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Making the Laundry List

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YOUNTVILLE, Calif. -- Corey Lee decants a stream of olive oil into a wineglass and holds it up to the light. It's a bright spring-green color and slightly cloudy. Lee, chef de cuisine at the French Laundry, swirls, sniffs and then sips, rolling the oil over his tongue as if it were wine. "I immediately get litchi," he says. "There's a little white pepper at the end; you get that in fresh olive oils. It's a good sign."

It's a good sign too for Valderrama's Hojiblanca oil. Harvested in Spain just a few months earlier, the oil already has been tasted and approved by a French Laundry sous-chef. The owner of the mill, José Valderrama, has made a pilgrimage to Napa to explain how advanced technology transforms fruit to oil in just 45 minutes. With Lee's approval, the oil might just make it onto the French Laundry menu.

Since its opening in 1994, critics have called the French Laundry "visionary" and "the best restaurant in America." For a small producer, supplying Thomas Keller's Napa Valley dining room is the holy grail. Other elite restaurants also can provide a launching pad, but no other is as famous. If the French Laundry is using it, the thinking goes, it has to be good.

"People call me all the time and say, 'You should buy from us. We sell at the French Laundry,' " says CityZen chef Eric Ziebold, who (apparently unbeknownst to the vendors) served as Keller's chef de cuisine for five years. "It's a big thing for them. It's a validation of their product."

Gaining admission to the French Laundry kitchen is the food equivalent of joining an exclusive club. Purveyors must attract the attention of French Laundry chefs, then survive intense hazing: questions about the taste and consistency of their product and the philosophy behind it. Once they're in, the restaurant supports, even honors, its producers. Many of them, such as Andante Dairy, Elysian Fields and Snake River Farms, have become food celebrities in their own right.

In the early days, getting an audience wasn't as difficult as it is today. In 2000, Diane St. Clair, who had just begun to make butter at her farm in Orwell, Vt., sent Keller a handwritten note to ask if he would try her product. The day after he received it, Keller called and declared it the most extraordinary butter he had ever tasted. Then he offered to buy her entire supply.

"If I did that today, I don't know if he'd even be there to get the letter," St. Clair says.

St. Clair fields weekly calls from restaurateurs who would like to buy her butter. But, she says, if she expanded production, it wouldn't be the special butter they seek. Today, she sells only to the French Laundry; Per Se, Keller's New York restaurant; and Boston's No. 9 Park, which launched a year-long

campaign to obtain a small share.

At the French Laundry these days, most new products come from trusted sources who understand what the restaurant needs. Seafood distributor International Marine suggested the restaurant try kindai, a farmed, sustainable bluefin tuna. The restaurant now receives 35 pounds of the approximately 200 pounds imported each week to the United States. A Yountville resident and regular arranged for executives from Australia-based Wine and Truffle to come in, bringing fresh black truffles to the restaurant's summer menu for the first time. Jing Tio, the founder of gourmet distributor Le Sanctuaire, introduced chefs to Valderrama's olive oil. "Most of the time, it's about the relationship," Lee says.

Even recommended foods are put through their paces. In the classically structured kitchen there is one sous-chef responsible for seafood, others for meat, dry goods and produce. Lee and Keller make decisions about costly items such as truffles and caviar.

When a new product, such as Valderrama's olive oil, arrives, the sous-chef overseeing that area of the kitchen will taste it. If impressed, he will compare it side by side with whatever the kitchen is already using, in this case Manni, a peppery green oil from Italy, and Moulin de Penitents, a fruity and floral oil from Provence. The chef will also invite the producer to come in and talk about the product. The final stage is a side-by-side tasting by chef Lee.

The complex process can be a trial for small producers. In 2006, a small Spanish caviar farm worked for several months to get its product on the menu. The owner flew to California to join a tasting. He sent samples of caviar aged for six months and 12 months, containing varying levels of salt. He experimented with packaging to ensure the caviar arrived in perfect condition. "We never got there," Lee says. "We couldn't get the level of consistency we wanted."

Heath Putnam, a Washington state farmer who breeds heritage pigs called Mangalitsas, mounted a prolonged campaign to get his pork on the menu. He left a message introducing himself, then waited several months for a return call. When it finally came, sous-chef Devin Knell told Putnam he wanted to experiment with the meat, known for its high fat content, for charcuterie. That meant he needed the whole pig, uncut, skin on and never frozen. The only way to get it there, Putnam realized, was to hire a truck and driver to deliver it, which he did. "Logistically, it was a nightmare. I'm having post-traumatic stress disorder talking about it," Putnam says.

Still, selling to the French Laundry made it easier to get attention from other restaurants -- and the press. Of nine recent articles about Mangalitsa pork, including one in this newspaper, six mention that the French Laundry has bought the meat. Putnam now sells to several exclusive restaurants in his home state, including the Herbfarm in Woodinville and Seattle darlings Lark and Sitka and Spruce. "The media uses it as a way to let people know a product is excellent," Putnam says.

On the other hand, Putnam is careful not to talk up his French Laundry connection too much. "A lot of restaurateurs hear that and think, 'The French Laundry buys all kinds of overpriced stuff I can't afford.' Sometimes it's better not to make your product sound so exclusive."

On balance, most agree the pros outweigh the cons. Even if the French Laundry chooses to use only a small amount of vinegar or truffles, it familiarizes the chefs who work there with the product. And those ambitious chefs (many of whom are doing short stints at the French Laundry just to get it on their résumé) move on to other restaurants.

Celine Labaune, who imports truffles from France, started her business five years ago with just one client: the French Laundry. Now she sells to dozens of high-end restaurants including Daniel, Le Bernardin and Masa in New York.

"My business has picked up with word of mouth," she says. "A lot of that is thanks to them."

Will the French Laundry do the same for Valderrama? This month a new dish went on the menu: salad of Hawaiian hearts of peach palm with litchis, radishes and Valderrama Hojiblanca olive oil.

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