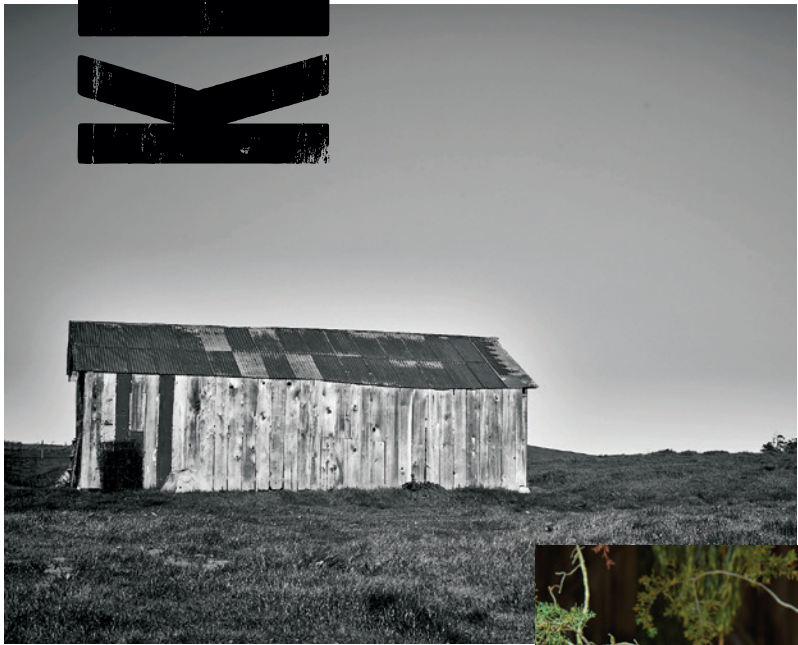


KEEFER

The former French
Laundry gardener
gives cannabis the
farm-to-table treatment



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MADNESS

FARM PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF SONOMA HILLS FARM



Grilled Peaches
with Brown Sugar
and Canna-honey

AARON KEEFER

holds the title “vice president of cannabis cultivation and operations” at Sonoma Hills Farm in Petaluma, California, but he insists it just means he’s a farmer.

“I’m responsible for everything as we build out the farm,” he says. “From planning where everything is going to go to creating the infrastructure. And when I’m all done with that, I’m very lucky. I can just grow plants.”

It’s late April, and for the past two months Keefer has been hauling away dead trees, unearthing vintage bottles and other curios from the era before recycling, putting up a hoop house and sprouting heirloom varieties of kohlrabi and kale. It’s all part of the process to turn 40 acres of rolling hills into a sustainable farm with animals, vegetables and—soon—cannabis.

A few times a week, Walt, a neighbor in his 80s, comes by to chat; California’s shelter-in-place mandate has him missing social time at the gym. From the farm, though, the pandemic feels remote amid the rolling hills. Remember those “Happy cows come from California” ads? That about sums up the landscape.

The topsoil is rich, but a truck delivers oystershell flour to add more nutrients. Over the past century, the land has been used for growing potatoes and grains, raising chickens and grazing cattle. In 2017, cannabis cultivator and entrepreneur Sam Magruder and his partners, backed in part by a San Francisco investment and strategy firm, bought the farm. Magruder then spent two years trying to obtain a conditional-use permit for a 1-acre cannabis grow—the first of its size in Sonoma County. That finally happened last October. The same month in nearby Napa County, the board of supervisors voted to ban cannabis farming in most of the territory.



He’s Crafty

But the goal of Sonoma Hills Farm isn’t so different from the goals of vintners in the surrounding areas: to produce some of the most nuanced craft product around. That’s where Keefer comes in. Having spent a decade growing vegetables under extreme quality standards for the Thomas Keller Restaurant Group, he is singularly positioned to grow cannabis for the connoisseur.

“True nutrition, you can taste it,” Keefer explains. “It comes from nutrition in the soil, the life in the soil. It’s the whole circle. You can give soil chemical fertilizers and you’ll never get the same taste.” This same philosophy applies to cannabis, he says.

Keefer’s experience with the plant started when he was a teenager growing up around farms in upstate New York. There, he and a couple friends nabbed a few cannabis seeds from someone’s dad, popped three plants and got one female. In the middle of the night, they’d sneak out to a cornfield to tend it.

That Skunk #1 “was the most pungent, most beautiful product,” he recalls. “I can still remember what it tasted like. It was so



“Flavors start to change as soon as the sun comes up.”

—Aaron Keefer, Sonoma Hills Farm, Petaluma, California

much different than all the other marijuana that I had gotten my hands on.”

