The estate of Thomas Jefferson, Monticello, recently welcomed California chef Alice Waters to prepare a meal on the oval-shaped West Lawn.

Ms. Waters and a team of eight other celebrated chefs—including Scott Peacock, formerly of Watershed in Atlanta and Mona Talbott, the former executive chef at the American Academy in Rome—used Jefferson's own wood-fired stove to prepare the elaborate meal for 250 Monticello donors and supporters.

The emphasis was on local ingredients, either from farmers and vendors in nearby Charlottesville, Va., or directly from the third president's garden, where he cultivated some 250 varieties of vegetables.

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inspired the April 20 celebration. "We think of him as the most cerebral of presidents," Mr. Hatch said, "but he was also a really handy guy and sowed seeds with his own hands. He was much more than a gentleman farmer—he actively participated in every aspect of this garden."

Ms. Waters, who wrote the foreword to Mr. Hatch’s book, said Jefferson’s garden has always inspired her. "It’s through food that Jefferson built community, explored biodiversity and expressed generosity," she said. "Jefferson was our first edible educator, our first teacher."

Later that evening, Ms. Waters called the meal "the most important dinner we’ve ever cooked." As diners made their way through the feast—which started with a Chesapeake Bay she-crab bisque, moved on to milk-fed lamb and vegetable ragout and ended, many courses later, with nougat made from Monticello honey—Ms. Waters told them to "become curious like Jefferson was. Think of this meal as a slow-food meal, and we hope that in eating this dinner, you absorb some of Jefferson’s values—camaraderie, beauty, aliveness, sustainability, generosity. Just imagine if you ate the way Jefferson ate. Then you’d think differently. You’d think the Constitution!"

—Laura Moser

### Lettuce

#### Then:
Unlike most men of his generation, Jefferson had developed the French habit of eating salad year-round, and he tried to plant it every Monday during the growing season throughout all his years as a gardener at Monticello. His preferred variety was Tennis Ball lettuce.

#### Now:
The salad following the main course featured a combination of Tennis Ball lettuce, Dutch Brown lettuce, Spotted Aleppo lettuce and arugula. Ms. Waters washed these lettuces herself the morning before the big meal.

### Kale

#### Then:
Jefferson was always swapping seeds with friends and fellow farmers, one of whom inspired him to grow sea kale, a rare, sand-blanch variety that grows wild off the coast of England and remains all but unknown on these shores.

#### Now:
"While we were picking lettuces for the salad," Ms. Waters said, "I saw all the beautiful kale growing and thought that we should really be using it in the menu, so at the last minute we decided to make some kale crostini." The addition was served along with other hors d’oeuvres in the garden before the main event.

### Asparagus

#### Then:
Asparagus was a staple crop at Monticello, and though Jefferson hardly ever entered the kitchen, he was constantly advising the friends and neighbors who received gifts of his vegetables—endives, say—to "prepare it like asparagus," Monticello’s Peter Hatch said.

#### Now:
The asparagus that appeared in the ragout accompanying the main-course lamb came from local vendors in Charlottesville’s famed Local Food Hub, a collective of area farmers.

### Sesame

#### Then:
After a tasting of salad oils in the White House led to Jefferson’s discovery of sesame oil, he became a lifelong sesame fanatic. Though the cold Virginia winters were inhospitable to the crop, the statesman-turned-gardener attempted to harvest sesame well into his 81st year.
Now: At the Monticello dinner, the chefs served Jefferson's favorite seed at the end of dessert, in a delicious peanut-sesame brittle.

Spring onions
Then: Jefferson grew hanging onions, a regional curiosity at the time.
Now: The chefs served Monticello onions both in the salad and atop buckwheat cakes passed around as canapés.

Almonds
Then: Jefferson planted almond shrubs during his early years at Monticello.
Now: Ms. Waters made a blancmange with almonds that had been given to Monticello by the American Academy in Rome. Using this gift was a way of "continuing the Jeffersonian tradition of carrying back goods from Europe," she said.

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