

# *edible*

## MANHATTAN

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## FOODSHED

### GREEN GODDESS

*Her perfect produce is many chefs' secret weapon.*

PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY  
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Nancy MacNamara's white truck stops outside Del Posto, but she's not there to eat. She's making one stop on a route of chefs who use her garnishes and greens to distinguish their dishes from the fray.

Sure, chefs citywide brag about their local ingredients, but only a lucky few finish their dishes with tender leaves coaxed from the ground by this First Lady of Flora. On a tiny, two-acre plot called Honey Locust Farm up in Newburgh, New York, MacNamara custom-grows a dizzying array of top-notch greens for the city's finest kitchens. Here Nobu's shiso (an anise-y East Asian herb often tucked under sushi) grows alongside Del Posto–destined sylvetta (a rustic Italian arugula), a few feet from nickel-sized turnips bound for Jean Georges. Once a week she harvests them herself and drives to town in a biodiesel-fueled truck, her Jack Russell terriers Sparky and Waller riding shotgun.

MacNamara's got good ingredients in her blood. When she was a child in the Hudson Valley, her father, Jackson Baldwin, was known far and wide for his raspberries (at 94, he's still at it) and she cites a coq-au-vin she made for Mother's Day from a recipe in *Gourmet* when she was 12 as a turning point in her life as an eater. But farming wasn't an instant fit.

She studied photography at the Rhode Island School of Design and spent the fall semester of junior year in Italy. Her first husband, a motorcycle mechanic, had taught her to ride an NSU Lube on the streets of Rhode Island, so in Rome she rented a Harley-Davidson Aermacchi and spent the winter coasting through the hills and valleys of Greece, Israel and Turkey. Snacking all the way, MacNamara learned a new language of ingredients.

Back in the States she put her new knowledge to use in the kitchen, but when she tried duplicating the flavors she'd found overseas, she ran up against considerably limited ingredients and soon had a realization: If you want something good to eat, you've got to grow it yourself. So began a decades-long interest in the cultivation of specialty produce, but first MacNamara took a detour—literally.

In 1971 she moved to Texas where she was a true motorcycle queen, named Ms. Supercycle later that year. Between rides, she learned the way of baked beans and smoked brisket and, less than a day's ride from the border, explored Mexico's dishes, becoming a tamale expert. She took her masa-wielding show on the road when



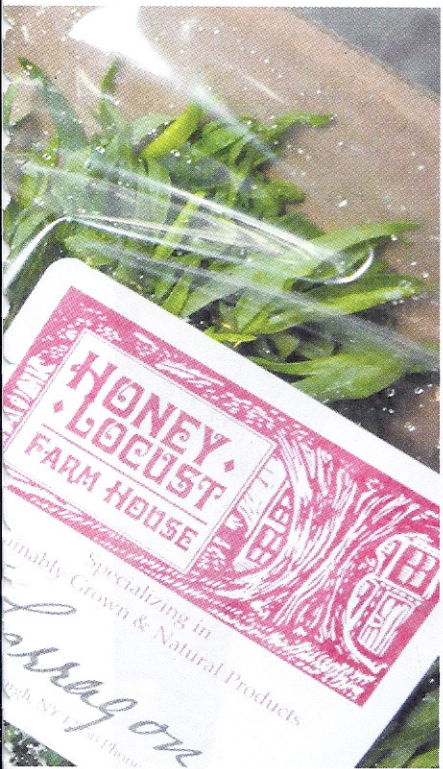


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**Chefs swarm to Honey Locust Farm:** Chefs like Corton's Paul Liebrandt (previous page), Jean Georges's Johnny Iuzzini (next page) and Nobu 57's Matt Hoyle (page 24) all rely on Nancy MacNamara's microgreens.













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she moved to Florida, selling tamales on the beach. When she got her hands on a stockpile of mangoes, she drove them to New York and hawked them on the streets, where she had another realization: The Big Apple was hungry for good fresh food. She began driving through her native Hudson Valley's fruit belt, buying friends' and neighbors' strawberries and watermelons to resell in Manhattan, and soon added to her dad's small patches of berries and tomatoes.

