

Chef Blaine Wetzel, named the 2015 James Beard Best Chef: Northwest, helms the kitchen at the Willows Inn on Washington's Lummi Island.

Nature Up For





Grabs

ISLAND LIVING MAKES FOR INNOVATION IN CUISINE AT THE WILLOWS INN

story by Julie H. Case /
photos by Joann Arruda

Chef Blaine Wetzel has an acid problem. Ferry across a Salish Sea strait to The Willows Inn, the restaurant helmed by Wetzel, and you can understand why. Halibut and spot prawns might ply the waters between Bellingham, Washington, and tiny Lummi Island, and apples and plums may dangle from orchard trees, but there's not a seed of citrus around.

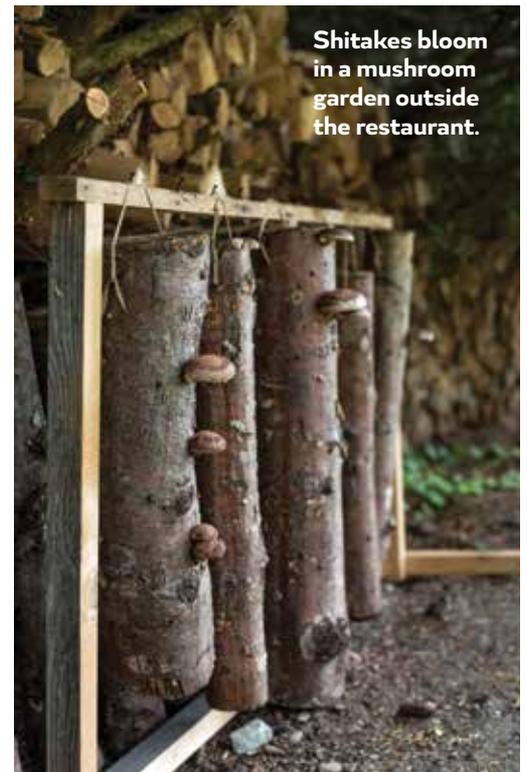
For a chef named the 2015 James Beard Best Chef: Northwest, the inability to source acid could be a challenge. For Wetzel, it seems to be an adventure. So much so, that he defines his style and menu geographically.

"As far as product sourcing goes, it's the highest caliber of any I have ever experienced in any restaurant. And really authentic. And really regional. It's specific to this island," says Wetzel.

At just 9.25 square miles, this island in the San Juan archipelago makes Wetzel's program a commitment to locavore at the micro level. For this reason, shiitake mushrooms are being cultivated on a hanging log garden behind the outdoor smoker, just steps from the kitchen. The restaurant not only has its own farm—Loganita Farm—but also belongs to a fishing co-op and is a partner in a boat. It keeps a forager practically on staff.

As much as Wetzel's menu is geographic, it is also seasonal. Or, as he describes it, "a reaction to that moment in nature."

There are challenges: April overruns with a plethora of vegetables, but not many fruits or roots. At other times in the year, there are virtually no fresh herbs.



Shiitakes bloom in a mushroom garden outside the restaurant.



Fresh pulled white turnips at the restaurant's Loganita Farm.

**Wetzel and team
at work on the
night's menu.**



“I really embrace those kinds of seasonal fluctuations,” says Wetzel. “In fact, the menu here is meant to showcase those. So, there may be times of year when you do have lots of green leafy vegetable dishes in a row, but hopefully showcased differently and interestingly enough to be part of a great menu.”

And, how does he deal with that acid issue? Wetzel glances through his storeroom at glass jars full of dried smelt, baskets of birch branches and vessels full of fir tips, and explains that he goes to great lengths to harvest under-ripe gooseberries.

He also dries razor clams and sea cucumbers gathered by the local Lummi tribe. Albacore is ham-cured to the texture of prosciutto. Sea cucumber and halibut guts are fermented for homemade fish sauce. Bulk kelp—think that long, bulbous seaweed that gathers on beaches—is collected during its two-week season, and the seed is harvested and capered. We experience this later in the night when it appears like roe atop a slice of rock cod lolling in a broth made from its own bones.

