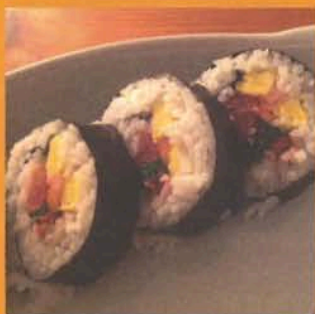


Think Globally, Dine Locally

Vermont restaurants use nearby ingredients to create far-from-home dishes

By MK Bateman



At Downstreet Eats: pork buns, kimbap, dak bulgogi, and banh mi.

Last year I was excited when the Burlington-based weekly *Seven Days* published an insert featuring restaurants participating in Vermont Restaurant Week. I couldn't wait to sample dishes from some of the highly touted localvore eateries I'd read about since moving to Vermont three years earlier.

When I opened up the insert, however, the number of advertisements featuring photos of hamburgers and fries surprised me. While I love a great burger as much as the next person, I was disappointed. I'd been looking forward to sampling cuisines featuring local products served in many different ways. With the variety of local foods available, was a burger really what people wanted most? It got me thinking: Is it possible for global cuisines to thrive in Vermont using mostly local ingredients? If so, do Vermonters even want this?

I decided to answer these questions by seeking out Vermont restaurants that are doing just that: using local products to create innovative menus with flavors inspired by cuisines from all over the globe. My quest took me to three very different restaurants: the Asian-influenced Downstreet Eats, a vegetarian restaurant called MINT, and El Cortijo, which serves Mexican fare.



My journey began at the recently opened Downstreet Eats in Cabot. Chef and proprietor Elena Gustavson has made it her mission to create "regional new American cooking using local and seasonal ingredients, with global influences"—just what I was looking for. Raised in California to a Korean mother and American father, Elena finds Asian food just as normal to her as mac and cheese may be to others. With the restaurant, she hopes to introduce food that is comfortable, affordable, and as local as possible, which has led to an eclectic menu mixing Vietnamese, Chinese, and (of course) Korean influences with classic American favorites. Elena's main thought when creating her menu was to ask herself, Would I want to eat it?

Downstreet Eats is certainly a surprising find in such a quintessentially Vermont town like Cabot. Elena is aware of this potential predicament. "I'm making some dishes that are very different from what people in the area may be used to," she says, "so I've renamed them in a very straightforward manner, listing the ingredients instead of their traditional names—something locals seem to appreciate." Case in point: bibimbap, a staple of Korean food. At Downstreet Eats it's presented as "grilled chicken with kimchi, root veggies, brown rice, and topped with an egg." Her use of root vegetables such as parsnips and carrots, available to her locally, makes the dish authentically Vermont.

The night I visited Downstreet Eats they were out of spring rolls. Elena's provider didn't have bean sprouts available, showcasing a difficulty with cooking Asian food locally: accessibility of traditional ingredients. (Because the climate here, and people's tastes, make finding traditional Korean ingredients impracticable, Elena uses what's accessible to her locally, such as Swiss chard or kale, to make her kimchi.) Instead we had baked leek and garlic cream soup and a caramelized onion dip; while they were not quite the Asian inspiration I'd expected, they were delicious, nonetheless. For the main course, along with the bibimbop, my partner and I tried the spiced shredded pork, steamed buns, and garlicky kale with onion jam and root vegetables in orange vinaigrette. All the dishes were wonderful and highly inventive. For dessert, we were served figs in vanilla wine syrup with crème fraîche.

The restaurant is in a comfortable setting, feeling almost like someone's home, with cozy rooms, charmingly mismatched chairs and tables, and a fireplace. Numerous built-in drawers contain games and toys, which create a wonderful child-friendly environment. In fact, it was Elena's goal to make Downstreet Eats as much a local hangout as a dining experience. The restaurant proved delightful and lived up to its credo of globally influenced local cooking.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DOWNSTREET EATS

ILLUSTRATION COURTESY OF MINT



The next restaurant I visited was a vegetarian restaurant called MINT, located on Waitsfield's historic Bridge Street. Chef Iliyan Deskov and partner Savitri Bhadavati, originally from Bulgaria and Hungary respectively, have clearly incorporated their experiences into their cuisine. Before settling in the Mad River Valley, they owned a restaurant in southern California for many years and have brought their extensive travels through Europe and their love of Indian, Mexican, and Middle Eastern cuisines to Vermont. I sat down with the pair before eating to explain the purpose of my article. They responded, "And you had to pick December to write this article?"

They made a really good point: in a state with a winter as long as Vermont's, finding a wide assortment of local produce in the dead of winter can be challenging, especially for a restaurant where vegetables reign supreme. Iliyan and Savitri have overcome this issue by purchasing organic produce outsourced from other parts of the country when local produce isn't readily available. A good solution, no doubt, and their results are imaginative and quite delicious.

