,” Mr. McLeod said. “We’re very passionate about what we do.”

Westin Hotels have two properties — in Paris and Annapolis, Md. — that view beekeeping as an opportunity to help the at-risk honey bee population. “My father was a beekeeper for as long as I can remember,” said James Barrett, executive chef and director of food and beverage at the Westin Annapolis.

Mr. Barrett said he inherited the bees after his father died in November, and the hives are now installed on the hotel’s rooftop. Recently, a neighbor of the Westin Annapolis stopped by to say his wildflower garden had taken off this year because of the bees.

“When I’m up on the roof,” Mr. Barrett said, “that buzzing sound is like white noise. It’s time to reflect on the relationship with my father, and the impact he had on me.”