

BACK AT THE RANCH



Urban eatery revives local farming legacy

Story by Toni Scott • Photos by Lori Fusaro and courtesy of The Ranch Restaurant & Saloon

Though today it is perhaps best known as a tourist destination, Anaheim was once a city built on agriculture, where oranges, winegrapes and other crops grew in abundance.

Over the years, a booming technology industry replaced many of the city's orchards and packing-houses. And though it has been decades since citrus defined commerce in Orange County, one Anaheim restaurant is seeking to reconnect the area to its agrarian roots, all while embracing its urban identity.

With the global headquarters of audiovisual equipment manufacturer Extron Electronics sitting directly upstairs from its kitchen, The Ranch Restaurant & Saloon is literally in on the ground floor of bringing farm-fresh California cuisine to Orange County patrons.

Located just minutes from Disneyland, The Ranch

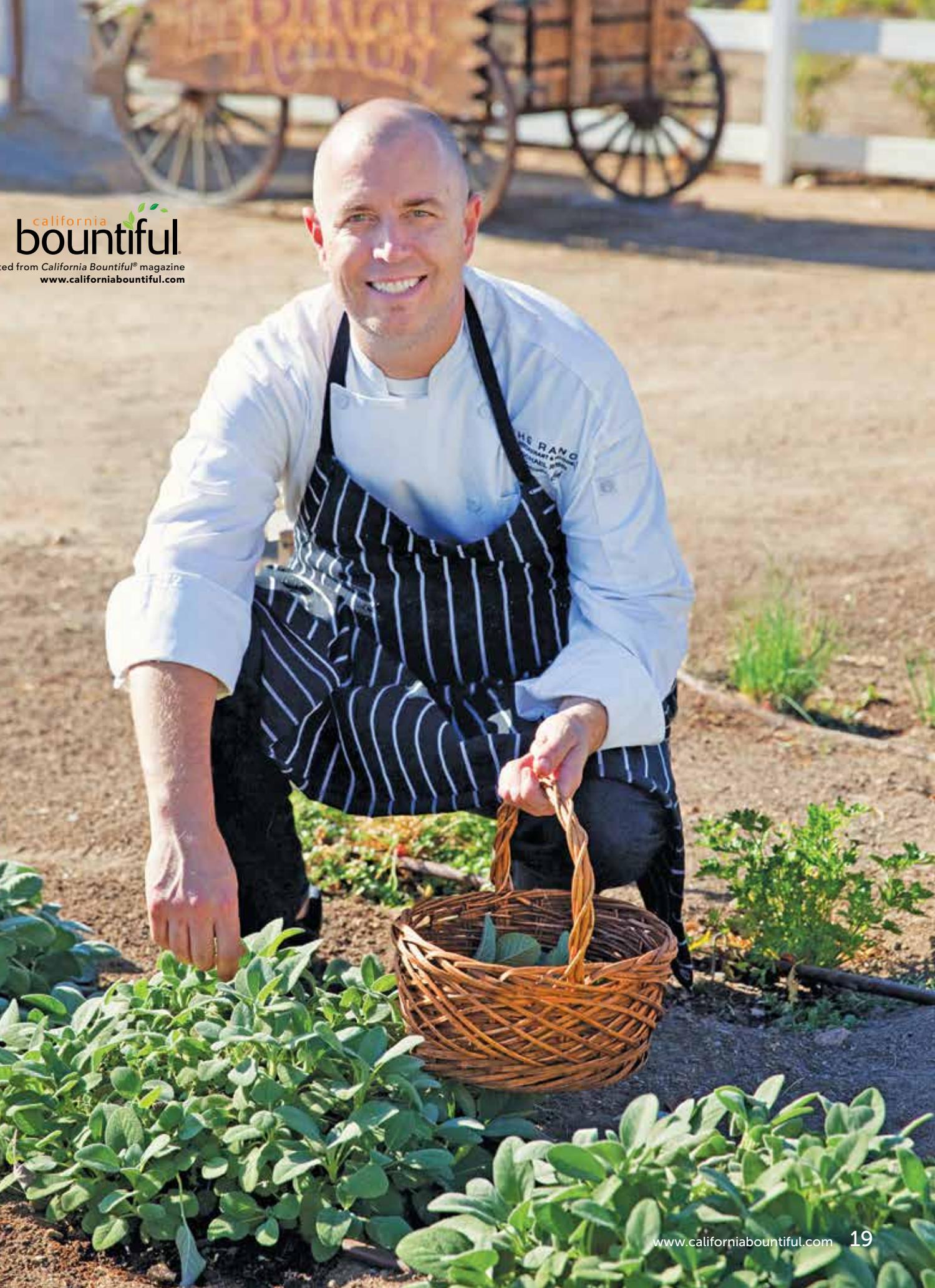
partners with California farms and ranches to offer dishes such as maplewood-smoked Jidori chicken and heirloom beet salad. Bacon is cured in-house and the restaurant makes its own pancetta. The Ranch's menu is also largely supported by the restaurant's own 2-acre garden, aptly named The Farm.

"It's a chef's dream," Executive Chef Michael Rossi said. "We're not fortunate enough to have a farmers market nearby where we can go every week, so we grow our own produce. Growing our own produce—it is as rewarding as you can get."

From video to vines

The idea for The Ranch and The Farm came from Andrew Edwards, president and owner of Extron Electronics. Edwards founded the electronics company more than three decades ago, and

Popular eatery The Ranch, above, brings a taste of Orange County's farm-rich heritage to an industrial park in the bustling city of Anaheim. The Ranch's executive chef, Michael Rossi, right, builds seasonal menus around the bounty of the restaurant's own 2-acre garden, The Farm, and other California farms and ranches.



