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ROOFTOPS
farm to fork

Chef Jamie Kennedy has been instrumental in changing Canada’s food culture, and his revolutionary approach, with its emphasis on all things local, was recently recognized through an Order of Canada—the first Award in Celebration of the Nation’s Table. Kennedy is setting his sights higher, quite literally, with an idea that just might revolutionize Canada’s restaurant culture, too. He’s planning to farm the roof of Gilead Café, his restaurant on a small industrial laneway in downtown Toronto.

Known for linking farmers with chefs and forging connections between agricultural producers and urban consumers, Kennedy plans, with his rooftop farm, to make the distance between food in the soil and food on the plate even shorter. Given that the Gilead roof is just 3,500 square feet, he acknowledges that this will be a largely symbolic gesture in terms of the amount of

food produced, but he’s confident that the efforts will be worth it: “When all the cooks in the restaurant are also involved with planting, nurturing, and harvesting food, they will be experiencing the whole cycle, and that leads to a whole other relationship with food. It shows in how you cook.”

This is not the first agricultural venture Kennedy has been involved with. His small mixed farm in Prince Edward County, which he purchased a decade ago for its vineyard potential, provides some of the potatoes, onions, tomatoes, and garlic for Gilead Café. While his own potato crop outstrips his restaurant’s potato demand (1,000 pounds a week are required for Gilead’s famous frites), his garlic crop currently supplies the restaurant for about three months a year, and his goal is to eventually be self-sufficient in garlic: “It’s really difficult to find local, home-grown garlic in wintertime. I’d like to extend that, push that.”

A few other restaurants in Toronto are also growing food on their rooftops. At Parts&Labour, in the city’s west end, garden manager Katie Mathieu and landscape designer Victoria Taylor grew more than 160 kilograms of organic produce such as tomatoes, lettuce, herbs, beans, and cucumbers in 2010 on the restaurant’s 1,800 square-foot roof. All of the produce was used in the kitchen and identified on the menu as sourced from the roof—a detail that no doubt intrigued diners and enhanced their experience.

For Kennedy, pushing the boundaries of convention is a political act as well, in that it changes relationships: “When you get your hands dirty growing vegetables, you have a different relationship from when you just get them from a box. It’s great to be able to say, ‘I grew this!’ People yearn for that connection.” With the Gilead rooftop farm, that connection will be as close as it can get—about twelve feet from farm to fork.

TEXT BY LORRAINE JOHNSON, EDITOR OF GROUND AND AUTHOR OF THE BOOK CITY FARMER: ADVENTURES IN URBAN FOOD GROWING.

01-02/ Produce grown on the roof of Parts&Labour restaurant in Toronto is used by the chef to create signature dishes.

IMAGES/ Victoria Taylor

03-04/ Chef Jamie Kennedy’s farm in Prince Edward County supplies some of the ingredients for his Toronto restaurant Gilead Café.

IMAGES/ Jamie Kennedy

Up Front: Information on the Ground