One of the questions we’re most frequently asked is also one of the most difficult for us to answer: “What is your philosophy of cooking at Arrows?” This seemingly innocuous question is a bit like the famed Trojan horse: there is a lot more to it than one bargained for! It’s difficult, in short, for my partner, Mark Gaier, and me to sum up our world in a few short sentences. So we often resort to telling some stories (all true, we swear) to illustrate how we cook. So, relax and get comfortable, it’s story time.

In March of 2001 the snow fell and fell and the drifts threatened to disguise the Arrows greenhouse as a white hillock: this was spring in Maine. The raised beds, row covers, and fences of the garden had disappeared. Our head gardener was desperate to plant the seedlings that were taking over her home, so there was no choice but to bring in a backhoe—the big kind they use at malls and supermarkets—to plow out the greenhouse and a path to the garden. Our gardeners donned snowshoes, ventured out onto the ice pack, dug down to find the raised beds, and lowered the row covers with their plexiglass lids to warm the soil. The furnace in the greenhouse was switched on, and the plants were brought in. The weather, though, remained cold, and even a month later, when the restaurant was poised for its regular April opening, snow banks four feet tall still surrounded the garden! But inside the greenhouse and the covered rows lived the spring we all craved. Inside, all was abundance: balmy, moist, and fecund. Mustard greens and arugula spilled over each other, competing with Red Frills lettuce, baby bok choy, spinach, and herbs.

Why go to such elaborate lengths for produce? Why plant seedlings in the dark of winter and go to the expense of plowing, heating, and clearing just to start a garden? The answer is simple: for the best food one must pursue the best ingredients. The garden is certainly one of the most obvious reflections of our commitment, but over the years we’ve been cooking we’ve come to realize that there are plenty of “ingredients” in the creation of outstanding food.

Surprising as it may seem, one of these ingredients can be adversity. I learned this when I was young, when I lived for a year in Beijing. As winter drew near I watched in astonishment as people piled cabbages in doorways and balconies. Soon the entire city seemed to be just one mound of cabbage! Finally I asked a friend what all the cabbage was for. He laughed and replied that I’d soon know, and indeed I did. Because of China’s primitive infrastructure at that time, it was the only vegetable that we were able to eat all winter! By the time spring finally arrived we were mad to eat fresh vegetables, and I can tell you that food never tasted so delicious. This was a revelation for me, coming as I do from California, where everything is always available. I had learned a fundamental lesson: ingredients cooked in season really do taste a lot better, especially when local produce has been scarce.

Fifteen years ago, when Mark and I left the lush city of San Francisco to open Arrows in rural Maine, we found a place very different from today, and certainly different from California. There was no good bread to be had. Seafood, oddly enough, was often poorly handled, and virtually any vegetable more exotic than a green bean was almost unobtainable. We soon realized, though, that this adversity could...
actually make our food better. If we could not buy good bread, we would make it! If we could not get good fish, we would work hard to find purveyors to seek out the best. And if we could not find good produce, then we would grow our own. We decided to become as self-sufficient as the people who had originally inhabited our colonial farmhouse. Today we create everything “in house,” from ice cream to smoked salmon to pastas and chutneys. It’s all made and grown under our supervision. Adversity, in short, enabled us to create better food.

Still, we wouldn’t want to overstate the “adversity” angle when we talk about our philosophy of cooking. We also believe that cooking and enjoying food should be fun. When you get right down to it, good food is really about enjoying life. It’s also about creativity and whimsy. For this reason we’re always traveling to far-off lands to experience different cuisines, to walk through exotic markets, to eat at roadside stalls. It’s why we make a point of trying all sorts of restaurants, to enjoy the other side of our work. It’s why we still love to cook at home—because sitting down to a well-prepared dinner with friends is one of life’s great pleasures. And it’s why each day, no matter how busy we are, we make a point of walking through and enjoying our gardens.

After all the stories, our philosophy is as simple as this: strive to use only the best ingredients, cook with the seasons, and don’t be afraid of adversity—it will make you a better cook. Most importantly, enjoy life!