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# BIG DELICIOUS PLANET

A World of its Own in the City

by Amelia Levin

photographs courtesy of Big Delicious Planet

When you're driving past the endless warehouses off Grand Avenue in Chicago, this little green oasis is easy to miss. But set your GPS correctly and you'll stumble upon Big Delicious Planet, a four-star certified green catering company, canteen and urban farm tucked in this more industrial section of West Town. A sleeper for some, this spot has become a regular destination for nearby workers, wedding planners and farm dinner enthusiasts alike.

Amid the rows of garden beds, wide swaths of greens, herbs and vegetables and even black raspberries are already overflowing, and it's only early summer. This is a big green "planet" back here, and it's certainly delicious.

Heidi Moorman Coudal never imagined she would be keeper of this expansive urban farm. A caterer for rock bands and concerts for more than 20 years,

Coudal got her start in the food world after working in film production and then joining a rock and roll catering company doing backstage work. This became the launching pad for Big Delicious Planet, which she founded with her sister in 1994.

Food was always in her blood. Born in Munich, Germany, as a child she moved around the world and the United States as a military kid, always discovering new cookbooks and recipes and later spending summers traveling and camping around Europe, *Michelin Guide* in hand.

Just a year and a half ago, she got out of the rock business to focus on her farm and café clients full-time. Now she draws a loyal following, both to her café and to the farm for seasonal dinner parties, small weddings, rehearsal dinners, showers and other events. This year, she already has more than 50 parties on the books.

"We were growing all these vegetables

right here in the city and wanted to work with clients who really appreciate what we're doing," Coudal says.

She didn't do it all alone. To build the farm in 2012, Coudal enlisted the help of a local gardener to set up the first eight beds in the empty lot next door.

"I was surprised by how quickly food grows here," she says, looking around the garden as if she's even still surprised. "I had no idea that three weeks later, we would see some radishes come up."

Soon after, Coudal began "peeking over the fence" that separated her lot from a junkyard next door, eventually tracking down the landlord to rent out half of it and build 20 more beds. The following year, she took over the rest of the lot and built the patio and 24-seat communal table in the middle where she hosts her farm dinners and allows canteen customers to sit during the warmer months.

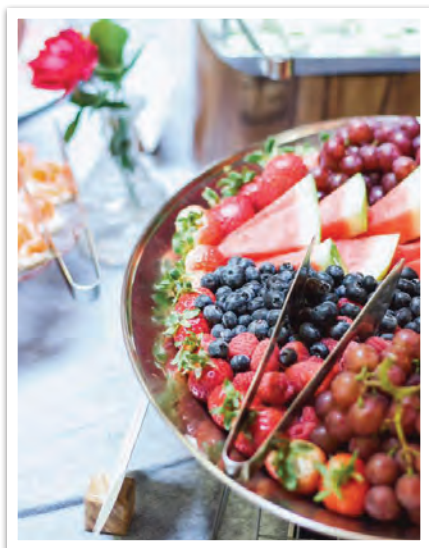






Heidi Moorman Coudal





Now she works with a different farmer from downstate Illinois who moved to Chicago and joined the team last year. Coudal and her dedicated catering and event planning staff even take time out of their busy schedules to help water, manage and harvest as needed.

"It's nice because the chefs can look at the garden from the kitchen and just come outside and take whatever they want or need," says Coudal.

This year, the team is growing more than 105 varieties of 39 crops. Last year, growing 85 varieties, they harvested over 3,000 pounds of produce. Italian parsley, cilantro and other herbs are flourishing, as are various types of lettuces and greens including Swiss chard and fennel. Then there are the Easter Egg radishes, burgundy beans, some peas at the back and, for the first time this year, fennel bulb, grown just for its root.

Peppered throughout the farm are strawberries, a black raspberry bush and a cherry tree that she hopes will bear fruit this year. Later, the team will harvest Pattypan squash and squash blossoms, beets and at least 12 varieties of tomatoes. There are even two beehives, maintained by a local beekeeper, that produce honey for use in salad dressings, cocktails and even as wedding favors when prettily packaged in jars.

Most of the garden's bounty is used for the special dinners and events, though some goes into the café creations in the form of salads and smoothies. To meet volume needs, she supplements this with other organic and local produce. "We might go for weeks without having to buy tomatoes or cucumbers and we definitely rarely have to buy herbs," Coudal says.

One farm dinner last year featured handmade gnocchi with pesto made from

the farm's arugula and basil, BDP honey and cumin-roasted carrots and raspberry rhubarb crostata. Another event showcased the farm's squash blossoms stuffed with local ricotta; shaved garden vegetables with chevre, pepitas and Red Hen Bakery bread; and black raspberries with house-made brown-butter ice cream. Most of the dinners include various passed appetizers followed by a family-style meal with a salad, two to three entrees and a dessert, all paired with craft wine and beer.

Inside the café, which opened in 2011, it is common to find a loyal group of nearby designers, contractors, architects, construction crew, gallery staff and others in the area looking for a healthier option over the typical greasy spoon. Many, Coudal says, will visit for breakfast, lunch and even an afternoon coffee before close. There's a grab-and-go cooler for pre-packaged salads and sandwiches, a hot line with a





few specials, a rotating panini option and a tasty, daily smoothie, often using local fruit and garden produce (that day's flavor was strawberry and kale). A chalkboard on one of the walls outlines all the different vegetables growing in the garden. Light from the front windows streams through to the countertop seating and handful of tables and chairs scattered throughout.

In 2013, the catering company with its onsite kitchen and café became a four-star certified green restaurant by the Green Restaurant Association, a process that evaluates businesses in seven environmental categories, with strict standards for adherence.

"That was a big deal for us," Coudal says. "I was hoping we would become a two- or three-star certified company and was surprised we got the highest rating. We were the first catering company to get four stars and only one of 20 restaurants in the

U.S. at that level."

The farm had little to do with the certification, only earning one point for onsite growing. Instead, Coudal's team earned the most points by making operational and kitchen changes to improve energy and water efficiency and reduce waste. The company installed low-flow sink aerators and toilets, switched to green cleaning chemicals and compostable disposables, used their rain barrel to collect water for irrigation, switched to local and sustainable food suppliers and began composting everything. Being in a green building with a geothermal power system also helped. Every two years Coudal must submit documentation to show the company continues to make improvements.

"The garden and green certification has done so much for our business," she says. "People are pretty blown away by what we're doing." Coudal has even scored

some pretty high-end clients like Facebook Chicago, where she now delivers breakfast and lunch every day for 70 people.

"We describe our food as a fresh take on global cuisine," says Coudal, but she's humble. Some might say the truly delicious comes only from what you grow yourself. And a junkyard lot turned into a luscious garden opened up a whole new world on the city's West Side. **ec**

*Big Delicious Planet is located at 412 N. Wolcott Ave., Chicago, 312-455-1019. For more information and hours: [bigdeliciousplanet.com](http://bigdeliciousplanet.com).*

*Amelia Levin—certified chef, food writer and urban adventurer—covers a lot of ground as a regular contributor to Edible Chicago. She is also a member of Les Dames D'Escoffier International society for women in food service.*