

# Cooking by Season: The Cass House

BY JAMIE RELTH



House-cured meats

All in good time. That is the mantra I imagine Captain James Cass, founder of the town of Cayucos, repeated to himself in the mid-1800s as he patiently and lovingly chipped away at building his home over the course of eight long years. A calculating visionary and a builder of the town's church and pier, he had a plan for the little scenic seaside city and he was not going to be rushed in bringing it to fruition.

The work paid off: His beautiful Victorian home remains today, now in the hands of Gary and Nancy Bagnalls, who carry out his pacing perfectly.

Keeping the Cass tradition alive, the Bagnalls invested 14 painstaking years to restore the historic home to its original glory. In 2007, gracious hosts Jensen and Grace Lorenzen

fell for the exquisite, intimate backdrop and eagerly turned it into the luxury inn and restaurant that it is today. The inn's contemporary touches of luxury (flat screen TVs, super-plush linens and free wi-fi) put the modern traveler at ease, while varnished vintage details such as original floors, windows and molding; antique fireplaces, and cast-iron soaking tubs invite guests of the five cozy rooms to relax and escape the harried pace of today's world.

The unrushed Cass clock continues its leisurely beat in the restaurant and kitchen, where guests are given the time to savor an artful four-course tasting menu (which often takes two or more hours to really enjoy) in the warm, dimly lit dining room, and where the content of dishes is dictated by nature's rhythms. Their 100% local, homegrown or locally sourced menu changes daily, accord-

ing to the land's rotating bounty, giving each season's vegetables, like each dish, its brief but unhurried moment on the stage.

"I always wanted to make a restaurant be sustainable on entirely local products and things that we grow—that's impossible for most restaurants to do," says Cass House Owner and Chef Jensen Lorenzen, who has worked in the culinary industry since he was 14. He lists motives for this method, like fresher food, reduced carbon footprint and sustaining the local economy—but it really comes down to having a connection with the food and the grower.

For instance, he says, "I've always thought that if you're going to eat meat, you should probably know where it comes from." He notes that The Cass House doesn't have a lot of meat on the menu, but what it does

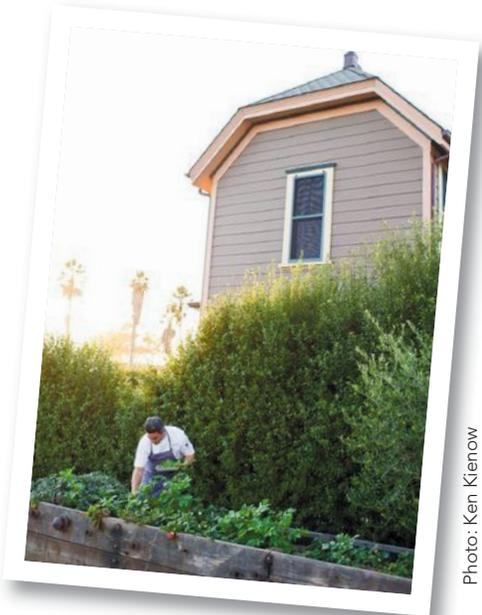


Photo: Ken Kienow

Chef Jensen gathering herbs from the garden

offer—chicken from Rinconada Dairy, fish from the local docks, grass-fed beef from Templeton—is completely locally sourced. “I know exactly where it came from, I know exactly how it was raised,” says Lorenzen.

But produce makes up the bulk of the menu at The Cass House, and all major menu decisions revolve around the whims of the local crops. Lorenzen says he visits three farmers markets a week, in San Luis Obispo, Morro Bay and his favorite, Los Osos, to gather produce from farmers with whom he is on a

first-name basis, such as James from Mount Olive Organics and Roberta from LeFort’s Organic Farm.

