

Lyme rang the bell on all the parameters for school and education. Niantic rang the bell on accessibility to the water.”

Once committed, they began to seek resources that would enable them to offer their diners fresh, locally raised foods without neglecting traditional menu stalwarts such as filet mignon. A variety of seafood and shellfish were readily available, including scallops procured from Stonington, Connecticut, and New Bedford, Massachusetts. But Dawn wanted to do more.

“When I first got here and wanted to cook with locally grown ingredients, I just had absolutely no resource for that.” Then the Bruckners learned about the Connecticut Department of Agriculture Farm-to-Chef Program, which provides a bridge between culinary professionals and the producers and distributors of locally grown products. This no-cost program also helps consumers locate restaurants that serve foods prepared with local ingredients through its website. “We are remarkably excited about it,” Dawn says.

The network enables the Bruckners to offer little-known ingredients as they become available. In June Farm-to-Chef sent out an e-mail about scapes. “They did a really cool thing,” says Dawn. “This guy had a whole bunch of scapes coming up and they let us know about them.” These flowering garlic stalks are only in season around the second half of June. A *Washington Post* blog describes the long, green tendrils as “a garlic lover’s nirvana.” “I like to sauté them,” she says. “They’re beautiful, with curls and a really nice, mild flavor.”

## BLACKBERRY COBLER

*Courtesy of Dawn Bruckner, La Belle Aurore, Niantic, [www.labelleaurorebistro.com](http://www.labelleaurorebistro.com)*

*Really any fruit in season can be used to make this, and mixing fruits works as well. We serve it year round, substituting apples in the fall.*

4–5 cups blackberries, picked over and rinsed

2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice

1/3 cup sugar

2/3 cup flour

3/4 cup brown sugar

1/2 cup old-fashioned rolled oats

1 teaspoon cinnamon

1/2 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg

6 tablespoons cold butter, cut into bits

3/4 cup coarsely chopped pecans, walnuts, or almonds

In a 9 x 13 (3-quart) baking dish, gently toss fruit with lemon juice and sugar. In another bowl, mix all the dry ingredients. Using a pastry blender, or two forks or your fingers, incorporate butter until mixture resembles coarse meal. Stir in nuts. Sprinkle evenly over the fruit and bake at 350° for about 40 minutes until done and the top is golden. Great with vanilla ice cream or freshly whipped cream!

They also make a terrific pesto.

“We get to play with things like that all the time,” says Wally. “We have flexibility because we’re not married to huge corporate kitchens with the big trucks coming in, which circumstances often drive menu choices. Specialty ingredients come in, they go out. As soon as we’re out of them, we’re out. It’s perfect.”

Another example of seasonal and local availability is the fiddlehead fern that graced La Belle Aurore’s menu last spring. With a wonderful flavor akin to asparagus, these young, tightly coiled fern fronds resemble the decorative scroll at the tuning end of a violin. Wally describes them as “mystical and Seussian.” Most fiddleheads are foraged, though in Canada the New Brunswick Department of Agriculture is exploring their cultivation as a cash crop. The window for foraging fiddleheads is quite short, about two weeks in each location. Once they unfurl they become inedible. Dawn served them with soft-shell crab from Chesapeake Bay.

The restaurant’s wine selection exhibits the same sensitivity to the availability of unique products. Wally, who oversees the wine and boutique beer list, enjoys the discovery process and is particularly jazzed about a Malbec from Patagonia he currently stocks, calling the red Argentine varietal “full-bodied and elegant.” He is also knowledgeable about domestic wines. “There are some fabulous sustainable vineyards out in Oregon that I like for some of my reds.” His collection includes organic selections, and the restaurant carries a gluten-free beer.

In summer months, the Bruckners rely on nearby White Gate Farm to supply the lion’s share of La Belle’s produce. This certified organic farm in East Lyme also supplies River Tavern of Chester, Feast Gourmet Market of Deep River, and newly opened Mangetout in New London. Pauline Lord, White Gate’s owner, says, “The great thing about Dawn is that she’s flexible and she’ll buy what we have. Our chefs are all flexible. It’s wonderful. I love being in this network of chefs and diners and foodies.” Dawn sources other produce from fairly close purveyors, for example, buying honey and apples from East Lyme’s Old Orchard Farm. Recent items on the summer menu include a “summer vegetable platter with kohlrabi, radishes,

