

From Chef To Chef/Owner Mary Dumont And Cultivar

BY DEBORAH NORKIN

Chef Mary Dumont has worked at some of the nation's premier restaurants. In 2006, she was named Best New Chef by Food and Wine Magazine. She's appeared on the Today Show and has competed on Iron Chef America. With such impressive credentials, she could have easily continued her noteworthy career as a Chef for someone else. Instead, she made the jump from Chef to Chef/Owner with Cultivar in Boston's historic downtown.

Cultivar's genesis began about five years ago. "I was feeling like my tenure at Harvest (a Harvard Square institution) was coming to an end," she says. Walking away from a successful, well-loved restaurant is not to be taken lightly. For Dumont, however, "the list of the things I wanted to do outweighed the things I already had done. I needed to grow and contribute something new." With that decision made, Dumont looked to her colleagues and friends for advice. Chefs Jody Adams and Barbara Lynch, both of whom had made the same leap with great success, talked her through the process and offered support. "Hearing them tell me to 'go for it,' was a big boost," she says.

Dumont knew how to develop a menu and how to run the business side of the kitchen, but a restaurant has many moving parts and with her name at the helm, she needed to understand them all. "Being a Chef/Owner is radically different from being an Executive Chef," says Dumont. "It's more than the food. It's raising money, financials, architecture, contracts, construction, and design. I worked with plumbers, electricians, and gifted artisans." The most exciting thing of all was the technology. "I wanted a very technologically modern restaurant and it was great learning more about wiring and networks to help make the restaurant more efficient."

With all the hard work of opening Cultivar behind her, Dumont is excited for the future. As for her advice to others considering following the same path? "Take the risk and go out on your own. You'll be glad you did."

THE CONCEPT, CONTAINER FARM, & MENU

A cultivar is a hybrid plant that combines ideal characteristics from several varieties. In the same manner, Dumont has taken the best of what she's learned in her twenty-year career and poured it into her new venture. The reference to the world of nature is a nod to Dumont's near obsessive pull to all things from the earth. "Everything stems from the natural world," says Dumont. "I want to celebrate that in a sustainable way."

The menu is hyper-seasonal and has many inspirations: the produce from her own one-acre garden; her partnership with several regional farms; purveyors of locally, responsibly-sourced seafood and dry-aged meats; and the items grown on-site in the hydroponic container farm.

The container farm came about as Dumont explored ways to showcase her passion for sustainability in an urban environment. It uses only five gallons of water a day, and it produces a variety of herbs, sprouts, and 225 heads of lettuce a week. "I want to show people that, even in the middle of a city, it's possible to grow food in a positive, forward-thinking way," she says. For Dumont, having her hands on some of the produce from seed to table is important. "It inspires me. When food shows up in boxes, it's easy to forget where it comes from. With the farm, everyone is, in some way, part of the growing process." To further her goal of educating the public, tours of the farm are given upon request.

Using the freshest ingredients is merely the jumping off point. Offerings change daily depending on what's available. If a guest sees something on the menu they like, they'd better order it because it may not be there tomorrow. "I might only get enough wood ears from my forager for one night," says Dumont who extends the local growing season by canning and pickling everything from tomatoes and jalepeños to peaches and plums.

Her talent for combining seasonings and cooking techniques enhances the subtle flavor elements of every ingredient. Each dish is presented in a visually stunning way, with the final result being a symphony of texture, taste, sight, and smell. Even the most sophisticated diner will be challenged by the innovative and expertly prepared fare.

THE FINANCING

In her mind, Dumont's vision was clear. To get investors on board, however, she needed to convey it in a compelling way. "Cultivar's business plan and restaurant presentation was extremely detailed and the exercise of putting it all together further clarified the concept." Dumont approached several investment groups eventually partnering with The Restaurant Investment Group. Comprised of industry leaders and service providers, RIG provides funding and support for many of Greater Boston's hottest chef-driven restaurants.

For everyone at RIG, her enthusiasm was contagious. According to Dan Dain, one of RIG's founders and President of Dain, Torpy, Le Ray, Wiest & Garner, P.C., a boutique real estate law firm, "Mary was the ideal candidate. She came to us with a lauded career and a passionate pitch about her concept. Her vision of a downtown sanctuary centered on locally sourced ingredients was exciting."

