

# MARKETPLACE

BY GRACIE SALEM

## TOQUE OF THE TOWN

**O**n a muggy Wednesday morning, Chef Alma Alcocer-Thomas and her pastry chef, Courtney McBroom, pick through the produce at Boggy Creek Farm Stand, filling their baskets on behalf of Jeffrey's Restaurant. Even as between-seasons as this particular week happens to be, Alma finds plenty of inspiration: cucumbers, tiny-but-robust cherry tomatoes, tender, pale-green bok choy, eggplants and two salad mixes rich with bright-red leaves.

A free-roaming chicken startles her by grazing up against her leg.

"I grew up in Mexico City," she explains, "so live chickens and everything, I'm not used to it."

Boggy Creek's Larry Butler saunters up to drape a long arm around her shoulders. "Good to see you again, Alma," he says, greeting the woman who's been his long-time food-world compatriot ever since she came to work at Jeffrey's 14 years ago. In fact, a photograph of Alma hangs at the back of the shed where Boggy Creek sells its dairy products. The picture shows a smiling young woman, only a line cook at the time, but convinced she was destined to spend her life in a kitchen.

Alma left for Paris right out of high school to train at the Cordon Bleu culinary school. Not long after she returned, she moved with her parents to Austin, a city that grew on her as she waited tables for restaurants and caterers, and planned her next move.

It turned out to be pretty prestigious.

Jeffrey's, Ron and Peggy Weiss's award-winning Austin restaurant, has been synonymous with fine dining for more than 25 years, known for its cozy-yet-elegant ambience, fine wine and innovative chefs.

David Garrido, the chef Alma apprenticed under as a pantry and line cook for 12 years, had created a popular and established menu best characterized as Continental cuisine with Southwestern influences—as in, for example, a fried oyster appetizer served on yucca chips.

Alma absorbed whatever David Garrido would teach her, and when he left two years ago, she took over as head chef. She was in her early 40s.

Since then, she's responded to the challenge of being a female chef—still relatively rare in the food world—trying to



make an impression at her first job as kitchen boss.

Before long, customers began to notice a gradual tweaking of David Garrido's standbys. She kept the spirit, she likes to say, but worked toward more local ingredients and lighter fare. The menu changes daily, according to what ingredients are available in the markets—exactly the way her Mexican parents and grandparents did their daily marketing. But her culinary influences extend far beyond Mexico.

"I consider our food Continental Texan, but with more spicy flavors."

One such recent dish was a watermelon gazpacho, served at the height of summer. Its lightness and freshness, Alma says, added up to the right flavor for the right audience.

"Austin is highly educated when it comes to food," she explains. "Our guests are into eating healthier. Our menu is definitely lighter. Five years ago, if we didn't serve mashed potatoes, we were in trouble. But now we can serve them roasted, in a lighter way. It makes our customers happy to see those things on the menu."

And her persistent quest for local food has branched out beyond produce. She's happy, for instance, to seek out local rabbits for a handmade terrine. The incorporation of nontraditional ingredients into classic dishes has become standard practice on the Jeffrey's menu.

Something along those lines is bound to occur today.

"Well, I know right off I'm going to add these little tomatoes to a green bean salad," she says, "and I'll use the greens to garnish plates. They really are beautiful."

Meanwhile, pastry chef Courtney McBroom, a young Texas Culinary Academy graduate, is dreaming up ideas for desserts made with local, seasonal fruits. "Right now, I'm really excited about making a Charlotte with peaches and figs and apricots," she says.

At this point, that's all the formal planning that's going to happen.

"We'll just have to get in the kitchen," Alma says, "and see."

*Gracie Salem has been writing about food and restaurants for Tribeza magazine since its inception in 2000.*