

# RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

Face it. You may never cook like the chefs at the French Laundry. But Aaron Keefer gladly shares how he grows edibles of ultimate quality for the legendary restaurant.

STRAW MULCH KEEPS THIS MANICURED BED OF 'SUGAR ANNE' SNAP PEAS LOOKING TIDY.

# IT'S 6:30

in the evening and the end of a long day in the garden. Aaron Keefer is dropping off the ingredient list for the chefs at The French Laundry. They will review it and use the list to plan the next day's menu. By 6:30 the next morning, Keefer will return to pick up the list and begin harvesting what the chefs have checked off. When the harvest is complete all the ingredients are delivered to the kitchen and prepared by chefs who will begin plating the food by 5:30 p.m.

This is what it takes to stock the Michelin three-starred restaurant with ingredients at the height of their flavor. It's second nature to Keefer, head gardener at the French Laundry Culinary Garden, located in Yountville, in Napa County. Keefer goes about his work with a quietude that evokes a Zen proverb: "Before enlightenment; chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment; chop wood, carry water."

To the classically trained chef who grew up farming, the work and the routine comes quite naturally. "Both my grandparents were farmers," he says. "My first job was picking Japanese beetles off of raspberry bushes." It's this marriage of classical training and a love of being in the fields—actually, here it's a 3-acre farm—that's led to a garden that grows and harvests for taste first and foremost. "Why would a farmer harvest turnips that might take six weeks to get to a 1-inch size when they could wait just a few more weeks to get turnips that are nearly triple in length and diameter? It doesn't make sense unless you are not worried about the economics," Keefer says. He harvests his turnips at 1 inch because that is what the chefs prefer.


He must be doing something right. The executive chefs at The French Laundry and its sister restaurants, Bouchon Bakery and Ad Hoc, all use the produce Keefer and his team of two gardeners deliver daily. We had a chance to sit down and speak with Keefer to find out how he does it, what makes the garden so successful, and why he thinks it's important for everyone to get their hands into the soil.

---

BY THAD ORR

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MEG SMITH





**KEEFER GROWS A VARIETY OF BEETS, INCLUDING 'RED ACE' (SHOWN), 'CHIOGGIA', AND 'TOUCHSTONE GOLD'.**



**GD: HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN WORKING AT THE FRENCH LAUNDRY?**

**KEEFER:** I've been here almost six years now.

**WHAT'S YOUR BACKGROUND? DID YOU COME OUT OF THE GARDENING SIDE OR THE CULINARY SIDE?**

Actually, both. I grew up farming and spent a lot of time on my grandparents' farm. I'm not formally trained in horticulture, but I have learned the most from getting my hands dirty. I went to school at the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) in Hyde Park, New York, so I guess I'm a chef by training. Before I went to CIA I was working in the Finger Lakes wine region of New York at Taughanock Farms Inn. After I graduated, I landed a job out west in the kitchen of one of Michael Chiarello's restaurants and Tra

Vigne, an Italian restaurant in Napa Valley. I kept my hand in growing and knowing how to produce raw ingredients I was cooking with, so when the opportunity arose to get back into farming at The French Laundry, I took it.

**WHICH COAST DO YOU PREFER, EAST OR WEST?**

In the west you can grow food year round. Back east you're shut down November through March, so as a farmer I'd have to say I prefer the west.

**HOW BIG IS THE GARDEN?**

The French Laundry Culinary Garden is 3 acres, but there are only 2 acres of tillable land. Not too long ago we added 1.5 acres of growing space at Trefethen Family Vineyards. At any given time we are growing up to a couple hundred different items at the culinary garden. We have 52 planting beds that are continually producing food for our restaurants. Each

bed is 25 feet long by 25 feet wide. We also have a 90-foot long by 30-foot wide hoop house, four beehives, an escarot farm, and a chicken coop that houses 22 bantams.

**WHAT'S YOUR PROCESS FOR PLANNING THE GARDEN?**

To keep things tidy, we have mown grass paths that divide the beds, and we don't mix crops. Each bed has its own crop. This means if a bed is all tomatoes, we might grow different varieties or cultivars, but we won't grow peppers there. This makes watering easier, since each bed has its own schedule, and crop rotation is simplified as well. When the beans are done, all around the same time, the entire bed can be rotated to the next crop.

