

ANG NEWSPAPERS: Field Day- Dinners on the farm offer fresh perspective

It's an unusually warm day in Watsonville, and the scalloped leaves of the pumpkin vines are drooping from the heat. "We rarely see this type of weather here," says organic farmer Andy Griffin, who is leading a group of 50 dinner guests on a tour of his friend and business partner Steven Pedersen's farm, High Ground Organics. "You can see how it stresses the plants."

Griffin is the owner of Mariquita Farm, but today he is acting as tour guide while Pedersen and his wife Jeanne Byrnes are attending a family wedding. The two men market their produce through a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture- a service in which subscribers receive weekly boxes of organic produce delivered to their homes) called Two Small Farms.

High Ground Farm is a former dairy that was purchased and restored through an agricultural easement made possible by Open Space Alliance (OSA), a Santa Cruz County organization committed to the "permanent protection of strategically identified open space lands with significant scenic and natural qualities." Pedersen and Byrne were able to purchase the land for a special agricultural price so they could farm it, thus protecting it from development and preserving valuable farmland and the wetlands that make up one-third of the property.

We are here at High Ground because chef Lynn Sheehan is holding one of her Farm to Table dinners, in which the organic produce, agricultural products, and winemakers of Santa Cruz County are featured in seasonal outdoor meals held at local farms. Tonight's dinner is a benefit for OSA. Sheehan is the chef/proprietor of Aptos' Sand Rock Farm, a historic B & B and arts retreat she helped renovate and now runs with her mother, Kris. Her Farm to Table dinners always include a tour of the host farm, so guests can learn about sustainable farming practices and how some of the ingredients they will be eating were grown, and to interact with the farmer.

While Sheehan, wearing in a broad straw hat as protection from the sun, and her crew finish dinner preparations at the makeshift outdoor kitchen, Griffin leads us to a block of strawberry plants poking up through black plastic covering. As we admire the quality of the plump red fruit, Griffin explains the practicalities of growing organic versus conventional strawberries.

"Strawberries only grow in a narrow coastal belt region here in California, which is why some organic farms ask more for their crop- the land costs more. The second year's harvest on a planting will yield smaller fruit, which results in a loss of profit because it takes more berries to fill up a basket. It's also not economical to just grow strawberries organically, because they have a tendency to get knocked out by pathogens, which requires frequent rotation of the berry patches, even as a preventative measure. Strawberries are also one of the most sprayed crops, because they're susceptible to spider mites. We release predator mites to control them, but in conventional farming, they just apply methyl bromide (which leaches into the water supply and has been linked to ozone

depletion) to the soil to kill pathogens, which enables them to replant the same field year after year. That depletes the soil of nutrients, which necessitates the use of fertilizers. For sustainable farmers, we have to balance economics with other things. Using these plastic covers on our berry crop instead of mulch to keep the soil moist is expensive, but effective.”

With the dinner hour approaching, Griffin shepherds us back to the flower-adorned tables shaded by canvas umbrellas. The tables, located next to the pumpkin patch, overlook a slough that is home to numerous species of waterfowl. The birds are an added benefit to the farm because, explains Griffin, “They control rodents and insect pests more effectively than spraying would.”

As we sit down to eat, smiling, affable servers pour wine from Zayante Vineyards, from the Santa Cruz Mountains. Tonight’s menu is vegetarian because, says Sheehan, “I wanted to celebrate the field, really focus on the produce since this is an OSA benefit.”

As the sun melts into the Pacific we dine on eclectic dishes such as Sheehan’s spiced Charentais melon with toasted pumpkin seeds, grilled torpedo onions and coconut milk rice, and roasted heirloom potato and beet packets with young garlic and scallion aioli. There is a communal vibe of conviviality, and shared awe at our surroundings.

“This type of event really opens up to the public how their food is grown,” says Chris Allen of Sunnyvale. “I think it’s great.” Allen was encouraged to attend the dinner by his girlfriend, Terri Hauschild, who is a Two Small Farms CSA subscriber. “I attended tonight because I thought it was money going to a good cause, and a way to educate myself,” she says. “It’s great being able to meet Andy and hear him speak. A lot of people give me flak about paying more for organic produce, but the farm tour really explained the difficulties small, sustainable farmers face, and why their product often costs more.”