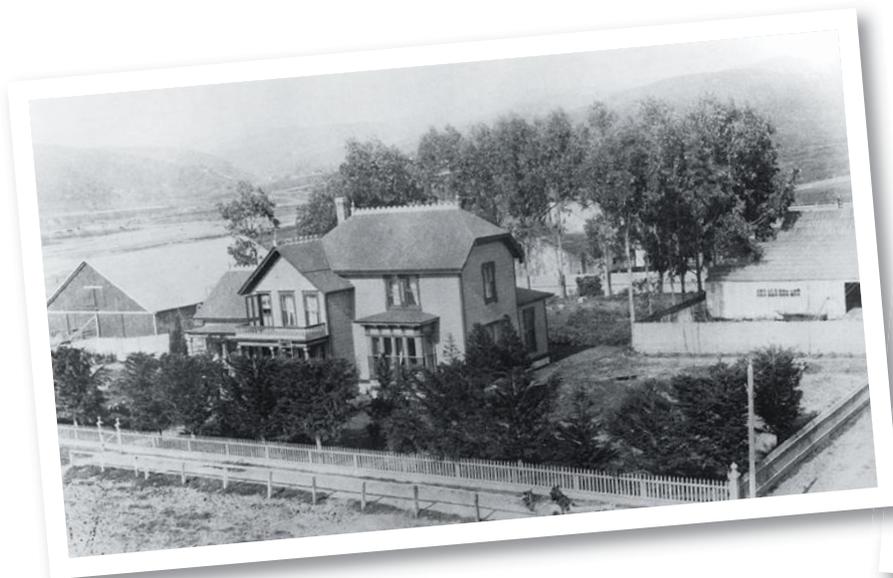
The rest he gets from The Cass House’s own gardens. Walking their peaceful grounds—just in view of the gentle sway of the ocean’s tides and replete with culinary as well as ornamental treasures—puts you in touch with the slow, steady biological clock that guides his kitchen. As you wind around through the raised beds of chard, artichoke and broccoli, you get a sense of the late winter palette by which he is currently composing his culinary masterpieces, and a preview of the meal you’ll enjoy for dinner. This is intentional. Lorenzen forced these constraints of using only local or homegrown products because he wanted to “give a sense of time and place with the restaurant,” he says.

The system also, however, puts a whole new layer of challenges on the chef’s plate, which Lorenzen enthusiastically takes on. “Right now we have a lot of broccoli and kale—my whole garden is heavy greens,” he explains. “Then the challenge becomes how many different ways can I use this one product?”

His process of turning a basket full of greens, freshly plucked from the garden, into a gourmet meal is fit for a reality cooking show.

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Photos courtesy of the Cass House



An early photo of the newly built Cass House in Cayucos



Capitan James Cass

“We’ll all be standing around the table looking at this stuff like, ‘OK, what should we do with it?’” Lorenzen says laughingly of his staff’s daily challenges. For instance, Lorenzen points out the thick leaves of Red Russian kale and says, “I wanted to do a pasta dish with it, but I was, like, ‘What if instead of using actual pasta, we just cut [the kale] like pasta—like a fettuccine—and sauté it and season it like you would a pasta, but use the green *as the pasta substitute?*’ So we started tinkering with that idea for a while and now it’s made it onto the menu.”

In the same way, dishes like the Lamb Tartare with slow-roasted beets, caraway flatbread, winter radishes, fennel, horseradish, avocado and Rinconada Dairy cheese find their way to the Cass House dining room. When the kitchen runs out of a certain ingredient, Lorenzen and his sous-chef will run out into the garden to survey the options. It’s a process I imagine most chefs (who buy from online purveyors and select any quantity of any crop at the click of a mouse) would find bewildering. And Lorenzen admits that coming up with ideas for the menu as the plants come up from the ground took some getting used to. But, he says, “For the way that we work, it forces us to be more creative and we end up with a fresher product.”

For now the challenge is broccoli and kale. Soon, Lorenzen says looking out into the garden, these winter crops will give way to spring’s carrots, baby greens and onions, inspiring myriad new interpretations on the menu. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves. All in good time. 🌱

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Writer **Jamie Relth’s** work has taken her to castles, islands, hot springs and countless restaurants and wineries. Whatever the topic, she is constantly inspired by the stories uncovered in the process of writing. Aside from work, her adventures include swimming, yoga, running and hiking the hills of SLO with her trusty dog by her side.



The garden provides a bounty of fresh greens

## Home-Garden Hints

Cass House Chef Jensen Lorenzen offers a few insights from his own culinary garden to help home chefs’ gardens take seed without wasting any time, space or produce.

**1. The Hardier the Easier** “Start with hardy leafy greens because they’re really resilient,” Lorenzen says, pointing out tough staples such as beets or kale. “Once you get the hardy stuff down you can work towards the more delicate.”

**2. Start Small** “Grow a small amount and learn to use that small amount,” Lorenzen advises, noting that he’s seen many people get in over their heads by planting a huge vegetable garden only to find they’re unable to manage or use all of the produce.

**3. Use the Whole-Plant Method**

“I think you have to learn how to eat the food you grow. That’s a curve in and of itself,” Lorenzen says. “You may not think right away of making carrot-top pesto, but with most plants it’s the same idea of ‘nose-to-tail eating’ as with animals: You wouldn’t throw out certain cuts of a pig. You can consider the vegetable the same way, so that with less space, you can consume more.” Lorenzen says he’ll pull up an onion and deep-fry the roots and sauté the greens. “Or, you know all the rainbow chard on the market right now? You can make this multicolored, rainbow jam out of just the stems. It’s super good.”