In 1980 MacNamara opened a storefront touting "Farm Fresh Fruit & Cider" on Second Avenue near Sixth Street. Her little stand became hugely popular. Decades before arugula and mizuna became commonplace, mesclun was altogether unknown. In that Iceberg Age, MacNamara began growing a still-staggering range of microgreens, leaves and flowers: sculpit, nepatella, salad burnett, anise hyssop, borage and lemon verbena. They attracted attention from a now-defunct catering group named Bink & Bink, which eventually distributed MacNamara's produce to a widespread community of chefs.

She insisted on joining the Binks during deliveries, and met several clients including Jean-Georges Vongerichten; when the caterer closed in the early '90s, she approached restaurants she had met through deliveries, persuading them to work directly with her, the farmer, rather than through a purveyor. Vongerichten agreed and soon began requesting she grow specific crops just for him. Influenced by famed French chef Marc Veyrat's fascination with weeds, he asked MacNamara "to grow [him] the wild things." She recalls, "He came up to the farm with his family before he opened his namesake restaurant in 1997. We walked around, picked our food and made a wonderful meal together."

Word spread and soon other chefs, including Gray Kunz, clamored for her peerless produce. Through Kunz and Vongerichten she met Gabriel Kreuther, now of The Modern; Floyd Cardoz of Tabla and Zak Pelaccio of Fatty Crab. Today she sells to dozens of restaurants, including wd-50, Morimoto and Lupa, guaranteeing 30 weeks' delivery, May through November, though she's trying to extend her season with sprouts and a few dried herbs, and is in the process of starting a tea business as a nest egg. She hosts a tiny stand on Saturdays at the farmers' market in Hastings, up in Westchester, but doesn't attend any city Greenmarkets.

Rather than simply plant what she hopes chefs will want, she consults her clients in advance, often buying seeds they specifically request: breakfast radishes the size of a pinky finger for Jean Georges, a special tender soybean for Matt Hoyle of Nobu 57, and for Corton's chef Paul Liebrandt, the most miniscule sorrel anyone's

ever seen. A few attempts have gone amiss—Charentais melons were not very successful, nor were a few tropical fruits she's tinkered with. And when Vong's chef Pierre Schutz asked her to grow winged beans (also known as asparagus peas), she had trouble getting them to take root, but she's hasn't given up on them yet.

Then again, sometimes she delivers the unexpected. "Nancy always comes with stuff we don't order. She has it in the truck, and I'm always surprised," grins Johnny Iuzzini, Jean Georges's pastry chef. "The amount of love and labor put into the product Nancy grows, when I get it, it's like a treasure. You have to treat it like gold." A recent surprise of fresh honeycomb, literally oozing with flavor, inspired him to put a new dessert on the menu.

Chocolate mint is seldom seen in Japanese cuisine, but Nobu 57's Matt Hoyle can't resist. He recently visited Honey Locust and came away in awe. "You get every stage of the plant: sprouts, small baby tenders, then large adults, as well as flowers and seeds." MacNamara even sells fresh cilantro seed—commonly seen dry and labeled coriander, it's green only for a few, aromatic days.

Though her custom crop list changes with food fashions, hours-old heirloom greens remain her signature. Liebrandt swoons: "The crispness of her lettuce—it has that fresh milky taste and texture, that sap. You can tell she just clipped it a couple hours before."

Iuzzini agrees that MacNamara's crops have little in common with something that's been sitting in a cooler: "You can still see the dirt in her fingers from picking the stuff, the berries are still warm from the sun."

Back at Del Posto, executive chef Mark Ladner, impressed by what he considers unparalleled quality, buys an array of MacNamara's chicories (treviso, puntarelle), stinging nettles, *ruchetta* (a wild arugula), *agretti* (a marsh-grown plant with a taste similar to sea beans) and *rue* (a bitter plant used to perfume broths and pasta water). Mark says her products are so special, he makes an exception to the standard First In First Out (FIFO) system, which typically keeps newer arrivals waiting, lest anything go to waste. "We always use her stuff first," he says. "I'd rather let the more commercial products wilt in the walk-in." ●

*Michael Harlan Turkell, Edible Manhattan's photo editor, has been documenting chefs/kitchens for near a decade, in and out of hundreds of restaurants annually. He recently planted herbs and microgreens in his potted patio garden and hopes that at least one of his thumbs turns out green.*