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FEATURES

FEBRUARY 2008

A GOOD TIME TO BE GREENS



Greens Restaurant, Building A

One of the most influential pioneers of Northern California's sustainable food movement is a long time Fort Mason Center resident and an acclaimed vegetarian restaurant. Situated at the north end of historic Building A, Greens Restaurant has gorgeous bay views, fabulous food, and a philosophy of service based on Zen Buddhist principles.

A Sustainable Legacy Members of the San Francisco Zen Center created Greens by transforming an old military machine shop and storage area into an austere, light-filled space. The simple furnishings provide the perfect setting for brilliant cuisine paired with phenomenal views of San Francisco Bay, the Golden Gate Bridge, and the Marin Headlands on display just outside Greens' floor-to-ceiling windows.

Zen Center participants built the restaurant space nearly 30 years ago in 1979 with little funds or outside support. As a way to stretch their limited resources, the Greens founders followed another revolutionary concept for the times — "green" building, which uses nontoxic, reclaimed materials such as recycled wood.

"We used trees that fell on Tassajara Road and redwood burl from Crescent City," said Executive Chef Annie Somerville, who has worked with the Zen Center and Greens since 1981.



Cooking For Community Somerville honed her considerable cooking skills entirely through on-the-job training and got her start at the main Zen Center in San Francisco and at the center's Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, a remote retreat in rugged terrain outside Carmel Valley, CA. At both places, Somerville practiced cooking for a community, which she finds rewarding in different ways than cooking in high-volume, world-class restaurants.

"We have a wonderful tradition of having a family feeling and involvement with a community," said Somerville of her Greens and Zen Center experiences.

Regardless of where she cooks, Somerville takes great pleasure in celebrating extremely fresh regional cuisine and planning menus based on what vegetables and foods are seasonally available.

"We're very lucky to be living in the Bay Area — there's lots of agriculture here," Somerville said. "We buy rice from Glenn County near Sacramento and vegetables from other counties — San Joaquin, Marin, Sonoma, Napa, Yolo, and others."

Supporting Local Sources Through its buying practices, Greens supports many small local farms, wineries, and other businesses, including the Zen Center's Green Gulch Farm in Marin County. Located near the coast in a cool, foggy valley, Green Gulch supplies delicious crops such as kale, chard, potatoes, spinach, and lettuce. In return, Greens gives the farm materials to recycle.

"The Green Gulch truck delivers vegetables to Greens and goes back with a load of scraps for composting," said Somerville.

Star Route Farms in Bolinas, CA is another supplier that serves Greens and other dining superstars such as Jardiniere, Chez Panisse, and the Slanted Door. Greens' wine list has won awards from Wine Spectator and the National Restaurant Association by featuring fine vintages from California, the Pacific Northwest, and other regions.

Former Greens Wine Director Chaylee Priete developed a wine program emphasizing small, local wineries, many devoted to biodynamic and organic viticulture. Green's new General Manager, restaurant veteran Mike Hale, now runs the wine program. Working with food folks of long acquaintance is important for Somerville and the entire Greens crew, many of whom have been with the restaurant for years.

"We're very committed to supporting people we know — there's a face and personality connected with the wine, cheese, and other foods we select for the restaurant," Somerville said.

Weaving The Web Of Food & Service Staying in touch with what's happening in the local and global food communities is crucial for Somerville. She visits the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market in San Francisco twice a week, "rain or shine," to discover new ingredients and stay connected. One of her goals for 2008 is to expand her horizons by visiting other farmers' markets more often, such as the one in Marin County.

She contributes to the community through cooking classes at places such as Green Gulch and chef's demonstrations at events like the Chefs' Holidays at the Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite National Park. Somerville also shares her expertise in her two popular cookbooks, *Fields of Greens* and *Everyday Greens*, and publications such as *Vegetarian Times*, *Food and Wine*, and *Gourmet*.

The recent completion of the private event room at Greens offers other opportunities for the food movement to collaborate on cuisine. In 2007, Greens hosted an event for the Slow Food movement and regularly contributes food to other nonprofits for events, including Fort Mason Foundation and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy.

"Food really brings people together," said Somerville.

Being part of a national park facility and close to the outdoors is vital for Somerville. She likes to hike, walk, swim in the bay, and feel connected to nature. She believes strongly that Greens To Go performs an essential park service function for park visitors by offering wholesome food at great prices in an informal atmosphere. Greens has big plans to enhance the takeaway service, according to Somerville.

"We have a lot of energy for new things and we feel very focused on the future," Somerville said.

— Claudia Willen

Images:
Greens cuisine Photo: Bradford Gregory
Greens Executive Chef Annie Somerville