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FRESH FROM THE VINE



The Farm, top, provides ingredients and inspiration for The Ranch's menu. Chef Michael Rossi, left, celebrates this abundance across the menu, from farm-fresh bloody marys with house-cured bacon, above, to grilled spring artichokes, below.



today it has more than 30 offices worldwide.

Its headquarters office is also home to The Ranch. Edwards was motivated to open the business to fill a need he saw in Anaheim for great country music and dishes that highlight fresh farm flavors.

The Farm, located in the city of Orange and perched in the foothills of the Santa Ana Mountains, sits on Edwards Ranch Estates, also owned by the electronics entrepreneur. There, he raises organic produce on his own land with his own workforce, maintaining an intimate and unbroken seed-to-plate connection.

"When you grow it, ... you see how good it is," Edwards said.

Edwards' philosophy for The Ranch and The Farm are mirrored in Rossi as well, who has helmed the restaurant from its inception.

An Orange County native, Rossi studied at the California Culinary Academy, worked with Roy Yamaguchi of Roy's Restaurant in Hawaii and opened a Roy's Restaurant in Southern California. He has also served as a chef for the Napa Rose restaurant at Disney's Grand Californian Hotel.

Counted among his most influential experiences is the time Rossi spent in Italy, working as a chef at a small countryside hotel.

"That's where I got hooked on the whole farm-to-table concept," Rossi said. "We grew all our own food and cooked it right there. I would go out to get zucchini and would find the perfect size and the perfect flavor for the dish I was cooking. We were sourcing exactly what we would use that night."

Root of inspiration

It is that model that guides Rossi at The Ranch, where he marries the fruits of The Farm with the menu of the restaurant. Rossi called The Farm his biggest inspiration.

"Our menu is driven by it," he said. "In the beginning of the year, we write everything we are going to grow and our menu is then dictated by what we grow."

Though primarily a spring and summer garden, The Farm is a year-round venture. During the last five years, it has grown to boast more than 90 varieties of tomatoes and 600 tomato plants. Blueberries, Swiss chard, zucchini, squash, chili peppers, beets, eggplant, carrots, herbs, cucumbers, turnips, cauliflower and pomegranates are just a sampling of the cornucopia of crops also produced.

The Ranch's menu varies seasonally to highlight the harvest from The Farm. In the summer, heirloom tomatoes are hot, and Rossi plates thousands of tomato salads. Fall can bring butternut squash soups, with spring ringing in grilled artichokes. Roasted vegetables are always a mainstay, and salads feature

kale, cucumbers, radishes or carrots from The Farm.

In addition to the vegetables, herbs, spices and fruits also grown on The Farm make their way into sauces, dressings, desserts and even cocktails. Hints of basil, Valencia orange, mint, fig and lemon can be savored in a sip of a handcrafted sidecar or a scoop of homemade sorbet.

With The Farm a plentiful resource for The Ranch, produce abounds, which Rossi said demands creativity from the restaurant's chefs. Rossi said he strives to see the bounty of The Farm spotlighted on his plates, and though people may come craving handcrafted ravioli, a bone-in ribeye steak or California-raised pork chop, Rossi said his main focus is to feature The Farm and affirm the role produce plays on the plates.

The approach requires ambition and imagination, but it is that constant connection to The Farm that Rossi said continues to sharpen him as a chef and brings customers back to The Ranch.

"We've got to treat our produce with the most respect and make a dish that showcases the star," Rossi said. "It's not easy when you get four huge containers of tomatoes and you have to find something to do with them. It's so challenging—but it's so rewarding. It's made us better chefs because we're constantly challenged to take care of the product and give it all the glory."

Making the connection

In highlighting fresh, farm-grown produce, Rossi and his team have the opportunity to talk with patrons about conditions on The Farm, factors that lead to tastier melons or sweeter corn, and the secret to the perfect vine-ripened tomato.

"That's the culture of The Ranch. It's all about education of our farm," Rossi said.

Introducing customers to the abundant array of fruits and vegetables that California's Mediterranean climate can foster also reconnects customers to the roots of the area.

Though the economies of Anaheim and Orange County have changed, Rossi's menu encourages customers to try out their own green thumbs on a backyard garden or put on their aprons for a new recipe featuring their latest pick from a farmers market and harken back to the foundation of the region, just as The Ranch has done.

"It's become a way of life for us," Rossi said. "Being in California, we're so lucky with the weather that we can grow produce so easily. Growing your own produce, bringing it into your kitchen—it's just a great way of life that we can have by living in California." 

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EDWARDS RANCH ESTATES HEIRLOOM TOMATO SALAD

With The Farm boasting more than 90 varieties of tomatoes and 600 tomato plants, Michael Rossi's kitchen at The Ranch enjoys a seasonal explosion of the fresh, flavorful orbs. Creating delicious dishes featuring tomatoes has become Rossi's forte, and in the summer, he makes thousands of tomato salads.

Serves 4 to 6

**5 to 6 heirloom tomatoes, different sizes and colors
4 slices applewood smoked bacon, diced small and cooked
1 sweet yellow onion, diced small and cooked slowly until translucent
3 tbsp. chopped fresh chives
3 tbsp. chopped fresh basil**

**1 cup crumbled blue cheese
Maldon sea salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
Apple cider vinaigrette
3 cups vegetable oil
1 cup apple cider vinegar**

**1 shallot, diced small
1 tsp. Dijon mustard**

Slice tomatoes and layer on a platter. Top with bacon, onion, chives, basil and blue cheese. Season to taste with salt and pepper. In a small bowl, whisk together vinaigrette ingredients and drizzle desired amount over salad. Serve immediately.