CULINARY GARDENS

Growing a Dream

In Healdsburg, a winery chef perfects the roots of cuisine

by **MATT VILLANO**
photography courtesy **JORDAN VINEYARD & WINERY**

FOR TODD KNOLL, executive chef at Jordan Vineyard & Winery in Healdsburg, menu preparation doesn't begin in the kitchen, but instead outside, in the culinary garden on a hill behind the chateau.

Here, amid 1.5 acres of manicured land, Knoll wanders the rows, looking for inspiration. One day the stone fruit might strike his fancy; another day, the Italian runner beans might be his muse. He might spy the yuzu and envision a delightful escabeche to serve as an amuse-bouche. In late summer, he likely will swoon over tomatoes, plucking the ripest specimens for a Caprese salad.

"Most chefs spend their careers thinking about a garden like this one," he says, estimating that 80 percent of his dishes are driven exclusively by what is ripe in the garden. "I'm lucky enough to have it every day."

With 92 different species of plants in the ground this year, the Jordan garden is one of the most varied and diverse culinary gardens in all of Sonoma. It's a great example of how smart planning, careful attention and the vagaries of our local climate can be leveraged to broaden the practical application of farm-to-table dining.

An orchard is part of chef Todd Knoll's dream garden.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Knoll always had dreamed of developing a garden to grow specific ingredients for his cooking, but he never had more than a tiny plot. That all changed when he arrived at Jordan in 2003.

At the time, the on-site plot was chock-a-block with rows of commodity crops such as bell peppers, string beans and yellow onions — items that would ripen all at once and then flood the kitchen with a surplus.

Because the restaurant at Jordan serves a very limited number of covers a night, much of this produce went to waste. Knoll knew there had to be a more efficient way to till the land. So he sat down with owner John Jordan and shared his vision for a garden that could serve the restaurant more specifically. His idea: To grow specialty items around which one could build a menu. Jordan was wowed, and green-lighted Knoll to rethink the plot completely.

The redesign took a few years. But by 2007, Knoll had stopped paying top dollar for haricots verts and was growing them and other high-end vegetables himself.

Over the last four years, Knoll and his wife, Nitsa, have redesigned the garden yet again. They have pushed out the borders, added new rows and incorporated orchard trees. Among the newest items: Red hyacinth beets, white asparagus, toy carrots and wasabi.

Other recent additions include Siberian and Ukrainian tomato varieties, a hothouse and a number of beds to grow flowers as well as ornamental kale and succulents.

"We're always trying to make the garden more varied, more exciting," explains Nitsa, who handles all of the florals at the winery. "It's part of the experience; when you come to Jordan, everything about your visit is unique to the winery and the land."

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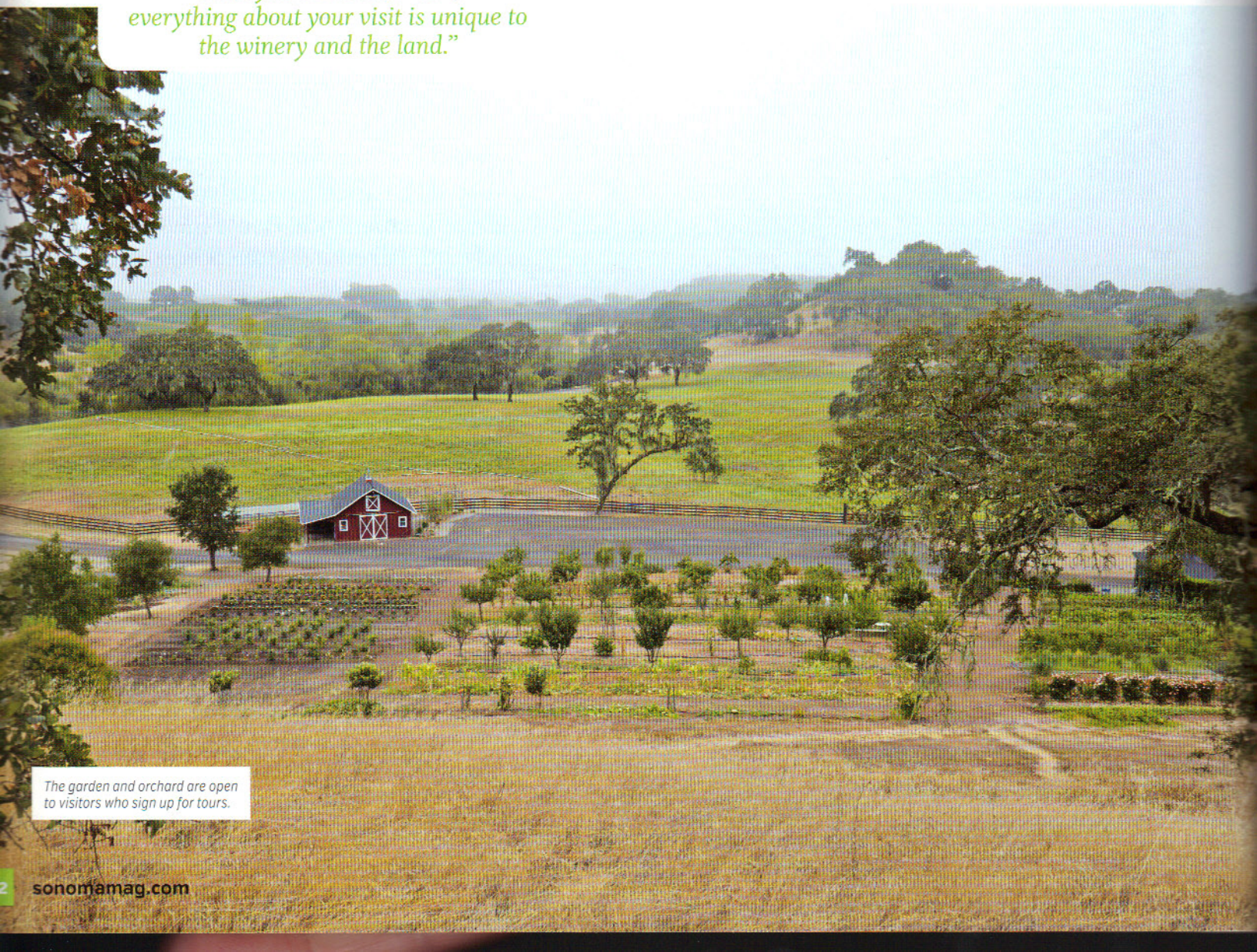

