

# TEMPO FOOD

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## The herb entrepreneurs: Selling the odd and the beautiful

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Journal staff writer

A few weeks ago, Charlie Coiner packed 200,000 herb cuttings and caught a flight up from his second home in Miami, drove 90 miles to Berryville, Va., and began the '91 growing season at Rock Garden D.C. farm.

There, he and local partner and friend Lolo Mengel (the other two partners are in Miami) oversee the growth and marketing of herb plants in the spring, cut herbs, gourmet vegetables and edible flowers in the summer and dried herb products for fall.

"Baby red brussels sprouts, purple gooseberries . . . the odder the produce, the better," says Mengel.

In the late '70s, Coiner, now 38, and a few friends began growing organic vegetables on a farm along the Shenandoah River. But instead of opting out when hippies became unhip, he stayed down on the farm.

Back then, he says, he would get up at 5 a.m.,

harvest the crop, drive into the city, deliver the produce to restaurants, get back around 11 p.m. and do it again the next day.

The grueling schedule had its advantages.

"I got to meet all the chefs that way," Coiner says, naming culinary names who started when he did — Nora Pouillon, co-owner of Nora restaurant; Jean-Louis Palladin, of Jean Louis at Watergate restaurant; Jim Bellows, now executive chef at the Grand Hyatt Washington Hotel ("He was like a sous-chef when I met him, but we've grown up together").

And so they learned together — Coiner began tailoring his crops to meet his friends' specifications and they began counting on him for the freshest and most exotic produce around.

"These guys would give me suggestions and seeds," says Coiner. "Roberto Donna, now chef and owner of Galileo's, would bring back seeds from Italy for me to plant. So I started growing weird stuff — radicchio [leaf chicories], haricots verts [green beans] and herbs."

Then, Coiner says, in 1983, Safeway contacted him, interested in a regular supply of fresh herbs.

"We started our first delivery — 14 packages of one-dozen bunches of whatever, basil, mint, oregano," he says. "And the deliveries have grown since — 'We have one store [the Georgetown Safeway] that takes about 300 dozen [over two weeks].'"

The 25-acre Berryville farm meets the summertime herbal demands of professional and amateur cooks from Richmond to Philadelphia, but during the winter, the operation moves to Costa Rica, where Coiner set up operations with joint venture partners in 1988.

From there, fresh herbs and gourmet vegetables are transported to Miami, then delivered within 48 hours of ordering to Canada, Europe, California, New York and Atlanta and other sites.

"We specialize in what nobody else wants to

Please see ROCK, B4



Tyrone Turner

Bountiful harvest: Lolo Mengel of Rock Garden D.C., is surrounded by fresh vegetables and herbs.

### ROCK from B1

deal in," Coiner says. "We don't do regular carrots and potatoes and grapefruits. We'll do miniature carrots, Yukon Gold potatoes, purple potatoes, Belgian endive."

The popularity of foreign travel and the ease of importing are two factors in the growing market for such exotic fare, says Coiner.

But another reason, he says, is that "people are spending a little more money and time on the things they put inside their body." And fresh foods, he says, are appealing for both health and flavor reasons.

To that end, Coiner designed a patented packaging system that keeps delicate leaves crisp at the produce counter.

"We haven't had a product rejected or returned by Safeway in three years," says Coiner. "We are good," he says flatly, then laughs at his own ingenuousness, for he has sacrificed a personal life, and says he's still waiting to quit and go back to medical school.

"I've been pretty much living this business, and that's one reason I've taken Lolo as a partner. It makes it more secure — less of one back to carry it all."

Mengel, 37, of Alexandria, Va., started out in 1981 working as a \$3-an-hour bean picker, but she was no ordinary bean-picker.

"Charlie and I had been friends, and I was an R.N. at the time, needing a diversion from nursing, so I took a summer off to work on the farm," she says.

"I just needed a break. It took me away from thoughts of death and dying [Mengel worked with cancer and AIDS patients] and put me in a beautiful environment, outside, having fun all day."

After that summer, Mengel went back to nursing, but a couple of years later, Coiner wooed her to a full-time sales position in Washington.

"That was fine with me," Mengel says. "[Sales] certainly isn't any harder than nursing, and nursing is a very people-oriented job. My ability to draw people out I learned in nursing."

"Lolo's done an awful lot of work over the last few years; she's really made the marketing part [of the business] happen," says Coiner. "And there are very few women in the produce business."

Mengel oversees a staff of 30,

and a product list of about 350 items, some of which are grown on the company's 20-acre and 30-acre farms in Costa Rica.

And although Rock Garden products are available to individuals and through Safeway, Sutton Place Gourmet, Marvelous Market, Hugo's and Washington Park Gourmet, the company's emphasis is on restaurant supply — clients include the Grand Hyatt Washington Hotel, the Hyatt Regency Reston, Nora restaurant, the Four Seasons Hotel, the Mayflower Hotel, the Jefferson Hotel, 21 Federal restaurant, The Ritz-Carlton and the White House.

Despite the client list, Mengel says Rock Garden is on the small to medium end of produce supply companies.

"But that allows us a lot more individuality in catering to our accounts," she says. "We'll find anything they want, and some of the larger companies don't have the time to do that."

One of Coiner's tossed-together dishes featuring rosemary, the herb of remembrance:

### Rosemary Wok

- 4 tablespoons sunflower oil
- 2 dozen snow peas
- 8 to 10 shiitake mushrooms
- 1 tablespoon chives, chopped
- 3 ounce package ramen noodles
- 16 jumbo shrimp, peeled and deveined
- 3 to 4 sprigs rosemary leaves, chopped

1. Heat wok. Add 2 tablespoons oil. Stir-fry snow peas, mushrooms and chives. Set aside. Meanwhile, cook ramen noodles, drain, set aside.

2. In wok, add 2 remaining tablespoons oil, heat and add shrimp and rosemary. Stir-fry for 1 - 2 minutes, or until shrimp have just turned pink. Do not overcook.

3. Toss together with snow pea mixture and noodles. Splash with soy sauce and garnish with additional rosemary sprigs.

Yield: 2 generous servings

► Rock Garden D.C. will deliver, but there is a \$25 minimum order required for free delivery. To place orders, call (703) 521-6655.

The company's herb plants are available at Merrifield Garden Centers and Burke Garden Center in Virginia, Longwood Garden Center and Behnke's in Maryland; National Cathedral, Washington; and Sutton Place Gourmets.