

Time Out

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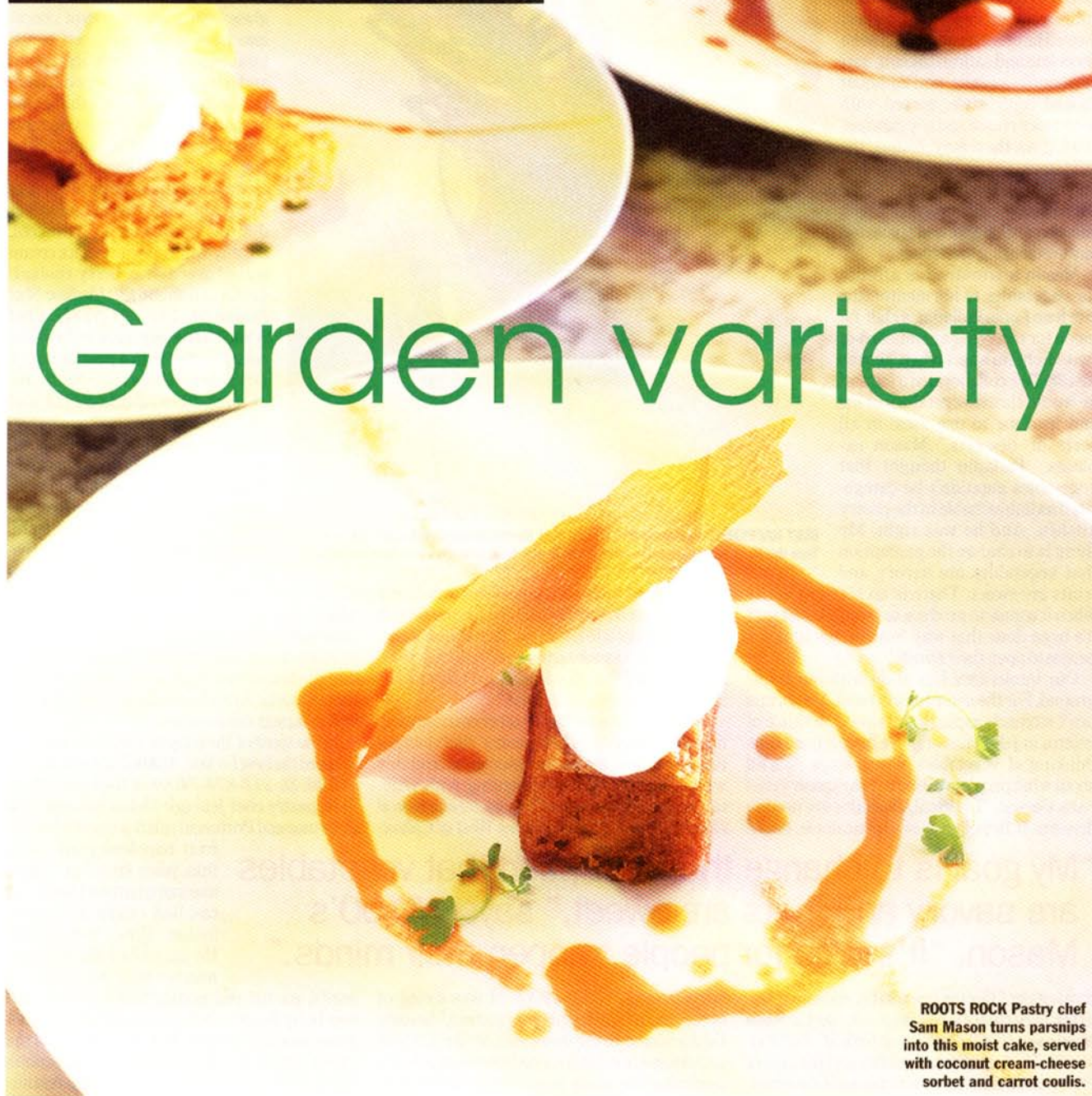
INSIDE: THIS WEEK
365 FREE
EVENTS



EatOut

THE CITY'S BEST RESTAURANTS, BARS AND CULINARY RICHES

Garden variety



ROOTS ROCK Pastry chef Sam Mason turns parsnips into this moist cake, served with coconut cream-cheese sorbet and carrot coulis.

Vegetables get a bad rap, but pastry chefs all over the city are bringing them to life with a little sugar and spice **By Andrea Strong** Photographs by **Alexandra Grablewski**

Of all the dreaded dinner-table commands, none resonates as loudly and as universally as "Eat your vegetables!" These three words bring back painful memories of nudging cold, soggy broccoli back and forth across the plate in hopes that it might

miraculously disappear so that dessert could be served. Even with adolescence safely behind us, vegetables can easily end up as dinner-plate wallflowers rather than culinary main events. But they just got a lot easier to swallow, thanks to a wave of pastry chefs who are packing the

recommended daily allowance of vitamins and minerals into, of all things, dessert.

At the recently opened **WD-50** (50 Clinton St between Rivington and Stanton Sts, 212-477-2900), high-wire pastry chef Sam Mason has given carrot cake a modern twist by transform-

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ing bunches of gnarled parsnips into a fluffy, moist cake topped with coconut cream-cheese sorbet and a stripe of neon-orange carrot coulis. Mason, who had us eating Pop Rocks embedded in chocolate when he was the pastry chef at Atlas, has always loved marrying odd ingredients, even if they may not sound entirely appetizing on the dessert menu. His other creations include a chocolate and saffron *coulant*, sort of a soufflé-as-cake, and kumquat cooked confit-style, served with sesame ice cream and soy caramel. Daring as they may sound, the outcomes are quite balanced—and balance is a mantra at Wylie Dufresne's popular new restaurant. Salt plays off sugar, and spices foil any overbearing sweetness.