**WHAT ARE YOU THINKING ABOUT LATELY?**

For me, flavor comes from two things: genetics and the life in the soil. The genetics, which I

ROWS OF 'FLASHY TROUT  
BACK' LETTUCE, A GREAT  
HEIRLOOM VARIETY WITH  
A DELICATE FLAVOR, GROW  
BESIDE ROWS OF RED  
SALANOVA LETTUCE.





THIS DISH, *CANARD À LA PRESSE*, IS MADE WITH “*COU DE CANARD FARCIE*,” GARDEN CARROTS, AND ANTE DAIY CREAM YOGURT, MEDJOO DATES, GARDEN HONEY, AND “*SAUCE HYDROMEL*.”

## GET YOUR OWN TASTY CULINARY GARDEN

**BUY SUPERIOR SEEDS** Order seeds from companies that focus on flavor in their genetic selection.

**START WITH GREAT SOIL** Don't add oil-based fertilizer. Stick to aged fertilizer, worm castings, and compost teas.

**ORGANIZE FOR EASY CARE** Plant your garden in blocks of varieties. Tomatoes go in the tomato

bed; peppers in the pepper bed; beans in the bean bed. This makes watering, harvesting, and rotating crops easier because each bed can have its own schedule.

**STAY TIDY** Keep paths and soil in beds covered with a mulch such as straw, cocoa hulls, or shredded cedar mulch. This keeps moisture in the soil and you won't have to stand in mud.

**HARVEST FOR TASTE** Figure out when produce is at its peak flavor (note the size and color) for the recipes you're using it in and harvest it then.

**KEEP A JOURNAL** Take notes on successes and failures both in the garden and in the kitchen. Write down what has the biggest impact on flavor, how you grew it, its location, watering details, and when you harvested it.

feel are most important, come from selecting the right seeds from heirloom genetic lines that carry superior flavor. I've found varieties I like from different seed companies. From Johnny's Selected Seeds I like beets ('Chioggia', 'Red Ace', 'Touchstone Gold') and radishes. Baker Creek melons are really tasty, as are their herbs. I like so much from Seed Savers Exchange, but their peppers are great. I also like that they work with farmers to grow out heirloom seeds to make sure they're genetically pure.

### WHY KEEP THE GARDEN SO ORDERLY? AND HOW?

The garden is visible from the restaurant, so it's important that visitors see a manicured setting. It has an impact on how guests perceive the restaurant. This is why we have the mowed grass paths, which are

purely aesthetic, and why we cover the soil in the beds with straw. Straw also makes it easier to harvest—we don't have to stand in 2 inches of mud.

### WHY INVEST SO MUCH IN HAVING A GARDEN THIS SIZE? COULDN'T YOU OUTSOURCE?

For us—I'm speaking for the chefs here too—the value lies in the flavor. This comes from getting the right genetics and using the proper growing techniques, but also from working closely with the chefs. We are harvesting the specific sizes the chefs want at the specific time they want it. This usually isn't congruent with what is available in the marketplace. So it's about taste *and*

**FRESHLY HARVESTED 'ALBION' STRAWBERRIES. 'SEASCAPE', 'ALBION', 'PINEBERRY', AND ALPINE ARE THE FOUR VARIETIES OF STRAWBERRIES HARVESTED AT THE CULINARY GARDEN.**

availability. Also, our guests see firsthand that our farm is sustainable and organic.

I drop ingredient lists off every evening between 5 and 7 p.m., and the chefs sit down and look at it around 1 a.m. when they're done in the kitchen for the night. They craft the next day's menu from this daily list. We pick up the list when we arrive in the morning, harvest the produce, and bring it to them directly from the garden. The ingredients are still alive when the chefs begin cooking with them, and our guests can taste that freshness.



Once a quarter, I meet with Chef de Cuisine David Breeden to plan what we will grow for the coming season.

### WHERE DOES YOUR INSPIRATION COME FROM?

Often it comes from the chefs. It's common for a chef to see something while traveling and send me a text. They'll wonder, "What is this? Can we grow it?" I always enjoy finding new varieties that taste great. I'll visit farms and go to other Bay Area restaurants. Blue Hill at Stone Barns, in Pocantico Hills, New York, is a great place with a wonderful education center. Also, The Chef's Garden in Ohio is one of the premier farms in the country.

