

What's Cooking?

This week's columns:
Single Servings
The Meal Manager

SPECIAL FEATURE

Dining Out — Literally!

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Special to the Jewish Exponent

Maybe it's not such a big deal if you own or rent property with a shaded deck, planned terrace or a screened porch and you feel like preparing food. But for the rest of us who aren't so lucky or so disposed, eating alfresco at a restaurant adds enjoyment to the dining experience. It's the best of all possible worlds: the joys of good food cooked by someone else, served in the glory of natural surroundings.

Although tables on the sidewalk can be pleasant and a little like eating in Paris, it's not at all the same as savoring a meal while you're surrounded by a bower of greenery or overlooking a body of water.

In the mid-1970s, Kathleen Mulhern turned her charming garden into a destination. The Garden restaurant, at 1617 Spruce St., awakened people to the pleasure — especially within the restrictive confines of the city — of being able to indulge in a meal outdoors in a charming garden on lovely china served by efficient waiters and waitresses.

A few years later, other savvy restaurateurs began searching for ways to give the public what it was looking for: outdoor settings that delivered a suggestion of communicating with nature while reveling in the pleasure of civilized dining.

Now, Philadelphia has a plethora of alfresco eateries in a variety of settings, from waterfront to garden locations, with a choice of different food styles: traditional American (City Tavern) to contemporary Southwestern (Arroyo Grille); American Continental (Edge) to Classic Italian (La Veranda).

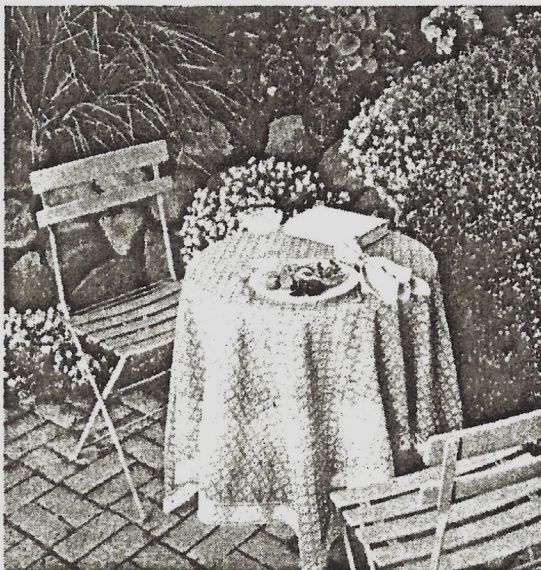
In the city are a couple of hidden garden spots in which to take sustenance: Opus 251 dishes up pretty food (the chef calls it

"rustic American with an Asian-Mediterranean influence") in reasonably attractive surroundings just behind the Art Alliance, at 251 S. 18th St. The space is liberally planted with tubs and pots; you'll feel entirely removed from its location, smack in the center of Center City, particularly after you've meandered through the elegant ground-floor ambience of the Alliance itself, perused the menu and enjoyed the enticing scents coming from the kitchen.

Then, for another kind of experience, there's **The Inn Philadelphia**, located in two adjacent little historic houses at 251 S. Camac St. The restaurant's Hidden Garden is a walled space that makes you feel as though you're entirely separated from the world at large. The service is as courtly as if you were being attended by a private butler, but in spite of its yesteryear ambience, the American-Continental food is reasonably contemporary. With the chef's liberal use of herbs, the meal is seasoned in a way that reminds you that you're being fed very much in 20th-century style.

Not so hidden, although reasonably separated from public view, is the extensive garden at **City Tavern** (Second and Walnut Sts.), where servers in period costumes present meals on authentic 18th-century dishes. While the serving style may suggest the antique, the food at City Tavern is made with fresh, contemporary ingredients insofar as it is possible to use them to recreate authentically old-fashioned meals. The space here is large enough to accommodate 200 for receptions and weddings, and intimate enough for smaller seated parties. One comforting feature is that in the event of rain, there is also an upstairs covered terrace that will keep a small group out of the weather.

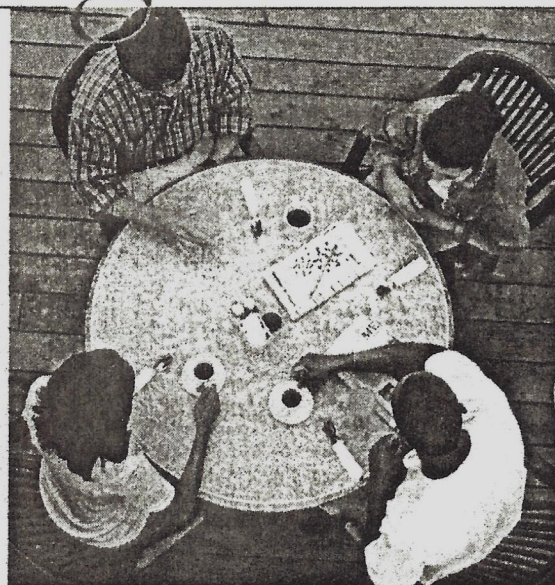
Ristorante La Veranda, at Pier 3 on Columbus Boulevard, between Arch and Market streets, is an elegant, thoroughly Italian eatery that serves a large menu that emulates the dishes served in the Centofanti restaurant in Rome, where the owner learned his trade. You can sit on the



veranda (yes, the restaurant has one) and gaze at the beautifully maintained boats in the marina below. Eat the fish or pasta or anything else on its large menu and you can almost feel the breezes of the Adriatic, rather than the Delaware.

Who can forget the **Moshulu**, that huge sailing ship that towers over the southern end of Penn's Landing? The restaurant, at 735 S. Columbus Blvd., serves snacks and drinks, but rarely entire meals, on deck. You'll feel as if you're about to set sail on a long voyage, but, in fact, you never leave the dock where the ship is anchored at right angles to the shore.

Heading out of the city,



In Radnor, **Bravo Bistro** and its pricier sister restaurant, **Passerelle** (175 King of Prussia Rd.), truly exude the flavors of the country or, at least, the exurbs. This French-influenced bistro and its fancy, romantic New American sibling share a kitchen and a lovely setting; they really do make you feel as if you've escaped the Philadelphia environs and perhaps ended up in Monet country — particularly in the spring, when the surrounding flowers are blooming in clear, fresh colors. The ambience, and the not-too-long ride from Center City via the Schuylkill and the Blue Route, leaves you feeling as if you've traveled much farther.

Thus far, you've been able to take your meals in city gardens, in the country, overlooking a big river, a small river and a skinny canal. For an entirely different take on outdoor dining, head to the Mann Center for the Performing Arts. The restaurant **Bravo** offers a weekly changing buffet in a beautifully appointed, yellow-striped tent with a nicely planted fountain in the center — a decidedly upscale experience.

Best of all, for Mann patrons who remember the steep climb to the top of the hill where food is served (and eaten), it's now possible to park at the bottom of the hill and take a shuttle bus up. No cooking, no climbing; just eating and enjoying — with a concert still to look forward to. Add natural surroundings and you really are dining out in style. ■

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