Mason attributes his affinity for vegetables to his mentor, the late Jean Louis Palladin, a chef famous for receiving an unheard-of two Michelin stars when he was just 28. "We collaborated a lot, and he would throw vegetables at me and lead me to use them in all sorts of desserts," Mason explains. "Palladin thought that vegetables shouldn't be categorized as untouchable in the pastry kitchen. And he was right. My thing is to change the perception that vegetables are savory and fruits are sweet. There is no black or white when it comes to produce or fruit, it's just that it's been done that way forever. It's time for people to open their minds."

Our intolerance has to do with our background. For the same reason most Americans can't stomach aspic (we're raised to think of gelatin in Jell-O flavors), we have a hard time thinking of vegetables in new ways. "It's all about what people are used to," says pastry chef Fany Gerson. "In Brazil, avocados are used in desserts. If Brazilians tasted guacamole, they'd



BEET HAPPENING Brasserie 8½ pastry chef Martin Howard makes his vibrant-pink. Turn the Beet Around Sundae with diced beets, beet brownies and beet ice cream.

man is not out to shock; she just likes to find new flavors to put on the menu alongside the default fruit and chocolate favorites. "My bottom line," she says, "is, Does it taste good? You have to be really careful that the dessert isn't just a self-indulgent conceptual exercise."

Necessity is the mother of other crazy, savory-themed desserts: When pastry chef Johnny luzzini couldn't get his hands on good fruit this winter, he started experimenting with vegetables at **Jean Georges** (*Trump International Hotel & Tower, 1 Central Park West at Colum-*

at 80th St, 212-717-9798), chef Scott Bieber uses them in his red-velvet cake, topped with cream-cheese ice cream, and they are an essential element in an ice-cream sundae at **Brasserie 8½** (*9 W 57th St between Fifth and Sixth Aves, 212-829-0812*). Pastry chef Martin Howard fills a tall pilsner glass with dense chunks of chocolate beet brownies, diced beets, bubblegum-pink beet ice cream and piles of fresh whipped cream. He's probably on to something: One of the best ways to turn a vegetable into a sweet treat is to puree the crap out of it, add sugar and heavy cream, and turn the produce into ice cream. Chef Mario Lohninger did this and came up with cool, creamy white-asparagus ice cream served over a strawberry-rhubarb gratin at **Danube** (*30 Hudson St at Duane St, 212-791-3771*). Chef Alex Urena serves a refreshing celery sorbet with a peanut-butter tart at **Marseilles** (*630 Ninth Ave at 44th St, 212-333-3410*) and chef Andrea Frizzi makes a sweet-and-tart lemon-cucumber *semi-freddo* with pomegranate sauce at **Acqua** (*718 Amsterdam Ave at 95th St, 212-222-2752*). An even racier combination comes from, of all places, the conservative kitchen of **Tavern on the Green**

(*Central Park West at 67th St, 212-873-3200*), where pastry chef Jasmina Bojic tops a warm chocolate cake with a scoop of candied black-olive ice cream. And WD-50's Mason promises that his fennel ice cream, served alongside the tomato *tarte Tatin* he made famous at Atlas, will reappear this summer.

In the spirit of the subject matter, we naturally saved the best for last. At **Aix** (*2398 Broadway at 88th St, 212-874-7400*) on the Upper West Side, pastry chef Jehingir Mehta has created a most unusual Provençal salad: a vegetable-and-

fruit napoleon made from thin, juicy layers of sugar-marinated green tomatoes, candied celery and Galia melon (like honeydew). He garnishes the colorful number with pomegranate

"My goal is to change the perception that vegetables are savory and fruits are sweet," says WD-50's Mason. "It's time for people to open their minds."

throw it out." Gerson uses chiles and tomatillos in her fiery chipotle *boca negra* dessert at **Rosa Mexicano** (*1063 First Ave at 58th St, 212-753-7407*). The heat from the chiles and the acid of the tomatillos balance the richness of the sweet, fudgy cake. "It's hard to change people's views, especially right now, because people are seeking comforting food," she says. "The challenge is to create a whole new palate of ingredients."

At Mario Batali's latest venture, **Otto** (*1 Fifth Ave at 8th St, 212-674-2044*), pastry chef Meredith Kurtzman is doing her part for the cause with olive-oil gelato, a mild, vanilla-infused version that doesn't taste a bit like olive oil but rather achieves its dense creaminess from oil added to the cream-based recipe. Kurtz-

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bus Circle, 212-299-3900). "I was dying of boredom, so I started playing around," he says. He wandered to the other side of the kitchen, found some beets and turned them into a devil's food cake. The gooey dessert is garnished with candied, cartoon-colored red, golden, and candy-striped beets and a raspberry beet sauce. "People are a little afraid of it," he admits, "but they have it as part of a quartet of desserts (a tasting included in the \$87 prix-fixe meal) that includes green Muscat soup with cape gooseberries; macadamia shortbread with crème fraîche sorbet, braised celery and rhubarb; and key lime pie. So there's always a safer choice."

seeds, garnet-red pomegranate syrup and raw baby fennel, then tops it off with a jade-green scoop of mint sorbet. Mehta created the sweet salad to showcase the indigenous ingredients of Aix en Provence, the restaurant's namesake region. "Green tomatoes, celery and fennel are prevalent, and I was trying to use at least one of them in a dessert," he says. "I didn't think they could all go in one dish, but then, it worked." Raw foodists, rejoice: He doesn't cook anything in the dish. The end product is also miraculously free of flour, eggs and oil—making it perhaps the single most justifiable and, dare we say it, healthiest dessert in the city. Not that there's anything wrong with that. ■