The garden and orchard are open to visitors who sign up for tours.

CULTIVATING A DREAM

The Knolls don't manage this garden by themselves; they work with a team that helps them tend the plants, remove weeds and make sure everything is growing to its full potential. The team is led by Leonel Camargo, who started working at the winery as a landscaper in 1999 and moved on to the garden after Knoll arrived. Rafael Robledo, the vineyard foreman who has worked at the winery since 1973, also comes in and helps during high-volume months.

Though the garden isn't technically organic, Knoll says it is "farmed sustainably," and he encourages his crew to use as few pesticides as possible.

"The more natural we can be with our produce, the better the produce will be," he says.

Knoll adds that one of the ways he and his colleagues avoid using pesticides is to water the garden by hand. "When you're there in the garden every day, it's a lot easier to stay on top of things," he notes.

All of this attention to detail has made an impression throughout the county. Donna del Rey, owner of Relish Culinary Adventures, a cooking school in Healdsburg, refers to the Jordan garden operation as a "dream come true," and notes that the project could be a blueprint for other chefs (and amateur cooks) to embrace the concept of farm-to-table dining on a grander scale.

"Our mission at Relish is to inspire people to cook at home more frequently, and a big part of that is having good quality ingredients," she says. "There's no better way to teach others about the importance of good ingredients than to grow them yourself, and that's exactly what Todd is doing."

When he's looking for culinary inspiration, Knoll heads straight to the garden, where fresh herbs, fruits and vegetables are within arm's reach.

Just-picked pears are one of the perks of having your own orchard.

WHAT'S NEXT

Fittingly, marketing and education are a big part of what Knoll has planned for the future.

Behind the scenes, the winery is expected to host a handful of sommelier breakfasts in the garden — an attempt to help raise awareness among industry insiders about the breadth of Jordan's estate-grown wonders (not to mention the joy of Bloody Marys made with fresh-from-the-garden wasabi).

There will be opportunities for the public to experience the garden, too. Throughout the year, visitors can sign up for the Winery Tour & Library Tasting ($40), which includes a walk to and through the garden. In late spring and summer, the garden is a stop on the Estate Tour & Tasting ($120), a reservations-only guided journey around the 1,200-acre estate. During this experience, participants have a chance to walk the garden pathways and sample ripe fruits and vegetables right off the vine. For more information, visit jordanwinery.com.

Later, in September, Knoll and del Rey, from Relish, will team up for a cooking class that starts at Jordan to collect ingredients, moves to the Healdsburg Farmers' Market to collect more ingredients and ends at Relish's training kitchen for an instructive meal prep. For more information, visit relishculinary.com.

The way Knoll sees it, these types of programs can only help the public learn more about the garden at Jordan and understand what it means to build menus around the earth's bounty.

"We have some exceptional stuff here," he says, "but, philosophically, this is something anyone can do." *H+G*

TODD'S TIPS

After years of cultivating a culinary garden, Todd Knoll, executive chef at Jordan Vineyard & Winery, is an expert. Here are some of his tips for aspiring green thumbs who wish to follow in his footsteps.

AVOID COMPLACENCY. Just because you plant a vegetable someplace doesn't mean it has to stay there forever. Knoll says that if a particular item isn't thriving where you first plant it, don't be afraid to move it elsewhere after a season or two.

PURCHASE GOOD MATERIAL. Gardeners, like the rest of us, get what they pay for. This means top-quality seeds and plants usually will perform best. Knoll recommends seeking materials from non-GMO sources. His local pick: the Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company and the Petaluma Seed Bank.

KNOW YOUR ZONE. To maximize the efficiency of your plot, know your gardening zone and invest in plants that thrive therein. What flourishes in Bodega Bay may not do well in Windsor.

EXPERIMENT. Once you've gotten a good sense of what your garden is capable of producing, take some chances on varietals that you might not otherwise think of planting. Some of Knoll's biggest gambles have included okra and wasabi. Both have paid huge dividends.