Sheehan, who returned to Santa Cruz in 1999 after stints cooking in France and at various prestigious Bay Area restaurants, found a way to unite her two passions: cooking and agriculture. “I wanted to bring my two worlds together,” she says. “I was living on a ranch in Petaluma and commuting to the city to run a restaurant. I just really wanted to showcase Santa Cruz County, focus on the local farms, and increase the visibility of the incredible agricultural richness of this area. It’s not just the Boardwalk. It’s a very diverse region in all respects, but who thinks of coming here culinarily? I wanted to start with the winemakers- they’re a talented, passionate bunch, producing great wine. But sustainable farms are a draw now, as well. My goal is to stay local. Why not? I chose to come back here. What better way to express the region than through these dinners?”

While Sheehan chooses to dedicate herself to promoting the farms of Santa Cruz County, Jim Denevan is taking a more regionally expanded view. Like Sheehan, Denevan is a local, having grown up near Santa Cruz. After cooking in France and Italy and working on a local organic farm, he became chef at Santa Cruz’s Gabriella Café in

the early '90's. In the mid '90's, the restaurant began hosting farmer dinners, where local growers whose products were featured on the seasonal menu would come, give a talk, and dine with customers and staff, providing everyone with an opportunity to literally connect with the agricultural lifeblood of the region.

In 1999, Denevan held his first farm dinner at Mariquita Farm. From that event, Outstanding in the Field (OiTF) was born. "My brother is an organic farmer in the Santa Cruz Mountains," he explains. "And I saw how small farms struggled to survive, and wanted to support the people I've bought produce from for years, as well as explore what regional products the area had to offer. We don't have the access to that culture of food and contact with farmers the way they do in Europe, and I wanted to see more of that here.

Outstanding in the Field is Denevan's creation- an organization dedicated to bringing together farmers, visiting chefs, winemakers, and guests for a farm tour and dinner in a "restaurant without walls," in the fields and orchards of Bay Area sustainable farms.

At OiTF dinners, Denevan likes to feature not only the host farmers, but also the other growers and artisans who have contributed to the menu. "We'll have the cheese maker, the fisherman, the person who raised the lambs or the potter who made the dinner plates, all at the table. These are passionate people who are creating meaningful things. When we shop at a farmers' market or buy an artisanal food, we aren't just buying an object. We're buying something with a story, usually an interesting one. I'm not a purist. I'm willing to accept a certain amount of poison- we all drive automobiles. But most chefs don't have time, even if they have the interest, to visit a farm. They pick up the phone and place an order. My goal is to feature chefs who are actively involved with their local, sustainable family farms, regional winemakers; and to interest people in and provide them with access to local products and promote a richness of culture."

This year, Denevan will hold his first farm dinners outside of the Bay Area. This month, chef Mark Peel of Campanile in Los Angeles will prepare a dinner at a farm in Carpinteria, and in October chef Dan Barber of New York City's Blue Hill will do a dinner in the Hudson River Valley. In 2004, Denevan plans to hold a seafood-focused dinner "on a tidal flat in Puget Sound," and one in Europe. "In a way it takes away from being local, but doing this in other regions," he explains. "But I've always had a strong interest in geography, and it provides an opportunity to find what's special in a region. I don't plan to become a jet setting farm dinner entrepreneur," he adds wryly

A week after Sheehan's farm dinner in Watsonville, Denevan and his crew are preparing dinner for 90 at a benefit for the Chez Panisse Foundation, held in the peach orchards of Brentwood's Frog Hollow Farm.

Organic farmer "Farmer Al" Courchesne is conducting a tour of his farm, while guests sip Wente Vineyards Brut Reserve sparkling wine and learn about how Courchesne controls codling moths to keep them from infesting his fruit trees. His wife,

pastry chef Becky Courchesne, is in the farm's commercial kitchen finishing preparations on her dessert, a peach Zuppa Inglese. Meanwhile Denevan's cooks prep at the kitchen they've rigged up alongside the 45-seat long dining table that runs between a row of peach trees.

