

farm fork

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Blue Moon Acres' farm manager Scott Morgan works in a high tunnel full of baby heads of lettuce at the Pennington location.

Facing: Japanese herbed hamachi sashimi with micro shiso, Thai basil, compressed cucumber, saltwort, and crystalline flowers, at Elements in Princeton.
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TENDER MICROGREENS ARE MUCH IN DEMAND BY CHEFS IN THE REGION'S MOST PROGRESSIVE RESTAURANTS. STEP BEHIND THE ARTISTRY ON MANY OF THESE PLATES, AND YOU'LL FIND THE SOIL-CRUSTED, DEDICATED HANDS OF JIM AND KATHY LYONS OF BLUE MOON ACRES – ONE OF THE FIRST FARMS IN THE NATION TO CULTIVATE THESE TINY TREASURES.

by Patti Verbanas Photography by Courtney Winston

"WHAT TIME ARE THEY BEING HARVESTED?" THE MORNING STAFF MEETING IS BREAKING UP AND JIM LYONS, CO-OWNER OF BLUE MOON ACRES FARM IN BUCKINGHAM, PENNSYLVANIA, PLACES HIS ELBOWS ON THE TABLE, HIS BLUE EYES FIXED EARNESTLY ON HIS EMPLOYEE, KATIE. THEY HAVE SOME CONCERN ABOUT THE CILANTRO AND ITS READINESS FOR THE DAY'S HARVEST. ➡





“WE GROW ABOUT 60 DIFFERENT TYPES OF HERBS AND VEGETABLES, AND TRY TO ACCOMMODATE THEM AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE WITHOUT DRIVING OURSELVES CRAZY.” –JIM LYONS

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From top, left: Blue Moon Acres' Pennington farm; squash blossoms; Scott Morgan with daughter, Clara; chiffonade of chives at Elements; carrot greens; red-veined sorrel.
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“WHENEVER THEY GET DRY,” KATIE RESPONDS. “THEY ARE STILL WET.”

“IF YOU HAVE THE SHADE CLOTHS ON AND ARE MISTING AS USUAL, THOSE TRAYS SHOULD BE DRY.” JIM LEANS BACK IN CONSIDERATION, THEN NOTES, “THEY’RE GOING TO BE *HOT*.”

“We can pull them apart so they can be harvested,” Katie suggests. Jim nods. “That’ll be good.”

As Katie opens the door and heads out to the greenhouses, the shrill trilling of cicadas and a blast of summer heat enters the trailer-office. Jim turns to me with a wry smile. “Cilantro is always a challenge,” he says. “It doesn’t like getting dry, and it doesn’t like getting wet. It has to be *perfect*.”

Getting things perfect has been the mission of Jim and his wife, Kathy, for the past 18 years, ever since they first started growing microgreens — plants that are harvested at the seedling leaf stage, often when they are just 2 to 3 inches tall. Growing small presents particular benefits and challenges for microgreen farmers such as the Lyonses. At Blue Moon Acres, greens and herbs are densely seeded and grown in greenhouse-enclosed flats in an organic soil mix of peat moss and compost — with no chemical herbicides, pesticides, or fertilizers. This economy of space allows for compact farming, and the labor is painstaking: Each flat, which is often at a different stage of production, is watered by hand — and if you water too much, you risk stunted germination and rot.

“You have more control growing this type of product than you have in a field,” Jim explains. “The plants are in structures that are heated during the winter and cooled in the summer. We’re always trying to control as many things as we can, but each crop is a bit different and needs different things. We grow about 60 different types of herbs and vegetables, and try to accommodate them as much as possible without driving ourselves crazy.”

The nurturing that the couple and their 20-plus employees provide has paid off: Blue Moon Acres’ microgreens are plated at blue-chip establishments in New York (Jean-Georges, the Waldorf-Astoria) and Philadelphia (the Ritz-Carlton, many of the Stephen Starr and Jose Garces locations), and at similar restaurants within a three-hour radius. Greens are harvested on average every two to three weeks; shiso, the longest germinator, is reaped a month after sowing. “We harvest them when they are ready and ship within 24 hours,” Kathy says. “The chefs want greens that are very fresh.”

Scott Anderson, owner of Elements in Princeton and a Blue Moon Acres client since the restaurant opened in 2008, is a veteran of using microgreens to accentuate dishes. “If we’re serving Italian pasta, we use the micro basil rather than shredded basil because the microgreens pack a pretty significant punch visually, as well as in terms of taste,” he explains. Elements, which is known for its Japanese-inspired



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*Extra-fine chives (above).
 The table is set at Elements.*





aesthetic, frequently employs shiso as well as micro cilantro, a variety of mustard greens, and micro kale — “anything,” Anderson says, “that might have a bitter edge to it.”

“These chefs are artists,” Kathy says. “They are always looking for what is new and unusual in terms of color, shape, texture, or taste that will set off the flavors of the dish they are preparing. But most of all, the greens must be very visually appealing.”

Microgreens have been produced in the United States since the mid-1990s, but leapt into public awareness in 2009 when researchers at Johns Hopkins University discovered in a small study that people who consumed two-and-a-half ounces of three-day-old broccoli sprouts daily for two months may obtain some protection against stomach cancer. Other than this study, however, the research on the nutritional advantages of microgreens over their mature counterparts is scant. “I wish they would do more research,” says Brenda Murdock, a registered dietitian at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey. She notes that the provable benefits of microgreens are their eco-friendly growing practices. “Since they are harvested very young, they grow back quickly and take up little space,” says Murdock, who has worked with community-supported agriculture programs. “So, you’re getting the nutritional benefits while supporting produce that won’t consume a lot of resources.”

Ecological friendliness is one motive shared by Jim and Kathy who both have deep roots in the soil. Jim’s grandparents lived on a farm on Durham Road in Gilford, Connecticut. (Blue Moon Acres is auspiciously also located on a “Durham Road.”) A psychology major by degree, Jim worked in the natural foods industry, first in retail and then in wholesale, before making the transition into full-time farming. “I worked backwards,” he says, laughing. “I always wanted to get back to the farm. Perhaps it was that connection with my grandmother — she loved living in the country.”

“My parents were farmers. I always hated it — swore I would never do it — then I met Jim, and that’s all he wanted to do,” says Kathy, a former home economics teacher. “It was always in my blood, and I was just trying to resist it.”

These days, there’s more than microgreens growing at Blue Moon Acres, which is experiencing a growth spurt of its own. Three years ago, the couple purchased a 63-acre conventional farm in Pennington and have been working steadily to bring the soil chemistry back into balance to start organic farming. And, unlike the operation at the 7-acre Buckingham location, in Pennington, they’re thinking big: growing a variety of regular-sized greens.

“I like the fact that I can make a difference in a person’s life by feeding them something healthier and in so doing also improve the value of the soil and the local ecology,” Jim says of his ventures. “I get a lot of pleasure from working in the soil. I never get tired of seeing a seed germinate and grow. It’s that simple.” *

*At Elements, Pete prepares a brunoise of jalapeño (top);
micro amaranth (bottom) is frequently used as a garnish at the restaurant.*



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—KATHY LYONS

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 Clockwise, from top, left:
 Scott Anderson with a squash blossom
 grown on Elements' property; local
 radish salad; Scott Morgan's wife, Ali,
 with their son, Wynn; baby heads of
 lettuce packed for shipping;
 Scott Morgan walks past high tunnels;
 tables await patrons at Elements.
