

Custom-Grown Ingredients Change Playbook for Root's Phillip Lopez

BY ANNE BERRY / PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATTHEW NOEL & | MARCH 15, 2014



Eight-year-old Phillip Lopez was on a riverbank in St. Tropez when he saw a French oysterman paddling in his hollowed pirogue, raking up oysters as he went. The man came ashore and cracked the shells, still slick with river water, and sucked them down.

“He was laughing, so joyful,” remembers Lopez. “I thought, ‘This guy must be eating candy.’” He tried one and wanted more. “After that, I wanted to eat whatever I could get my hands on.”

That spontaneous hunger propelled Lopez through restaurant gigs with John Besh, Michel Richard, and his own headliner at Rambla. These days, Chef Lopez is known as the imaginative mind behind Root’s modern cuisine—its riotous salads, shape-shifting ingredients (pecan leathers, blueberry rice noodles, foie gras cotton candy), and dazzling presentations (edible flowers in a smoking terrarium; a fruity ambrosia forest).

“When we opened in November 2011, we were making food that nobody thought could survive in New Orleans,” says Lopez.

His modern ideas, though, are grounded in formal technique. Consider his fish veronique, an Escoffier classic calling for wine-poached fish in a cream sauce marbled with green grapes. In Lopez’s hands, the fish is poached sous-vide in his own verjus vinaigrette (verjus is the juice of young grapes). The silky cream sauce is restrained and on the side; ribboned celery and fennel top the fish, as does a rugged foam.

You’re curious about the foam. Lopez made it by cultivating grape yeast (steeping grapes in water and sugar until they naturally break down), then charging the liquid with soy protein and an immersion blender.

Also tumbled on the plate: grapes that he’s pickled in the same verjus. The presentation is artful, for sure, but it’s the grapes you should study: They’re Chardonnay grapes and they come from a farm in New Orleans, an environment notoriously hostile to them. Enter John Posey, an enthusiast who crossbred the wine grapes to make a survivor strain. The grape is proprietary to Root.





Like the wine grape, much of Root's produce is just-plucked from urban plots in the Lower Ninth Ward. Habitat for Humanity leases the land to Pelican Produce, a small farming business owned by Posey's daughter, Michelle, and business partner Kevin Schneider.

For four seasons now, Lopez has contracted them to grow herbs, produce, and edible flowers in the ground, while fences support exotics like passion fruit and a curved squash called cucuzza. They're harvested and delivered to Root twice a week.

Lopez's partnership with Pelican Produce lets him customize a restaurant's worth of heirloom, rare, and proprietary seeds. "We decide what to grow, instead of the produce company," he says. "You can control it 10 times more, and you know how it's raised."

Most of these farm plots run parallel to the Oliver rail yard, with the largest— about an acre—sitting just beyond the decapitated Florida housing projects. I note the watermark on the homes' rusted iron steps. "You have these abandoned, blighted buildings, then this beautiful pop of life across the street," Lopez says.

On this day, John Posey is the bearer of good news: He's found a heat-resistant rhubarb seed, firing up Lopez's dream of using the crimson stalk next summer. "It opens my playbook as a chef," says Lopez.

Also coming to Root: a custom variety of button cauliflower, this with widespread florets. When it's different than anything you've ever cooked with, "you no longer think of it as a cauliflower," Lopez says. "You start to ask yourself, 'What does it resemble? How can I use this?' You treat it in another way." This specialty cauliflower's bloom reminds him of a maitake mushroom, to be tempura-battered, fried, and dressed with lardo.

In the garden, he lets me try the cauliflower sprout, raw. From adjacent rows, I've eaten dill, bronze fennel, and sorrel the same way, all organic. Within the hour, we've followed those same herbs, vegetables, and fruit back to Root.





In the kitchen here, curing salumis are draped neatly over a sous station, a cookbook library is tucked above a desk, and intermediate sauces and garnishes are labeled with dates, prepped for the next step. A tight walk-in fridge dictates that incoming blood oranges be pickled or made into marmalade, rather than stored whole.

An orderly influence, maybe, from Lopez's father, who made a career of the U.S. Army. "There's definitely a chain of command in the kitchen," Lopez says, pulling on his crisp chef's coat. "So the transition from 'yes, sir' at home to 'yes, chef' was super easy."

He begins assembling Root's vegetable salad, his rebuttal to traditional "copout" house greens. Here, charred fennel and pickled celery root nestle with raw candy-striped beets, baby carrots, and pea tendrils in an arc that suggests an artist's palette. The wild garden's color burst is offset by a smoky, sultry swipe of ash, made from fine-roasted and seasoned vegetable scraps.

During a busy lunch service, you'd think it's too time-consuming to precisely compose a dish like this. You'd be right. "The plating part is easy if you just let the ingredients fall," Lopez says. "Chaos can be beautiful."

Though his parents are passionate home cooks, and Lopez himself ate his way through Europe, a culinary career wasn't necessarily on his radar.

"When I was a kid, I thought I'd be a computer person, cracking codes," he says, recalling the day his father bought the family's first computer—which Lopez promptly ripped apart, laying the innards on the table like a butchered hog. "When my dad came home, he gave me the look of death," Lopez jokes (now). "My life flashed before my eyes but that took milliseconds, since I was only 11."

A computer science degree ultimately wasn't for Lopez, and neither was a culinary one—he's self-taught, and has had extraordinary mentors.

He found his way back to one of them on a wintry night in 2006, while roaming the streets of Brooklyn. Lopez had moved there for a girlfriend, his only connection to the city, and she'd just broken his heart. On impulse, he pressed a random speed dial number on his cell phone, vowing that whomever it reached would be a sign as to what to do next.

The phone rang. John Besh picked up.

A 20-hour road trip later, Lopez pulled up to Restaurant August. There would be work the next day, and the day after. When Lopez talks about pushing forward, keeping up momentum, it's as much for himself as it is for New Orleans.

His latest expression is Square Root, where he's transformed a 150-year-old building that has held an oyster house and a cigar shop. The torched cypress walls of varying chars are, ironically, fireproof. Downstairs is a reservation-only, no-menu, 15-course rock-and-rollercoaster. Upstairs, a lounge (with pretty city views) focuses on charcuterie and cheeses, and craft cocktails.

Eventually, behind the back wall, Lopez will fire up the test kitchen of his Rebel Restaurant Group, where a fulltime developmental chef will play with "lab equipment": a Coravin system that allows a sommelier to siphon off wine without ever uncorking a bottle; a rotary evaporator that can separate alcohol from spirits (which could be used to make syrup from bourbon concentrate, or a clear Bloody Mary).

Lopez will also warp time when he can, using an ultrasonic homogenizer (and smoked wood chips) to barrel-age spirits in mere minutes. But he bristles at the term molecular gastronomy.



"All cooking is molecular," he says. "I may manipulate texture, but I'll never change the flavor. My food never loses its soul."

As for the city of his birth, Lopez sees a future where New Orleans sets global culinary trends, outpacing Europe. "New Orleans is so much more than béarnaise and tarragon," he says. "We have to explore not just what our cuisine is, but what our cuisine is going to be."

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