

# Organic Farmer in Our Dell

*Branch Creek Farm's Mark and Judy Dornstreich give chefs like Anton Dodel what they need to produce.* **BY BARBARA ANN ROSENBERG**

CALL IT SERENDIPITY. FATE. KISMET... whatever. That's how Mark and Judy Dornstreich and Anton Dodel got together — and there was never a more compatible trio. Their relationship has nothing to do with romance, though they do share a passion for, of all things, organic vegetables and edible flowers.

The Dornstreichs grow the vegetables and flowers at Branch Creek Farm in Perkasio, Pa.; Anton Dodel uses them in his restaurant — Anton's at the Swan in Lambertville, N.J. A mutual friend in the food business introduced them three years ago.

The restaurant is a bastion of New American cooking, where the chef considers the quality of the ingredients he buys at least as important as his artistry in preparing them. In fact, Dodel is somewhat of a nut (by his own admission) about what he buys — and whom he buys from. He thinks so much of the Dornstreichs' salad greens that he makes the trek from Lambertville to Perkasio in Bucks County on a regular basis to pick them up — since, because of the press on *his* time, Mark only makes deliveries to Philadelphia and Bucks County restaurants.

What's most interesting about the trio is that the Dornstreichs, now in their late 40s, didn't begin their careers as farmers — nor did the 32-year-old Dodel start out as a chef. In fact, Judy Dornstreich was a psychological counselor who specialized in vocational guidance and Mark, her husband, was a Ph.D. anthropologist.

Anton Dodel was another kind of scientist, and it was actually while



Mark Dornstreich started out as an anthropologist; his wife, Judy, was a psychologist.

he was working at the Channing Laboratory at Harvard Medical School in 1987 (with the group that unlocked the mystery of toxic shock syndrome) that he decided that the regulated, scientific life was not for him. While he was pondering his future, Dodel took a job at Michela's, a restaurant in Cambridge, and fell in love with the chaos, the long hours, the excitement...the antithesis of his previous profession. He pursued his new love by taking classical French

cooking courses at L'Academie de Cuisine in Bethesda, Md., and, as they say, the rest is history.

Mark and Judy Dornstreich took a longer route to their present bucolic occupation and lifestyle, a much longer route...via New Guinea. Mark was on a field trip to study the economics of primitive agriculture, and it was there that he got bitten. "Literally bitten by malarial mosquitoes, and figuratively by the farming bug," he says.

Several years and two kids later



# EDIBLE ARTISTRY BY ANTON

THE FOLLOWING ASPARAGUS salad was created by Anton Dodel for his Lambertville restaurant, Anton's at the Swan. The asparagus he uses, of course, comes from Branch Creek Farm. This recipe will serve six.

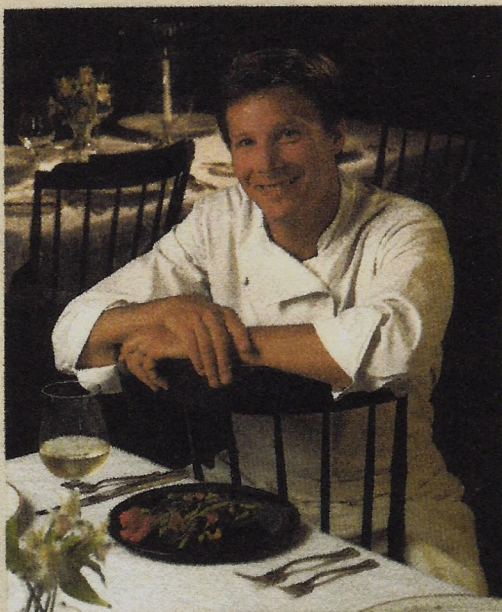
2 pounds of asparagus (preferably peeled, with the woody bottoms of the stalks broken off and cut to look smooth)  
2 tablespoons good olive oil  
5 large nasturtium leaves for every 6 stalks of asparagus, cut into fine julienne  
nasturtium flowers for garnish (about 10 flowers for every 20 leaves)

## Mustard Vinaigrette

2 tablespoons Dijon mustard  
2 teaspoons wine vinegar  
½ cup good olive oil

Blanch the asparagus in boiling water for about 3 to 4 minutes. Do not overcook. Refresh under cold water and pat dry. Cut each spear into 2 or 3 pieces (depending on size).

