

# RESTAURANT

## BUSINESS

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...in Poached Chicken (T. ...)

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## BEST PRACTICES

Business ideas you should steal now



Sustainability

### GARDEN VARIETY

Hyperlocal sourcing made easy ... well, easier.

**Chef Mooney's soil-free system has proven more resistant to bugs and disease, plus it produces a higher yield than traditional gardens**

**R**estaurant gardens have been all the rage for some time, but the space and commitment traditional gardens require are not realistic for all operations. Moto in Chicago, for example, has no outdoor space, so the solution for the fine-dining concept was to bring the garden indoors. Two years ago, the team hired an outside company to convert an 80-square-foot office into an indoor hydroponic grow space, known as Moto Farm. It took about six months to settle on the right temperature, humidity and carbon dioxide level within the windowless room, but now the three vertical trough-like systems produce enough edible flowers, herbs and microgreens for 200 services per week.

For Moto, one benefit of its hydroponic system, which grows plants in dried coconut husks, is the ease of maintenance. A pump filters water and nutrients through the growers, so they essentially water themselves, Executive Chef Richie Farina says. The method has proven speedy as well: "We see sprouting within a day," he says. Moto pays farmers to come in

#### Ponic-what?

The boom in urban agriculture has brought light to a variety of growing methods

#### Hydroponic

Roots live in nutrient-rich water only or in a non-soil medium

#### Aeroponic

Using air or mist without soil or another medium

#### Aquaponic

Plants are nourished by excrement from fish in the water

once a week and replant for a minimal fee. Other hands-on maintenance by the Moto staff is simple, Farina says. He performs daily cleaning, but with the garden located directly next to the kitchen, it is done "in no time at all."

Half of what is grown is devoted to the Grow Room course on Moto's \$175 tasting menu. Microgreens are presented in the pod in which they are grown, then trimmed tableside, dressed and served atop beef tartare.

Chef John Mooney does have access to the rooftops at his restaurants Bell Book + Candle in New York City and Bidwell in Washington, D.C. Instead of traditional gardens, though, he had a low-maintenance system of soil-free aeroponic towers installed. Each of the 60 portable towers in New York City and 75 towers in D.C. functions as its own self-run ecosystem; each has a reservoir on a timer that mists nutrient-spiced water on the plants. Staff pitches in when planting, and it takes only one member of Mooney's kitchen crew about two hours a day to tend the towers.

With at least 60 percent of produce coming from the rooftops, Mooney wants to be sure his diners know their food's origin. Waitstaff are trained to promote the homegrown produce, and menus provide a list.

Farina says his initial investment of \$15,000 to \$20,000 paid off within a year. His small operation produces more than 10 clamshells worth of microgreens each week (each would cost between \$15 and \$30 from a purveyor), saving roughly \$300 weekly. Mooney's aeroponic towers were pricier at \$750 a unit. But he estimates he saves nearly \$6,000 a month on produce and has reduced spending by nearly 15 percent, recouping his initial investment in two years. For the chefs who make the commitment, a system that is up and running "is pure profit," says Farina. —Sara Rush

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be and Operated

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