

TLF: Tender Love and Farming at FARM Restaurant at the Carneros Inn, Napa Valley



FARM garden at the Carneros Inn
Credits: Catherine Bostian



Slideshow: [Garden-to-Table](#)

Peter Stonebraker, the culinary gardener at FARM Restaurant, located next to the Carneros Inn, squats close to the ground, closely purveying the soil, pulls out a weed, looks up with a big smile and throws the weed into his compost bin. This instance is a microcosm of the larger scheme of things at FARM; the natural cycle here rotates around a focus on the land, sustainability, attention to natural flavors and lots of passion and TLC.

FARM Restaurant delights the diners and visitors of the Carneros Inn in Napa Valley. Only a short drive from San Francisco, it has the feel of a bucolic, far-off escape from the city. The Carneros Inn is tucked in rolling hills full with grape vines, with a stylish, yet cozy country-chic décor. The elegant, rustic cabins and ranch-style buildings are embraced on all sides by the bustling gardens and fruit trees that cover the property. As one walks the property, all senses are enlivened by the sights, smells and feel of this peaceful, pastoral landscape. The surroundings are complimented further by the exceptional service, top-rated spa, and sophisticated ambiance, making it the perfect place for a weekend retreat, a romantic getaway, a beautiful wedding or other special events.

One cannot help but notice the gardens of Carneros Inn. If you do find yourself in the garden, you will likely be pleasantly greeted by Peter Stonebraker, the culinary gardener, and/or one, or both, of FARM's chefs, Executive Chef Steven Tevere, and Chef de Cuisine Andrew Budnyj. Guests are invited into the garden for tours, where they can learn where food comes from, what a tomato plant looks like, and what it takes to be organic and sustainable. The culinary gardener excitedly shares his passion and knowledge for enlivening the earth.

Growing up on a quarter acre of land in Vallejo, California, Stonebraker spent 10 years of his life learning gardening from his family. His grandmother picked cotton, and when Stonebraker was young, she continued her gardening by pruning her flourishing rose garden. "She gave me an appreciation for pruning," says Stonebraker, "she was making the roses healthier and enhancing their life; that inspired me."

After studying Environmental Studies and Spanish at Willamette University in Oregon, Stonebraker lived in Ecuador. During his time there, he learned about the location, the agriculture – and to love his green thumb. He also became very conscious of water and using it resourcefully. With a history saturated by gardening, it makes sense that Stonebraker now describes his job as a culinary gardener as, "not a job, but a vocation."

Stonebraker's passion for his vocation is evident; "you develop a relationship with the garden," he says, "you think about it deeper, before you go to bed and when you wake up in the morning."

While Stonebraker is transcending the bounds of 'job', his garden is transcending the bounds of organic, and not just in the exciting biodiversity of the garden. "We use things an organic garden would [to protect the plants], but we transcend organic," says Stonebraker, "we use active monitoring, IPM." IPM is essentially Stonebraker's passion brought to life. It means that he is out there, torrential rain or scorching sunshine, monitoring the growth of every individual plant. And that's only the beginning; "it takes multiple methods," says Stonebraker, "sometimes I may spray the tomatoes with culinary oil, or cut off an infected branch here or there, or use fish emulsion to enhance the immune system of the plant." Even as we spoke, Stonebraker was pulling weeds from his plant's soil and tossing them in the compost bin. "It brings reality into hand; you learn the importance of a cumulative effect and that everything in the garden is different and therefore, has different requirements," says Stonebraker.

Stonebraker translates his passion into innovation and flavor, flirting with burying carbon, planting new and challenging plants, and reusing seeds from plants in the garden. "It is trial and error," says Stonebraker, "no organic garden is going to be perfect. You learn to accept imperfections in veggies, and glean what you can." And while there may be a hole or two in the leaf of a radish, there are no holes in the flavor. Stonebraker describes the veggies in the garden as "delicious." "The broccoli is so incredibly good," added Chef Tevere. Yes, you read right, there is a chef in the garden.

Stonebraker wasn't alone in the garden; Executive Chef of FARM Steven Tevere was standing by his side, perhaps an uncommon sight for visitors, but a daily (and multiple times a day) occurrence at FARM. At FARM, there is a cohesive communication, filled with mutual inspiration, between the chefs and Stonebraker. "It's enlightening," says Chef Tevere, "finding out what makes him tick and getting on the same page. It's wonderful to have someone who cares as much as I do about the ingredients, but when they're growing."

This is where the word 'culinary' gets added to Stonebraker's title of culinary gardener. "The chefs can come up and say what they would like to grow" says Stonebraker, "and I can bring the produce over at its crispest, when it is most ideal for the plant to be cooked." "You have the chance to go to a restaurant and experience a homegrown carrot," says Stonebraker.

"A lot of restaurants use the term "farm-to-table," says Chef Tevere, "but what we care about is sharing the understanding of where food comes from." While most produce in stores is dictated by its ability to be transported, the community at FARM is largely unaffected by transport; "here, we can grow soft-skinned tomatoes and easily bruised apples – and the quality is better." The chef added a bit of scientific backing; "when you look at vegetables, you think about sugar contents, which converts to mealy textured carbs. The sugar leeches out as the fruits and vegetables age. But here, the flavors are still all there." The transportation for the produce from FARM's garden only has to travel down a small hill or is directly outside the restaurant; "here, there is an intimate relationship between food and where it comes from," says Stonebraker.

This relationship is quite literal in the physical relationship between the chefs and Stonebraker, but FARM transcends this, as well. "We are trying to integrate the kitchen with the garden," says Chef Tevere, "and the guests." It is not surprising that guests from the big city would come to Carneros Inn for an escape; it is surprisingly accessible from the metropolitan center of San Francisco (only a 45min drive), yet transports you to the thriving, natural world of a childhood dreamscape. "Sometimes people come here and have never seen a tomato plant before," says Stonebraker, who regularly gives guests a tour of the gardens, "it's important for people to leave the city and get their hands dirty."