Like Downstreet Eats, MINT seeks to introduce new taste combinations into the local palate. "We want our guests to try things they wouldn't otherwise be introduced to," Iliyan says. They've created a menu as varied as their backgrounds, designing dishes according to regions of the world. The result is a diverse mix of vegetarian and vegan meals that draw inspiration from European, Middle Eastern, Latin, and Asian cuisines. And the overall design of MINT's interior is as globally focused as its food, with Indian- and Moroccan-inspired décor, world music, and wooden tables that create a warm and intimate environment for patrons.

Our meal that day was like a culinary world tour. We began by sampling grilled polenta with mascarpone, chive cream, and onion relish, as well as chard rolls stuffed with rice, lentils, cranberries, mint, onions, herbs, and crème fraîche. For our main courses, we went traditionally vegan with the Asian-influenced curly kale and broccoli braised in tamari (a type of gluten-free soy sauce), garlic, orange juice, fruit juice-sweetened cranberries, brown rice, and black turtle beans, topped with a delectable sauce made with tofu, tamari, lemon, basil, parsley, and kelp. Our second dish was a German staple: baked sauerkraut with vegan sausage, tomato, rice, parsley, and summer savory. It was served with smashed potatoes and crème fraîche. (For those seeking a fully vegan meal, MINT can make many of its menu items vegan upon request.)

While the restaurant's location lends itself to a large tourist base (roughly 75 percent of its clientele), over the past several years MINT has developed a devoted local following. "It took a little time, but we now have a core of loyal locals who come to our restaurant on a weekly basis," Iliyan says. While some Vermonters may be slow to come around to more exotic taste combinations, MINT proves that great food is the most important thing to customers.

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At MINT: Thai curry with puffed rice noodles, polenta with forest mushrooms, and winter rolls—a wintery take on the classic spring rolls with shredded Brussels sprouts, carrots, red peppers, basil, mint, ginger and a grapefruit-hoisin dipping sauce.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MINT



My final destination was Burlington's El Cortijo. Brought to you by the people behind the impressive and highly successful Farmhouse Tap and Grill a few blocks away, El Cortijo is located in a converted railroad car just off Church Street. At first glance, it evokes more of the quintessential feel of a Brooklyn-style diner than a Mexican restaurant. But the Mexican tiles adorning the walls and the charming stringed lights made from converted cans of El Pato tomato sauce give you a sense that you're getting something much more authentically Mexican. The restaurant certainly delivers on that promise.

El Cortijo emerged from the success of the Farmhouse Tap and Grill's "Taco Tuesdays." Phillip Clayton, chef-partner for The Farmhouse Group and a native of North Carolina, grew up in an area where Mexican food and culture were prevalent, leading to a lifelong love of the cuisine. Taco Tuesdays gave him an opportunity to showcase something he'd been making at home for years. "Tacos are a great vehicle for sourcing Vermont's foods, especially its meats," he says. When El Cortijo's current space became available, a Mexican restaurant seemed the ideal choice. Since opening, it has quickly filled a void in Burlington's food scene.

My meal was as wonderful as it was local. Although authentic Mexican food must rely on long-distance products such as avocados that can only be supplied by distribution services, this doesn't take away from the restaurant's core belief in local first. As Phillip puts it, "We built our menu around what we can get locally and source the rest. Our philosophy is that food is created out in the field."

For starters, I had escabeche, an assortment of pickled jalapeño, onions, carrots and garlic, and house-made nachos with chorizo sausage, queso fundido, Vermont Bean Crafters' black beans, olives, scallions, pickled jalapeños, salsa, and sour cream. For my main dish, I couldn't resist trying the taco combination. I had three tacos: the carnitas, which featured seasoned local pork and charred pineapple salsa; the lengua, with braised beef tongue, salsa verde, and shaved radishes; and the legumbres, which included local vegetables in the form of roasted corn salsa, pickled onions, and salsa fresca. El Cortijo proved that authentic world cuisine, made with local produce whenever possible, could be successfully prepared.



As for my initial questions—whether global cuisines can thrive in our local food landscape, and whether Vermonters want to eat them—I will say that while pub food continues to dominate many local food restaurants, global foods are certainly on the rise. Each of the three restaurants I visited used localvore products as much as they feasibly could to create innovative world cuisines that were both delicious and affordable, not to mention quite popular with their customers. I can't speak for all Vermonters, but I know I will definitely seek out more of these innovative local flavors.

To find Vermont restaurants that use a significant amount of local food, visit the website of the Vermont Fresh Network: vermontfresh.net.

MK Bateman is a freelance writer and recovering New Yorker based in central Vermont.



At El Cortijo: Neil's Nachos, the restaurant bar, and counter, El Cortijo taco plate.

PHOTOS BY JESSICA ANDERSON

PHOTO: COURTESY OF BENITO'S HOT SAUCE