"I hope the guests will take away a greater sense of awareness and appreciation for the land and the bounty it provides," Al Courchesne says later. "I think these dinners renew or ignite their understanding and enjoyment of truly high quality, locally produced foods. They also play an important role in preserving and supporting food security, the local economy, and our agricultural heritage. I definitely see farm dinners as a growing trend. We're planning to do our own summer series of dinners, in order to build connections with our community and with our neighboring farms. I feel appreciated by my customers at the farmer's market, and I don't take their support for granted, but for a farmer to be able to enjoy the camaraderie and beauty of farming, and share the struggle with the same land policy issues as fellow family farms, to bond with customers and guests, to recognize and celebrate the labors of local chefs, farmers, and food artisans- all at the same table...well, it's an incredible thing."

Says renowned cookbook author and guest Marion Cunningham, "The thing I think is significant about farm dinners is they tell people we're losing lots more than just the rituals of the table at home. We're losing our farmland. If only most people had access to or awareness of the availability of local, sustainably-grown foods, it would be a great way to bring them back into the kitchen, or to the table."

Adds Alice Waters of Berkeley's Chez Panisse, that evening's honored guest, "I hope guests are taking away with them how important it is that we support the people taking care of the land. We need to not have this type of benefit or educational dinner in a hotel, but in the types of places that have the set of values we want to communicate. I can't think of a better place to have this type of dinner. What could be better than a party in an orchard, with the fruit hanging off the trees?"

While Madeline, the Courchesne's four and-a-half month old daughter, is passed around the table, the candles flicker, and the clink of glassware and sound of laughter prevails, the atmosphere is decidedly that of an enormous family gathering. After leg of McCormack Ranch lamb and grilled lamb sausage with shell bean ragout, the prelude to dessert arrives. A plate is adorned only by a single, perfect, Cal Red peach accompanied by shards of Fiscalini Farmstead Bandage Wrapped Cheddar and Knoll Farm mint. The peach tastes the epitome of peachiness; golden, sweet, dripping with juice, eliciting rapturous signs the length of the table.

Waters stands up, wineglass raised in a toast. "If you taste the right peach, you'll want it again and go seeking that. It's how the whole process of educating the public about food, and supporting small farms begins. That's what these dinners are about."

Recipes

For information on upcoming farm dinners, go to the following websites:

Sand Rock Farm: Historic B & B, retreats, and special events, catering, Farm to Table dinners. www.sandrockfarm.com, 6901 Freedom Blvd., Aptos, (831) 688-8005

Outstanding in the Field: www.outstandinginthefield.com, toll-free, (877) 886-7409

Gabriella Café: Farmer dinners are held every Thursday through early October. Reservations are strongly recommended. www.gabriellacafe.com, 910 Cedar St., Santa Cruz (831) 457-1677.

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ANG NEWSPAPERS: Multicultural Adelaideans are savvy about food

“This is what Adelaideans do,” explains chef and restaurateur Mark Gleeson, as we wander through the indoor Central Market of South Australia’s small, charming capital city. “The Market is a part of our lives, and has been for 135 years.” Gleeson, who also owns the Providore, a Market shop that sells pastry and picnic items such as prepared foods, condiments, and chocolates, leads public tours of the Central Market. Today, I am his willing disciple as he introduces me to vendors and explains the history of South Australia’s ethnic culinary influences.

The Market, which is owned by the city council, is far more than a tourist attraction. It’s apparent from my first visit (during my 12-day stay in South Australia, I managed to visit the market at least half a dozen times, never tiring of it’s vibrant atmosphere and gorgeous food displays) that Gleeson speaks the truth. The Market is thronged with hungry locals shopping for weekend barbecues and beach picnics, or enjoying coffee with friends or bowl of Malaysian beef *rending*. Says Gleeson, “Adelaideans are pretty savvy about food- we take an interest in how it’s produced, where it’s from. Knowing the vendors who make or sell it is part of the social fabric. We’re a multi-cultural city- unlike the rest of the continent, South Australia wasn’t settled by British convicts, and the market reflects that. Our early settlers were German and Eastern European, followed by a wave of Middle Eastern and Asian immigrants in recent decades. All of these ethnic communities have had an impact on the market and the food of the region.”