The plant fascinated Keefer, who began studying strains and growing strategies. Separately, he was also drawn to cooking, graduating from the Culinary Institute of America in New York’s Hyde Park and later moving to Northern California to cook in restaurants. Even working grueling kitchen hours, he continued cultivating cannabis on the side, tending to his grow after work instead of going for beers with the other line cooks. He began to realize how small changes affect the end result.

“Something that happens at day four affects harvest at day 51,” he says. “It was a game of concentration, of reaching the peak genetics of what you’re trying to grow.”

Converging Paths

This love of cannabis began extending to all plants and led to a career change. While working as a food and beverage director

at a country club, Keefer won an internship at The French Laundry in Yountville, California, finding a natural fit working in the restaurant’s garden. He later moved up as the restaurant’s head culinary gardener. During the week, he’d take the chefs on a tour, explaining which produce was reaching its peak flavor. Chefs would plan the next day’s menu based on Keefer’s availability sheet. In the early morning, he’d harvest everything from fairy tale eggplants to delicate herbs, storing the produce at cool cellar temperature until it was ready for the prep cooks.

“Flavors start to change as soon as the sun comes up,” he says.

According to Keefer, all plants need the same things to grow and taste their best. Start with good genetic material. Then give that plant a rich growing environment, in soil teeming with life. Finally, care for the product once it’s been harvested and before it reaches the customer. This goes for food and cannabis alike.



CULINARY CRED

► Grew his first cannabis plants as a teenager in upstate New York.

► Tended plants instead of partying after shifts as a young line cook.

► Former head culinary gardener at Thomas Keller’s French Laundry in Yountville, California.





Tomato
Crostini
with
Infused
Olive Oil

Straining for Flavor

On the farm, half an acre of cannabis will grow outdoors, while another half will grow in a greenhouse with controlled climate and lighting. Keefer plans to focus on strains with nuance, aroma and flavor, such as citrusy Orange Acai. He plans on experimenting to see which strains do best outdoors, noting that outdoor plants will likely be much leafier because of direct sunlight. While the cannabis is growing, he still has acres of land to play with. This year, a portion will be for a victory garden; he'll give away the bounty to support restaurants during the pandemic.

It's true that the work has only just begun—the first harvest is months away—but Keefer is content. He's found his dream job.

“Sommeliers taste wine to understand the differences between left bank and right bank,” he says. “And chefs taste and taste and taste. It's about work, honing your palate. Unofficially, I've been training my palate for cannabis for years.”

Oh, and his last name? For the record, it's his real one. He knows what it rhymes with—it's just further confirmation he's landed in the right place.

Tomato Crostini with Infused Olive Oil

- 2 pounds ripe tomatoes, cored, seeded and chopped
- 3 garlic cloves, 2 minced, 1 halved, divided use
- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 3 tablespoons infused extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for drizzling*
- 1 tablespoon red-wine vinegar
- 1 loaf ciabatta or baguette bread, cut on a diagonal into ½-inch pieces
- ¼ cup packed fresh basil leaves, coarsely chopped

Combine tomatoes and minced garlic in large bowl. Season generously with salt and pepper. Add oil and vinegar; toss to mix. Cover and let stand at room temperature for 2 to 3 hours, stirring occasionally.

Rub one side of bread with remaining garlic clove. Cut in half crosswise; lightly brush each piece with olive oil. Bake at 350 F until toasted, about 12 minutes.

Add basil to tomato mixture along with salt and pepper to taste; mix gently. Spoon onto toasted bread. Serve at once with a drizzle of olive oil. Makes about 12 crostini, about 3.8 mg THC each, based on a 15% strain.



Grilled Peaches with Brown Sugar and Canna-honey

- 4 medium to large peaches, halved and pitted
- 1 tablespoon melted butter
- 4 teaspoons brown sugar
- Canna-honey, for drizzling*

Brush peach halves with butter and sprinkle with brown sugar. Grill at medium-high heat for 2 minutes on each side. Remove from grill and drizzle with honey. Makes 8 servings. Potency depends on the strain and amount used.

Infused Coconut-Lime Ice Pops

- Two 14-ounce cans coconut milk
- ½ cup sugar
- ½ cup lime juice, freshly squeezed
- Zest of 1 lime, finely grated
- 2 to 3 tablespoons infused coconut oil*

Combine coconut milk, sugar, lime juice and zest in blender; mix until smooth. Pour through fine strainer into spouted bowl; whisk in infused coconut oil. Pour mixture into ice pop molds. Freeze until set, at least 2 hours or overnight. Makes about 12 pops, about 3.8 mg THC each, based on a 15% strain. **KT**

*Get the recipes for infused honey and cannaoil at **kitchentoke.com**.

Recipes courtesy of Aaron Keefer



Infused Coconut-Lime Ice Pops

