

# WHITE TEETH, GREEN GREEN THUMB

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NADIA LACHANCE

AN ACCIDENTAL FARMER  
(WHO'S ALSO A DENTIST)  
EXPOSES DINERS TO  
THE PECULIAR AND  
THE SUBLIME.

BY REBECCA FLINT MARX

84 San Francisco | August 2016









# SECRETARY THAT

Peter Jacobsen says, a tiny purple flower in his outstretched palm. Plucked from an anise hyssop plant, it's one of the 25 different kinds of flowers you can eat on the 1.3 acres that comprise Jacobsen Orchards, the culinary garden that Jacobsen has been farming for the past 34 years. Although he calls it his "secret garden," Jacobsen's Yountville plot is beloved by some of the best chefs in the Bay Area: Much of its bounty goes to the French Laundry, and the rest is currently being divvied up between Ninebark, SPQR, and AL's Place. Jacobsen, who has also supplied produce to Atelier Crenn's Dominique Crenn and Jeremy Fox when he was at Ubuntu, says the caliber of his clients is no coincidence: "The chefs willing to put up with the spontaneity, they have a gymnastic quality—they're the ones who get the Michelin stars," he says. "Others don't have the tolerance or inspiration."

While Jacobsen is hardly the only farmer supplying high-end chefs with local produce, he's one of the new and more rarefied breed of farmers who grow exclusively for restaurants. Because his land is so small and his crops are so impeccable, the chefs who are lucky enough to work with him treat his harvests as precious commodities. And because much of what drives Jacobsen is his love of sharing his discoveries with chefs, he provides them with possibilities they wouldn't otherwise enjoy. SPQR chef

Matthew Accarrino recalls a year when he and Jacobsen grew savoy cabbage: He discovered that the leaves were more versatile if they were cut while the cabbage was still growing. "If I tried to ask another farmer growing 1,000 heads of cabbage to harvest the leaves, he would think I was crazy," he says.

It's indeed a bit crazy to find a backyard with 120 producing fruit trees off a quiet residential street in Yountville, but Jacobsen is an improbable farmer. When he and his wife, Gwendolyn, bought their house, he was a practicing dentist and dental professor—it was the excess of ripe fruit on the property that first inspired him to sell his produce to chefs. Today, Jacobsen is still a dentist in San Francisco two days a week. But Yountville is home, and when he's asked what he does for a living, "I say I'm a farmer," he says. "Everyone tends to have preconceived notions about farmers and dentists. 'Farmer' is less threatening."

To tour Jacobsen's land with him is a bit like traipsing through Wonderland with the white rabbit as your guide. He'll feed you tiny white strawberries that taste, as he says, "like somebody put a strawberry in a strawberry"; proffer improbably savory, slightly fishy green leaves that appear to be coated in sugar ("ficoïde glaciale, the darling of fancy chefs," he explains);

and, standing in the shade of a celestial fig tree, offer you a daylily to eat—"but just the yellow part." You half expect him to follow that with an invitation to dine on an actual lotus.

"He's like Willy Wonka; he's not trying to churn out 60 flats of Black Mission figs a week. For him, it's all about the differences and variations," says Accarrino. The chef has been working with Jacobsen for five years and drives up to the farm on a weekly basis. Although the farm isn't big enough to grow ingredients in huge quantities, he says, "if I want to grow nine different kinds of peas, that's the place it will work."

"It's been a lot of fun to have an orchard on your doorstep," adds Elwyn Boyles, the Thomas Keller Restaurant Group's pastry chef. "You're able to look at your fruit as it progresses and choose what you're going to do with it at its different stages." Recently, he pickled some of Jacobsen's underripe green peaches and made ice cream from their leaves that tastes exactly like almonds.

Working with imaginative, ambitious chefs has kept Jacobsen inspired and motivated; teaching and learning from them has helped him maintain what he refers to as his "beginner's mind." Walking through his orderly rows, he looks a decade younger than his 71 years. He plans to keep going until he can't, and then go some more. "It's written into our will," he says. "Gweny is to put me in a corner and let me do the weeding." ■



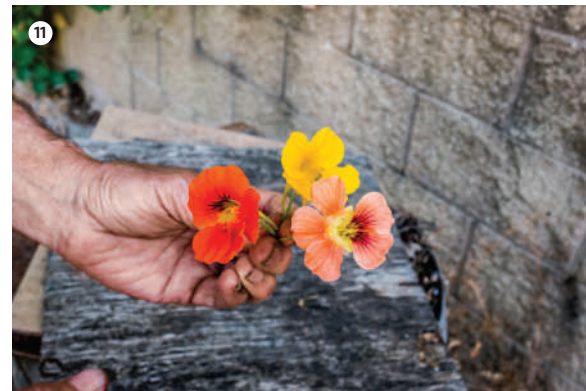




**Peter Jacobsen lets us in on some of his garden's many secrets.**

- 1 "This sylvetta arugula," Jacobsen says, "has more wasabi flavor than regular arugula."
- 2 He describes these pretty but flavorless blue cornflower petals as "edible confetti."
- 3 "I love this stuff," he says of this ficoïde glaciale. "It has the slightest hint of fish."
- 4 White strawberries are in season for only 8 to 10 weeks.
- 5 This type of bean, which Jacobsen calls a square pea, "is a commis's [junior chef's] nightmare."
- 6 When it's torn, this peach tree leaf releases the aroma of almonds.
- 7 You can caramelize this daylily, and also stuff and batter it.
- 8 This baby crookneck squash blossom is "the French Laundry look," Jacobsen notes; the smaller, the better.
- 9 Miniature white cucumbers are particularly crisp and have a melon-like flavor.





- 10 Dentistry and farming are "all connected through a personality that enjoys detail," Jacobsen says.
- 11 "The definition of an edible flower," he explains, "is that it won't kill you when you eat it."
- 12 This pistou basil has an "amazing burst" of flavor, he says. "How does this surprise get used?"
- 13 Most of the farm's squash blossoms go to SPQR's Accarrino.
- 14 Four kinds of mulberries are grown here; these white mulberries are headed for the French Laundry.
- 15 Jacobsen describes the innards of this finger lime as "citrus caviar."
- 16 Is the farmer tempted by his mulberries? Nope. Instead, "the temptation is to mellow out and pull weeds," he says.
- 17 "Every day is a different day, every walk is a different walk," he says of his farm.
- 18 All of the components of the *Capparis spinosa*, otherwise known as the caper bush.
- 19 A baby Mexican sour gherkin destined for the French Laundry's cucumber salad.
- 20 These may look like baby cucumbers, but they're teeny-tiny squash blossoms.