When ready to serve, warm the asparagus over low heat in 2 tablespoons olive oil and add nasturtium leaves, stirring rapidly to avoid their clumping



Chef Anton Dodel regards the quality of his ingredients.

together. When the leaves turn dark, remove from heat and arrange on plates. (Anton uses black plates because of the color effect.) Salt lightly.

To make mustard vinaigrette, whisk together mustard and vinegar. Add olive oil slowly, whisking continuously to avoid separation. (If it *does* separate, beat vigorously with a small spoon to reincorporate the oil.)

Dress salad — about 2 tablespoons vinaigrette per serving. Garnish with nasturtium flowers (they taste as good as they look). — B.A.R.

(they now have four), the Dornstreichs bought Branch Creek Farm, a spread that was already using organic growing methods. "I sometimes wonder now if I'm growing artists' materials or vegetables and flowers," says Judy about the tiny specimens of beets, oriental greens and several varieties of lettuce and cress that live their short lives in the 5,500 square feet of greenhouses.

Circumstances weren't always right, however, for the Dornstreichs to grow perfect vegetables. In fact, they didn't even think in those terms. It took the Philadelphia restaurant renaissance to get to that stage. In the beginning, they

sold their organically grown outdoor produce at a farm stand, and Mark made regular deliveries to health food stores. "But with [by then] three kids, it just didn't work," he says, "so I was teaching courses at Rutgers and trying to figure out how to make a living at this business of farming."

The proverbial break came when a couple of herb growers wanted to supplement their deliveries to restaurants and asked Mark to go along with them. It wasn't too long before he met food consultant Aliza Green (then chef at DiLullo's Fox Chase restaurant, now a consultant at the Center City Omni's Azalea Restaurant), who became a

fan of the Dornstreichs' produce. Happily, as things turned out, Green was interested in developing her own supplies from local growers, and encouraged Mark to grow more — and more. "I was so excited," he says. "Particularly when Aliza and other chefs began asking us to grow specialty stuff like arugula and colored peppers and different species of eggplants that were then less well known in this area at the time. Now they're challenging us with new species, like mizuna [an oriental green], and I love it!"

Mark Dornstreich admits that he most enjoys meeting (and exceeding) the expectations of even the most demanding chefs and restaurateurs. "When people like Georges Perrier [owner/chef of Le Bec-Fin] tell me that something we grow is as good as, or even better than, what he can get in France — wow! Or when Jean-Marie Lacroix [executive chef at the Four Seasons Hotel] prepares a luncheon for La Chaine des Rotisseurs [an exclusive eating club] featuring Branch Creek vegetables. Or when Anton Dodel goes against his usual principles [of not garnishing with flowers just because they look pretty, they must serve a purpose] and develops a salad that mixes our nasturtiums with asparagus. The combination of tastes is wonderful."

It was serendipitous, too, when a few years ago, Branch Creek Farm expanded its output to include exquisite herbs — unusual items such as lemon verbena and chervil — every month. "We took that on when a lovely woman who grew herbs in this area decided to move to Maine and we bought her plants. A few thousand of them. We dug them ourselves and brought them to Branch Creek Farm. They were wonderful — already productive — but I'm always looking for new varieties," says Mark.

Now the Dornstreichs not only have the greenhouses where they grow their year-round produce, they also have a quarter-acre outdoors for herbs, and eight acres for vegetables. Mark notes that they have 30 to 40 varieties of tomatoes alone. "To hedge our bets," he explains. "I'm constantly looking for improved performance, particularly with the new strains that are coming on the market."

The Dornstreichs are committed