



# KNOWING WHAT IT MEANS TO NURTURE:

## Volunteer Park Café and Marketplace

STORY BY PAT TANUMIHARDJA  
PHOTOS BY CAROLE TOPALIAN  
AND PAT TANUMIHARDJA

**O**n a sunny spring afternoon, I find Ericka Burke and Heather Earnhardt behind the counter of their very popular Capitol Hill café. The chef-owners are huddled over a panini grill deep in a heated discussion with a team of repairmen. Sandwiches are a staple on the café's daytime menu so their furrowed brows rightly demonstrate their concern.

All around them it's business as usual at Volunteer Park Café and Marketplace, a light-flooded yellow brick building wedged into the corner of 17th and Galer. Staff take orders for salads (there are five deliciously fresh combinations to choose from), Burke's seasonal pot pie (today's was chicken), or espresso drinks plus any one of Earnhardt's assortment of fresh-baked sweets (I vote for the pear-cardamom muffin).

Everything on the menu demonstrates Burke and Earnhardt's commitment to pure, fresh, tasty foods. "It's our responsibility ... to give our customers good food ... and basically go about in our unspoken, nurturing type of way," explains Burke.

As moms, both Burke and Earnhardt know what it means to nurture. While the café isn't 100 percent organic (in the summer, 80 percent of their ingredients are organic), they use seasonal ingredients sourced from local farms and purchase hormone-free dairy as well as high-quality meats. Above all, they seek out small batch and handcrafted



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products and support family farms that have a passion for their produce.

Behind every ingredient is a local producer. And Burke and Earnhardt can tell you a story about each one.

Full Circle Farm's bounty--be they cranberry beans, golden beets or Thumbelina carrots--appear on the café menu often. Burke and Earnhardt have worked with them since 1997. "It's nice to watch them grow from a broken down truck to the big business they have now," says Earnhardt. In fact, Full Circle's owners live in the neighborhood and are regulars at the café.

The café also gets its supplies in quirkier ways.

There's Brandon (they don't even know his last name!), who appears at their doorstep every week during season with a rainbow assortment of heirloom tomatoes. "He just showed up at Carmelita (where both Burke and Earnhardt used to work)," says Burke and they've been buying his tomatoes ever since.

Earnhardt adores Rachel and Peter Christianson, whom she dubs the 'hippie couple.' "They go to organic U-pick farms and bring back flats of strawberries still warm from being picked."

Even their customers get in on the act. A neighbor down the street goes blackberry-picking with her three boys in tow and brings in flats of fruit for the café. Earnhardt turns the blackberries into individual "hand pies" and also spoons them over her dense yet soft-inside shortcake. Another neighbor's plums and Concord grapes find their way into tarts and pies.



Such is the close-knit relationship between Burke and Earnhardt and their customers.

In addition to being the baking maven, Earnhardt is also the resident gardener. I'm chatting with her in early April and she admits with an "I know, I know" shrug, "I'm way behind." But she hands me her list of "intentions": freckles lettuce, mache, cucumbers, sweet peas, yellow brandywine tomatoes, black prince tomatoes, Pruden's purple tomatoes, and a hodgepodge of herbs. The organic garden is small, says Earnhardt and most of the yield will go toward the monthly wine dinners.

Held every second Saturday of the month, the wine dinners feature small boutique wineries with an emphasis on organic and biodynamic wines. The accompanying dishes follow the same concept as the weekly-rotating dinner menu.

Burke, the mastermind behind the café's savory selections, celebrates food while respecting the original form of the ingredients. "There are never more than five ingredients on a plate, nothing is over-sauced and we use ingredients that we care about and want to highlight," she explains.

Simple and straightforward, every dish that emerges from the café kitchen extols creativity and comfort.

Small plates might include deviled eggs, a mini chicken pot pie--made with free-range chicken, of course--and a mini mac layered with gruyere, white cheddar and fontina cheeses and topped with a parmesan-breadcrumb mixture. They've also become known for their home-style braised meats; beef brisket, braised shanks, or a short ribs dish is always on the menu. All their meats come from the Meat Shop of Tacoma, the oldest certified organic meat shop in Washington.