An inspirational person we work with is Peter Jacobsen in Yountville, California. He's a dentist by trade and also has an orchard with more than



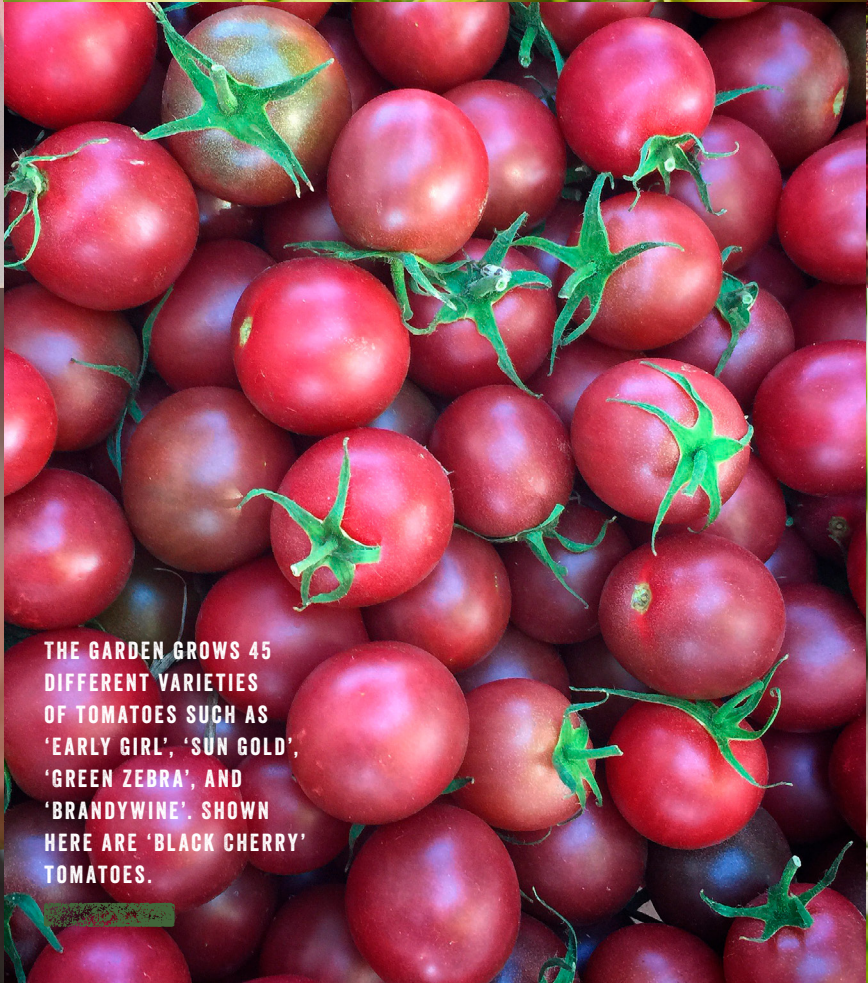
'CHERRIETTE' RADISHES ARE HARVESTED YEAR ROUND AT THEIR PEAK.



AT TIMES KEEFER LETS BROCCOLI GO TO FLOWER. THE YELLOW BLOOMS ARE USED IN RECIPES AND AS GARNISHES.



THE CHEFS AT THE FRENCH LAUNDRY LOVE 'FINO VERDE' BASIL BECAUSE OF THE SIZE OF THE LEAF, THE DEPTH OF FLAVOR, AND THE RICH COLOR.



THE GARDEN GROWS 45 DIFFERENT VARIETIES OF TOMATOES SUCH AS 'EARLY GIRL', 'SUN GOLD', 'GREEN ZEBRA', AND 'BRANDYWINE'. SHOWN HERE ARE 'BLACK CHERRY' TOMATOES.



IN MARCH, THE FRENCH LAUNDRY CULINARY GARDEN IS OFTEN FILLED WITH WINTER GREENS LIKE SAVOY CABBAGE, 'FLASHY TROUT BACK' LETTUCE, RADICCHIO, AND 'WINTER DENSITY' LETTUCE.



TAKE A LOOK INSIDE A 'CINNATI MARKET' RADISH. GROWN FROM SEED PURCHASED FROM SEED SAVERS EXCHANGE.



AT THE CULINARY GARDEN SAVOY CABBAGE IS GROWN AND USED DURING WINTER AND SPRING.



AN ARRANGEMENT OF PRODUCE COLLECTED FROM THE GARDEN IN LATE SUMMER.

120 trees where he's growing over 100 different varieties—including apples, figs, plums, almonds, peaches, nectarines, and a variety of citrus—on about 1.5 acres. Around 95 percent of what he produces goes to The French Laundry and our other restaurants in town.

