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# When chef Lisa Elbe needs fresh produce for the cuisine she creates at Victor's Pier Street shanty, it's just a step away

When Victor Cerda arrived at his restaurant, Victor's Pier Street Shanty in Port Washington, the Tuesday after Memorial Day, he was surprised to find a concrete patio near the entry filled with containers of plants.

Chef Lisa Elbe and apprentice chef Zak Yoho had gone to garden centers after the restaurant closed at 2 p.m. Sunday and spent all day Monday planting herbs, vegetables and fruit that are now being harvested for everything from salads to entrees, drinks and even ice cream.

In water troughs, milk cans, baskets and recycled plastic containers, an unbelievable array of produce is growing, including lettuces, beets, carrots, tomatoes, eggplant, pole beans, jalapeño peppers, nasturiums, marigolds, blackberries, raspberries, blueberries, strawberries, kiwi, lemon balm, chocolate mint, lemon thyme, basil and bay leaves.

"This was done in 48 hours," Elbe said. "This is nothing compared to what we wanted to do. Wait until next year.

"Being the first year, it's a huge investment in dirt and containers. I have never done container gardening before and didn't realize how much dirt is needed. Considering the drought, it's done really good."

There are few things that surprise Cerda when it comes to his chef, but the garden was one of them.

"When you have a creative person who has a passion for something, you have to let them do it," Cerda said. "I've known Lisa for a long time, and I trust her."

Elbe worked with Cerda for eight years at the Bavarian Inn in Glendale and Victor's Restaurant in Cedarburg before joining him in Port Washington.

"I apprenticed under Victor's chef and was on fire. I was like a sponge and ended up taking his job," Elbe said.

“It’s what I was meant to do.”

She is passionate about fresh ingredients, and there is nothing fresher than picking the ingredients for a salad a few minutes before serving it. Her customers rave about the salads, she said, and a woman from New York even blogged about them.

In addition to a mix of lettuces — she recently planted a second crop — Elbe adds beet greens, nasturiums, marigolds, an array of herbs, berries and tomatoes, whatever is ready for harvest.

“The salad is a fireworks of flavor in your mouth,” Elbe said.

The garden, it turns out, has been more than a place to grow food for customers. It’s also provided an opportunity to meet people and share gardening tips and recipes.

“Customers come and hang out in the garden. People walk by and see me in the garden and they stop to talk. We give them something to taste,” said Elbe, who has too much shade at her Port Washington home to have a garden.

“They tell me about their gardens. It’s all about community — both local and distant. A guy from Germany talked to me about my berries.”

For Elbe, the garden was a natural thing to do.

She and her six siblings grew up on a Town of Grafton farm, where their parents had a large garden. Their plates were filled with food fresh from the garden. Her family also fishes and hunts.

“My mother was a great cook, and she canned everything,” Elbe said. “That’s the way I was used to eating.”

Elbe has pickled beans, jalapeño peppers, eggplant and other produce that can be added to drinks or entrees in winter.

She recently made chocolate mint herb ice cream. She also offers a phantom fish fry made with eggplant instead of fish.

Elbe and Cerda took the fresh ingredients concept a step further when they offered to prepare fish caught by fishermen. It’s done in other fishing communities, but not in Port before, Elbe said.

The restaurant offers magnificent views of Lake Michigan, where customers can almost see fish being caught

“I grew up fishing, and you have the lake here,” Elbe said. “Catch the fish, clean it on the

dock, walk over here and you'll have your fresh fish for lunch or dinner."

The service has become so popular with fishermen that many come back repeatedly with their catches.

Customers can choose from a variety of ways to have their fish prepared. The fish can be fileted, steaked or cooked whole.

"Some want a platter of filets done several different ways," Elbe said. "It's been good for the fishermen, the charter captains and for us."

Cerda lets Elbe rule the kitchen.

She puts her foot down when it comes to buffets, refusing to offer them. Instead, Sunday brunch items are served until 2 p.m.

"We don't do buffets because I want everything prepared fresh," Elbe said. "I make my own hollandaise sauce for eggs Benedict. Sometimes, I make two to three batches.

"We have one couple who has come here every Sunday since we opened. We've seen their baby grow. The baby was only a month old when we opened."

Another regular customer came every night just before closing to get take-out risotto for his wife, who was pregnant with twins.

"She had a craving for risotto," Elbe said. "We did their baptism meal."

Turn to page 4C for recipes from Elbe and Cerda for food and drinks.

Image Information: Chef Lisa Elbe and Victor Cerba, owner of Victor's Pier Street Shanty, in the restaurant's garden. Photo by Sam Arendt