Wetzel can be mercurial, suddenly changing a dish on the



**Bread and butter showcases
wheat farmed and milled every
Wednesday just for Willows Inn.**

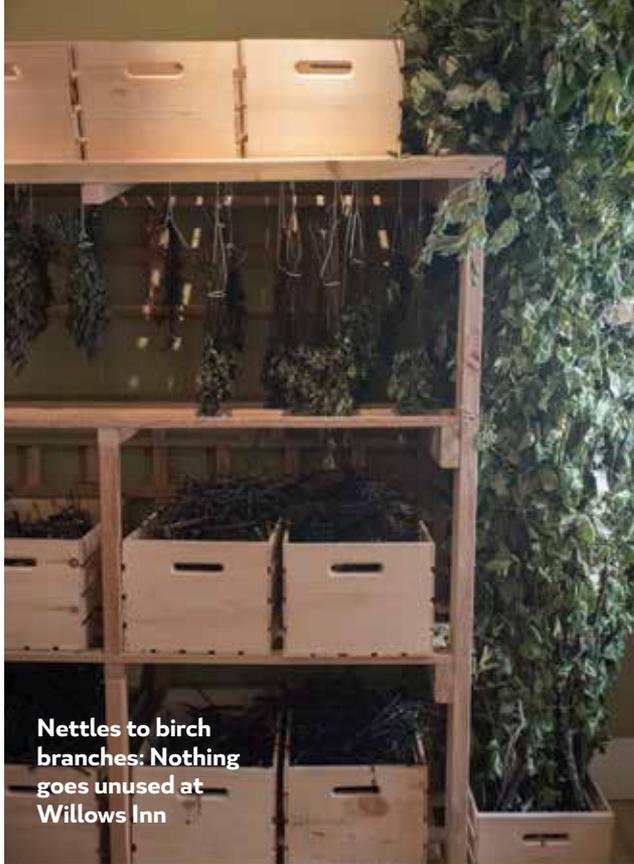
seven-course-tasting menu when he discovers, for example, that beach roses are in bloom. That means his team must be equally innovative, and equally ready to change directions on a whim. Given that the beverage program is dedicated to “Cascadia” wines—those coming from Washington, Oregon and British Columbia—and is dominated by small producers, this can be a challenge.

“You’ll come in on a Thursday to, potentially, something entirely different,” says Wine Director Phaedra Brucato. “So, you have to find something else that works. Usually we can do that, but sometimes it’s a mad dash to procure enough for the weekend, and take us through our week.”

“Last week we had to change a bunch of the wine—for the dessert and other dishes—and we had a Waitsburg Cellars



**Solving the
acid problem
with homemade
vinegars.**



Nettles to birch branches: Nothing goes unused at Willows Inn

2012 Chenin Blanc, but only six bottles of it.” While that worked for two days, the young somm had to scramble for the rest of the week. She found a Moscato from Foris, in southern Oregon, yet while the pairing was right, she had to wait until the end of the week for the wine to make it to the island.

Wetzel and Brucato aren’t the only ones digging deep. Bar Manager Emily Sipprell infuses vermouth with seasonal ingredients—think chanterelles, dried hops, and seaweed—for the pairing menu. There’s even talk of collaborating with a Bellingham Brewery for a beer made in locally-coopered barrels with malt from the nearby Skagit Valley.

Nothing is spared Wetzel’s devotion. Not the oysters foraged from the beach out front which come both cooked and served raw on a bed of hot island rocks. Not the beach roses running to the shore. Not even the trees.

“I noticed the pine branches had started to grow a bit,” says the chef, turning over a jar full of fir tips, “and those tender tips are harvestable, edible and have a very bright flavor.”

Nothing is spared for the diner, either. Dishes here aren’t delivered by a tango line of waitstaff but by the entire staff—including the chef and cooks.

Sitting on the deck overlooking the sea that is the source of so much, the dinnertime waltz begins. First comes a crispy, paper-thin crêpe topped with garlic scapes, served alongside a local organic sparkling cider. Then comes the black cod “donuts.” Topped with salt, and beignet-like, a just-cooked black cod emerges from their utterly springy center. There are the shiitakes—two of them—perfect and juicy, grilled and salty. Shatteringly crisp Loganita Farm kale dotted with Lummi Island black truffle arrives, followed by halibut skin encircling littleneck clams harvested by the Lummi tribe. And then there are the oysters on their rocky bed.

Before sunset, we move into the restaurant proper, with its kitchen view, and Nick Green, Chef de Cuisine, appears with a bright green nasturtium topped with raw spot prawns



Dried local smelt, nettles, and roses await their place in a future dish.

in fermented plum marinade. Then comes a bowl (Willows Inn hires its own platemaker) filled with heart-shaped Nooka roses and salmon berries, topped with “princess juice”—shaved beach rose ice.

Wetzel circles among the diners to explain that the dish is special because the two are in season—together—for only a few days a year. I imagine this is one of those moments that made Brucato jump, and yet the Quails Gate Chenin Blanc that lingers in our glass pairs immaculately.

The night evolves. Buttery zucchini blossoms in a roasted zucchini juice give way to more mushrooms. Then comes the rockfish in its bone juice; the cold-smoked, reef-netted salmon; and the alder-smoked trio of mussels atop an umami smear of sunflower root that I’d eat on bread, on toast, on my left arm, for the rest of my life.

There’s bread and butter, which of course features wheat farmed and milled every Wednesday just for Willows Inn, served alongside an Oregon Chardonnay. For a taste of the non-alcoholic pairing menu, we sample a rhubarb shrub, which smells like a bath on the last Sunday night of summer, but tastes earthy and slightly bitter.

Kelp bass arrives with lovage and skin, as do grilled cabbage leaves atop razor clams harvested by the Lummi tribe. There’s a nostalgic tea from toasted birch branches, and that Oregon Moscato. And, at last, the pine tips arrive, in an ice cream alongside grilled strawberries.

All without so much as a lemon. ■cr

Willows Inn nightly menu.