Michael Staub, a restaurant development consultant and one of RIG's founders, noted that "Mary was an engaged participant in our collaborative selection procedure. We saw what she wanted to do and were thrilled to help her make it happen."

"It's a rigorous process," says Dumont. "You have to be more than a good cook. You have to know how to run a business." Dumont appreciated their due diligence. "I like it when people do their homework on me." For the most part, RIG is a purely financial investor but when Dumont has a question, she knows she can call on them. "They've done this a hundred times. I've done it once. I respect their experience and expertise."

THE LOCATION

Chef Dumont chose The Ames Hotel because the location is ideal. "It's directly across from the Old State House and surrounded by modern buildings. To me, it's the perfect intersection between history and innovation," she says. Additionally, the hotel's owners were intrigued by the container farm which is adjacent to the outdoor terrace. "Having a supportive landlord makes everything easier." An outdoor dining space was also on Dumont's list of necessities. The terrace, bordered with flowers and foliage, allows people who are probably stuck inside all day to get a breath of fresh air. "Other locations wouldn't have had room for the container farm or terrace which narrowed down my choices."

THE DESIGN

Glen Coben of Glen & Co. was tasked with creating a three dimensional expression of Chef Dumont's vision and aesthetic. "It's not so different from how a chef works," says Coben. "it's a balance of ingredients but instead of flavors, I'm working with a hundred details both overt, like the color of the walls, and subtle, like the banquettes which use reproductions of revolutionary war uniform buttons for the tufting. Most people don't notice but when they do, they're charmed."

The process is highly collaborative. Chef Dumont and Cultivar's Director of Operations, Emily French-Dumont, were active participants. "The idea for the bar came from Mary's memory of a 200 year-old copper beech tree from her childhood" and details like these, says Coben, make the design personal and unique.

References to nature are everywhere. Tiles in shades of stone cover the restaurant's rear wall. Copper beech leaves are etched in the windows. The lighting fixtures are tree-branch inspired chandeliers, and butcher block table tops and soft teal bar stools along with ferns hanging in copper pots all works together, according to Coben, to evoke feelings of forest and meadow.

"It's about finding the soul of the restaurant and allowing Mary to feel a sense of peace and comfort. That attitude is reflected in her food. It's much more than just farm-to-table. It's the feeling of connection to the earth for the diners and the staff."

THE TEAM

"So many of the people I now work with are people I've come to know and respect over the years," says Dumont. "It's such a huge group that I joke that we've all come home to Cultivar." From the inception, Dumont's most important team member has been her wife, Emily French-Dumont. As Director of Operations, French-Dumont is an integral part of every facet of the running of Cultivar. "We talked about and envisioned this restaurant for years," says French-Dumont who oversees the business side as well as the gardens and growing programs. "Knowing I wasn't alone in this was reassuring," says Dumont. "It's so important to have not just financial support, but emotional support as well."

Brian Young, the Chef de Cuisine, worked with Chef Mary as Executive Sous Chef at Harvest. "Mary and I have been friends for a long time. The atmosphere at Cultivar is really like a big family. It makes coming to work a pleasure. Mary and I have such a great creative process together, and we have learned so much from each other."

Veteran barman Dan Lynch came on board a few months before the restaurant opened. In keeping with the restaurant's theme, the cocktail program relies heavily on gin. "The botanicals, herbs and spices pair well with the kinds of flavors Mary cherishes in her cooking." Lynch chose spirits that are small-batch and seasonal from craft distilleries in the US and in Europe. There's even a proprietary Cultivar gin blend from GrandTen Distilling flavored with locally foraged white-fir tips and with notes of citrus and floral.

Of course, no great meal is complete without dessert. Robert Gonzales, the Executive Pastry Chef, oversees the pastry department which features an in-house bread program and produce-driven desserts that complement the menu. "The desserts change daily," says Gonzales. "Having the freedom to experiment is exhilarating." Selections like Lemon Verbena Panna Cotta and Cherry Wood Smoked Brownie are the perfect finish to the dining experience created from the mind, heart, and hands of Chef Mary Dumont.