**WHAT LESSONS HAVE YOU LEARNED FROM GROWING FOOD WITH SUCH STRICT STANDARDS?**

The best lesson is patience. Not everything will grow the same each year. One year our radishes went to flower quickly, so we used the radish flowers in a dish. I'm in direct communication with the chefs so they know what's going on in the garden and what's available or coming soon. Then we make a decision about whether or not we'll let something go to flower to use it in a dish or turn over that bed. It's a symbiotic relationship with the chefs.

Also, be patient with the soil. Try not to add oil-based fertilizers and don't use fish or kelp emulsion. These give plants immediate growth, but you lose texture and get more pests. Instead, use organic aged manure or worm castings. Work it into the soil, then wait for plants to do their thing.

**WHAT ARE SOME OF YOUR FAVORITE CROPS?**

I hold winter and early season crops near and dear to my heart. Garlic grown in the garden has a flavor that's more nuanced than what you find in the store. I get garlic varieties from Seed Savers Exchange and Ed Fraser over at Fraser's Garlic Farm in Rochester, New York, because it is distinguishable in any dish. I also love winter greens like 'Alcosa' cabbage and radicchio from Johnny's Selected Seeds. The flavor and texture of winter greens is great. In February and March we grow our second crop of cabbage, radishes, spring onions, peas, broccoli, and more. And in the hoop house we start summer crops—tomatoes, peppers, and eggplant.

**FLAVORFUL FINDS SHOPPING LIST**

**JOHNNY'S SELECTED SEEDS**

- ♦ Beets ('Chioggia', 'Red Ace', 'Touchstone Gold')
- ♦ 'Alcosa' cabbage
- ♦ Radicchio
- ♦ 'Cherriette' radishes

**BAKER CREEK HEIRLOOM SEED CO.**

- ♦ Melons
- ♦ Herbs

**SEED SAVERS EXCHANGE**

- ♦ Garlic
- ♦ Peppers
- ♦ 'Cincinnati Market' radish

**ANY TIPS FOR PLANNING A KITCHEN GARDEN AND KEEPING IT GOING?**

You have to plan the next year's season when the current season ends. Keep a log and write down successes and failures right after the season is over. Get your seed orders ready early so you don't miss out on top varieties.

**DO YOU GROW FOR SPECIFIC DISHES?**

We have. For example, when we did a week-long pop-up restaurant at Harrods in London, we had to succession plant in order to harvest for weeks around the event.

**WHAT ARE CHEFS ASKING FOR LATELY?**

Chefs are always looking for something new. Padrón peppers were all the rage, but that's changed. Chefs want things that excite visitors and that are different from what other restaurants have. Right now our favorite thing is 'Aji Dulce' peppers. They look like 'Habanero' peppers but they're sweet. In the restaurant they are pickled and the liquid is used to flavor many dishes.

**WHY SHOULD EVERYONE HAVE A CULINARY GARDEN AT HOME?**

Well, it's not always less

expensive than buying vegetables, but there are other rewards. It's important for people to get their hands dirty and connect with the food they put in their bodies. Any vegetable your kids grow, they will eat. The health benefits are multifaceted and you get to provide for your family.

**WHAT ARE A FEW TIPS FOR CREATING AND SUSTAINING A GREAT KITCHEN GARDEN?**

First, don't overreach. If you have a small space, start with herbs. They'll have the most significant impact on the flavor of your cooking. Next, prep the soil correctly. We like to include worm castings, and we make our own compost tea. Third, make sure you have a steady source of water. It's important to have this on automatic for when you're away on vacations and especially during summer months. At the culinary garden we have everything on a drip system. Fourth, try to experiment. Try different things and write down what worked and what didn't. Lastly, when planning your garden, plant what you like to eat. Think about meals you like to make and ingredients you know how to use.



**SLOW COOKED FILLET OF WILD SCOTTISH SEA TROUT IS A DISH MADE WITH A 'SATSUMA' MANDARIN CONFIT, KALUGA CAVIAR, AND PEA SHOOT COULIS.**







**A COLORFUL MORNING HARVEST OF MICROGREENS FOR THE KITCHEN: GREEN, YELLOW, AND PURPLE HARICOTS VERTS; AMARANTH, PURSLANE, PURPLE RADISH SPROUTS, AND SUNFLOWER SPROUTS. THE MICROGREENS ARE USED AS GARNISHES.**