## What do all these great restaurants have in common?

Asteroid Café · Atlas Foods · Barolo  
Bella Italia · Betty · Blackbird Bistro  
Black Bottle · Cactus Restaurants  
Café Campagne · Café Juanita · Café Presse  
Chateau Ste. Michelle · Chez Shea · Ciao Vito  
Coastal Kitchen · Crémant · Crow · El Gaucho  
Endolyne Joe's · Epic Roasthouse · Eva  
Fins Bistro · Four Swallows  
Geraldine's Counter · Harvest Vine  
How to Cook a Wolf · La Medusa · Lark  
Le Pichet · Library Bistro · Licorous  
Machiavelli · Maple Leaf Grill  
Marco's Supper Club · Matt's in the Market  
Mioposto · Pazzo · Pike Street Fish Fry  
Purple Café and Wine Bars · Quinn's  
Ray's Boathouse · Restaurant Zoë · Salumi  
Sazerac · Sea Grill · Serafina · Steelhead Diner  
Stumbling Goat Bistro · Teatro ZinZanni  
Ten Mercer · The 5 Spot · The Hi-Life  
35th Street Bistro · Tilth · Trellis · Tavolata  
Troiani · Tulio · 26 Brix · Txori · Union  
Veil · Via Tribunali  
Volunteer Park Café & Marketplace  
Yarrow Bay Grill and Beach Café



Ethan Stowell  
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Joseba Jiménez  
de Jiménez  
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In the tiny back kitchen, Burke shows off a trio of branzino from Mutual Fish Company which will be roasted whole and accompanied by saffron-roasted Yukon potatoes and fresh spring asparagus for that evening's dinner menu.

While the quality and provenance of the food they serve is very important to their mission, Burke and Earnhardt want the café to bring people together and promote a sense of community and conviviality in the neighborhood. "Our goals are to be part of and help create that sense of community, to provide high-quality food from local sources, and to make your lives more comfortable," says Burke.

From the looks of it, they're doing a great job. At dinner, people who don't know each other leave as friends, says Burke with pride. "We'll introduce neighbors who live on the same street," she continues. "And you'll see them coming to dinner together the next week."

This conviviality extends to the relationship between owners, staff and customers as well. Often, customers will make their way to the kitchen window in the back just to tell them, "Thank you, dinner was awesome!"

"It's great for our young staff to know that they're part of something bigger than themselves," says Burke.

As I gather my things to leave, I hear an order called for the pepper bacon BLT. Ah, the panini grill is working again! *eS*

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**Pat Tanumihardja** writes about food, culture, and travel through a multi-cultural lens. She has been published in *Saveur*, *Seattle Magazine*, and *Sunset*, and is currently working on her first cookbook, *The Asian Grandmothers Cookbook*, to be published by Sasquatch Books in 2009. Check out her blog: [theasiangrandmotherscookbook.wordpress.com](http://theasiangrandmotherscookbook.wordpress.com).

**Volunteer Park Café and Marketplace**  
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Wine dinners are held on the second Saturday of each month. Upcoming wineries and dates:

July 12, LIOCO Wine ; August 9, K Vinters

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## Warm Hazelnut Chevre Salad

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### Recipe Courtesy Volunteer Park Café

Serves 6 | Prep Time: 45 minutes, start to finish

If you have trouble finding blanched hazelnuts, simply rub the skins off with a tea towel after toasting.

12 ounces soft goat cheese  
(chevre)

1/2 cup hazelnuts, blanched

1/2 cup panko breadcrumbs

2 large eggs

1/4 cup half-and-half

9 ounces (6 big handfuls) mixed  
salad greens

18 strawberries, sliced

Pomegranate Vinaigrette  
(recipe follows)

Preheat the oven to 350°. Place the hazelnuts on a baking sheet and toast for 8 minutes. (Make the vinaigrette while the hazelnuts cool.)

Portion the chevre into 2 oz balls, then form the balls into little cakes, about 2" in diameter and 3/4" tall. Refrigerate until ready to bread.

Once hazelnuts are cool, place them in a food processor with the panko. Pulse until a slightly chunky breading is achieved. (The nuts should be no larger than 1/8".) Transfer to a medium bowl.

Beat the 2 eggs and half-and-half together in a second bowl, until blended.

Remove chevre cakes from the refrigerator. Place one cake in the egg mixture, coating it completely, then turn it in the hazelnut breading, using your hands to ensure the cake is well coated, and set it on a plate. Repeat with the remaining cakes, then refrigerate until just before you're ready to serve the salad.

To assemble, bake the chevre cakes on a parchment-lined baking sheet at 350° for 5 to 7 minutes, or until they're warm in the center. Meanwhile, place salad greens and half the sliced strawberries in a mixing bowl. Toss with vinaigrette to taste (about 3/4 cup for 6 salads).

Using a metal spatula, carefully transfer the warm chevre cakes to salad plates. Place the dressed salad next to the cakes, garnish with remaining strawberry slices, and serve immediately.

### WINE PAIRING COURTESY MICHAEL TEER, PIKE AND WESTERN WINE SHOP

**Chinook Cabernet Franc Rosé 2007:** Beautiful pink/red color with aromas of fresh strawberry. Some body balanced by ample fruit and bright acidity.

**L'Ecole Chenin Blanc 'Walla Voila' 2007:** Aromas of ripe apple or pear with a wonderful freshness. Richness of texture supported by ripe, slightly sweet fruit and good acidity that keeps everything fresh.