As we wander the raucous marketplace- a cacophony of sights and smells and a refreshing lack of preciousness- Gleeson and I stop by some of his favorite shops for tastes of local delicacies. I am particularly enchanted by the Russian *piroshkis* at Taldy Kurgan. These ample, fried puffs of dough resemble yeasty, perfectly made doughnuts, except they are stuffed with savory fillings of ground beef and rice, spinach and feta, or braised cabbage. The kind shop owners emigrated from Kazakhstan three years ago, and also sell delicious handmade *pelmeni* (boiled meat dumplings) with yogurt, and borscht. Over at Sevenhill Fine Foods, Mr. Waldeck, a Polish refugee, sells traditional tastes of

his homeland, including *makowiec*, a poppy seed bread, and regional charcuterie such as mettwurst and lachshinken. Sun Mi runs a small stall selling her Korean take on made to order sushi, while Tony O’Connell of O’Connell’s Quality Meats specializes in local product, such as lamb. O’Connell, 47, started in his family’s shop at 15, and treats his customers like relatives. As we watch him portion lamb chops, he shows us a couple that are fatter than the rest. Instead of tossing them aside, he gently tucks them into the display case, murmuring, “We’ve got a couple of older ladies who will be real happy with those, so we’ll keep them.”

At Foods of South Australia, the theme is both regional and indigenous “bush tucker” ingredients such as lemon myrtle, wattleseed, illawarra plum sauce, quandong jam, and flaky, red, Murray River salt. House of Organic sells pristine, sustainably grown Australian produce: Mildura asparagus, Adelaide Hills beurre bosc pears, kipfler potatoes, and the seafood shops are stuffed with local Smoky Bay oysters, sweet, teal-colored blue swimmer crabs, scallops in the shell with their neon-orange roe, octopus of every size, and bugs, the delectable Australian crustacean similar to slipper lobster. Over at dough!, Turkish pide, and Lebanese flat bread compete for space with quiche, pastry, and locally made, whole glazed figs, clementines, and kumquats, as well as plump, dried muscatel grapes from Barossa Valley vineyards. If cheese is your thing, the Market won’t disappoint. Smelly Cheese and Say Cheese are the two primary cheese stalls, and both are stocked to capacity with imported and Australian artisanal cheeses and housemade condiments such as *skordalia*, marinated bocconcini, and pickled octopus.

You’ll need to fuel up for all of this shopping. Local’s love to have “brekkie” at Zuma’s, where they feast on savory muffins or egg dishes, but my personal favorite is Asian Gourmet. On a tip from a laksa-loving local, I stopped by this unassuming restaurant within the Market, which is famed for its utterly authentic version of the spicy, coconut milk-thickened noodle soup. I’ve never had a better laksa, and I returned at least four times to get my fix. Be sure to have the Singapore version with yellow noodles- it’s the best four U.S. dollars you’ll ever spend. Speaking of Asian food, the Market is conveniently located adjacent to Adelaide’s thriving micro-Chinatown and Gouger Street, which is lined with both cheap and upscale Asian eats, most of which have sidewalk seating. And that describes Adelaide in a nutshell: residents may refer to it as just a “big country town,” but that doesn’t do justice to this city of astonishing diversity and quality ethnic cuisine. The Central Market is a national treasure, and Adelaideans love of convivial, adventurous dining and their pride in regional products make this a must-visit on ever food-lover’s itinerary.

For Central Market or Mark Gleeson’s Market tour information, go to www.centralmarkettour.com.au.

The following recipe is about as simple as it gets, and is very reflective of the region. Haloumi, a mild, salty, semi-hard sheep’s cheese from Cyprus, is artisanally produced on South Australia’s Kangaroo Island in the traditional manner- by pressing mint between the blocks of cheese to provide subtle flavor. Fried haloumi is a beloved regional treat.

Serve as an appetizer, as part of a salad, or as a dessert course, drizzled with Greek honey and walnuts, or berries, when in season.

Fried Haloumi

recipe courtesy of *The Market- Stories, History & Recipes from the Adelaide Central Market*, by Catherine Murphy (Wakefield Press, \$29.95)

Dust some slices of good quality haloumi with flour. Fry quickly in olive oil until golden on both sides. Serve immediately with a squeeze of lemon and freshly ground black pepper.

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