

Chef Elizabeth Johnson: Mindful Sourcing

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Chef Elizabeth Johnson Shares Her Philosophy To Support Local Growers

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY JANICE THACH

Gardeners can tip their shade hats to the Culinary Institute of America for nourishing a movement that has now seeped through our soil and grown strong roots: San Antonio's locally sourced food community. During the last eight to 10 years, the CIA of San Antonio has graduated many chefs who have remained regional and connected with community farmers and ranchers for fresh, sustainable and delicious options.



One person who's not only fanned the flames but helped ignite them is Elizabeth Johnson, now of Pharm Table restaurant, which opened its doors at the Radius Building last September. For years she headed the CIA's Latin American department, but before that

studied anthropology and world cultures, traveling extensively abroad and earning her own culinary degree in Mexico City.

Through the years, Elizabeth Johnson cobbled a personal philosophy of food and living that she now serves up as Pharm Table's mission:

“To serve real, farm-fresh, nourishing meals that enable you to experience a better quality of life.”

The menu choices use novel combinations of fresh vegetables, legumes, citrus and proteins — all ingredients sourced locally.

Recently, Johnson and I sat talking at one of Pharm Table's rustic wood tables. Sprigs of fern plant just clipped from patio plants rose from small vases, and wait staff greeted customers by name as they entered, adding to the casual community feel of a restaurant that proudly displays a sign listing the local farms and businesses they source.



Many creative organizations inhabit the neighborhood in and around the Radius Building — the Tobin Center, Southwest School of Art, Gemini Ink, SA Chamber Orchestra and

others, adding to the overall synergy. As we drank fresh-brewed teas, one of her farm purveyors, Mitch Hagney of Local Sprout hydroponics, walked in with a huge armload of freshly picked and washed kale. He pulled off ruffled green leaves for us to sample in their naked goodness. Call it garden romanticizing, but there is something meaningful — and flavorful — about tasting something just attached to the earth.



Elizabeth Johnson herself knows a lot about plant life and its roles in both mental and physical health. She keeps an evolving garden at her own house, having removed all turf from the front and back yards: “I thought it was blasphemy to be watering sod in South Texas.” Instead, she’s planted regionally suited forage bushes like agarita, chili pequins, horsetail, nopal cacti, a Meyer lemon tree and butterfly plants to attract monarchs and even once-absent bees for better ecological balance.



She tried multiple raised beds and wanted more, but finally had to ask herself, “What do I want my backyard to be? Do I want it to be work or a form of refuge?” Managing a restaurant business and teaching, the home/garden balance she leaned toward, became more of a family refuge. She knew plenty of people she could support by buying their vegetables, which in turn supported her own mission of balance.

Elizabeth Johnson works hard to live with balance and teach its importance to others, encouraging people to be mindful of what they eat and how they eat it. Food choices, like other life choices, can either nourish or deplete.

She explains, *“Just like people choose music, colors and activities — some balance, others aggravate. Food is the same. Get rid of things that aggravate you, and you feel better.”* Pharm

Table also offers fresh meal bags to take away and use at home, with breakfast items, soups, salads, sweets and more, all locally sourced, nutritious and free of glutens, dairy and sugar.

“We all have a natural propensity to heal ourselves through food. I want to nourish people, teach them to eat in a mindful way. What you eat is really important, but how you eat is also. If you take time to eat in a slow, mindful way, you’ll feel more satiated. Food goes hand in hand with education. It’s like a puzzle. In order to complete it, you need multiple pieces,” Johnson says. Sometimes she’ll serve a salad with chopsticks, so the process of eating is more conscious than it might be with a fork.



She also teaches lunch and dinner classes on Ayurvedic ancient health care methods, which sort body types into three categories that react differently to various foods. She has studied the world’s “blue zones,” five regions designated by National Geographic researchers with the highest density of people living more than 100 years. She notes many of these cultures use plant-based diet combinations to form complete proteins, which clearly must be working and hence are on her menu.

"We celebrate world cuisines, but we dissect them so we can understand their profiles. I have a love and passion for the story of food and the cultures that have molded and shaped the foods we eat," Johnson says. This January, she will teach a class at the San Antonio CIA on Ancient Foods in a Modern World.