



The Egg and I

As suburbanites embrace farm-fresh fare, a rural retro renaissance takes root.

By Kristen Manieri

It's a cool, overcast Saturday morning, and I'm feeling virtuous and purposeful. Because instead of sipping coffee at home in my pajamas and furry slippers, I'm out grocery shopping. Apparently I'm on the egg aisle. I know this because of the exploratory nips I'm getting from the half-dozen chickens at my ankles, pecking away as I work my way across a carpet of sweet-smelling hay toward their roosts.

The softness of a feathered breast registers against my knuckles as my hand slips underneath a nesting hen and emerges with a warm, brown egg. She doesn't protest the theft. She's a happy hen, from what I can tell, perhaps because she was born and raised and is gainfully employed at the cage-less, free-roaming chicken farm where I've dropped in for a breath of country air and three dozen unquestionably farm-fresh eggs.

The farm is Lake Meadow Naturals in Ocoee. Its owner, Dale Volkert, lives here in a contemporary ranch-style home with a bubbling outdoor fountain in the drive and a view, on this particular morning, of a cow, two dozen ducks, nearly as many

turkeys and 2,800 chickens.

The chickens do the heavy lifting around here. The eggs they produce make regular appearances at some of Central Florida's best restaurants and hotels. They are blended into the decadent chocolate soufflés at Victoria and Albert's at Disney World. They nestle atop the Taleggio Polenta with Key West Pink Shrimp at Luma on Park in posh Winter Park.

Or, heck, they're simmering next to the bacon in the Sunday-morning frying pan at your house, if you want. On Saturdays, Volkert opens the hen house for anyone who wants to go straight to the factory outlet center to select and purchase eggs. He makes a bit of money from the enterprise, but that's not the point.

"I'm trying to show people where their food actually comes from and connect them with great local options," Volkert says. "Local food has gained tremendous momentum in the last year."

Farmer Dale and his chickens are aloft on the wings of the latest retro trend: local production and consumption of fruits, vegetables, meats



and, yes, eggs. The trend is nationwide but more pronounced in Florida, with a broader variety of crops and a longer growing season than less temperate states can offer.

According to the website FoodRoutes.org, a national not-for-profit organization dedicated to “reintroducing Americans to their food,” most of what we eat travels an average of 1,300 miles from farm to table. Fruits and vegetables shipped from distant states and countries spend as many as seven to 14 days on the road before winding up on your fork.

Food produced in Central Florida travels an average of 202 miles, which reduces fuel consumption and carbon emissions. Plus, because products from local farms are often consumed within 24 hours of harvest, less packaging material and fewer chemicals for preservation are required.

“People are starting to see how easy it is to go back to the way food used to be produced and consumed,” says Rebecca Reis-Miller, founder and co-leader of Slow Food Orlando, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to encouraging people to consume food that originates within 100 miles of their homes. “The movement is really picking up speed as people realize that local, fresh food not only tastes so much better, but that it’s exponentially more nutritious.”

While agriculture remains a flourishing, \$100 billion-dollar industry in Florida – second only to tourism – most residents rarely, if ever, even see farms. They pluck their carrots and oranges from bins at the supermarket and give little thought to the source of the vegetables and fruits they enjoy.

But beyond the region’s sprawling suburban landscape, a handful of small-scale farmers are in the midst of a rural renaissance. Consumers and businesses, motivated by economic, environmental and nutritional concerns, are creating a nascent market for their products.



PHOTO: KRISTEN MANIERI



Eggs and vegetables produced locally are destined for nearby establishments like Luma in Winter Park, where this green garlic spinach tortellini was made using produce from Waterkist Farms in Sanford and Rabbit Run Farms in Fort Myers. Luma also uses eggs from Ocoee's Lake Meadow Naturals in its recipes.

“Local food simply tastes far better than its industrialized counterpart,” says Julie Petrakis, chef and owner of The Ravenous Pig in Winter Park. “We feature local farms on our menu as much as possible because we’re very passionate about the quality of their products.”

On Petrakis’s “Gastro Pub” menu you’ll discover several locally sourced selections such as the Heirloom Tomato Tart, a slice of rich, savory rapture dripping with sweet balsamic and loaded with tomatoes from Waterkist Farms in Sanford and creamy blue cheese from Winter Park Dairy.

“Beautiful, local heirloom tomatoes delivered to our doorstep hours after harvest, by the farmers themselves, taste thousands of times better than the anemic tomatoes found in grocery stores,” says Petrakis. “A lot of store-bought tomatoes

have been picked green, gassed, stored and shipped across the country.”

Petrakis notes that, unlike restaurant chains, which buy in huge volume, independent eateries have the luxury of adaptability. “Because we print our menus daily, we can be flexible and will make changes according to what the local farms have available at any given moment,” she says.

Cress Restaurant in DeLand boasts an ever-changing menu of locally inspired soups, fish entrees and desserts. Not only does owner Hari Pulapaka buy from local farms such as Spring Greens in DeLeon Springs, he also uses ingredients from the Cress Garden, located at Planted Earth Vegetables in DeLand.

“We buy only local ingredients that are hand-picked, so the quality is the best possible,” says Pulapaka. “Food

created using local ingredients definitely tastes better than food prepared using ingredients that were transported, with preservatives and packaging.”

The options for “locavore” restaurants are growing steadily with favorites such as Primo at the JW Marriott, The Palm at the Hard Rock Hotel, Harmoni Market, Nonna, Fresh on the Fly and K restaurant in College Park.

These eateries support a small but growing directory of local suppliers, such as Deep Creek Ranch in DeLeon Springs, whose marketing manager, Trish Strawn, says she’s on a mission to “Feed Florida with Florida.” More than 400 cows and sheep graze on Deep Creek’s 1,000-acre spread. They aren’t exposed to pesticides, antibiotics or growth enhancers.

Eat-in locavores can get their fresh produce through organizations such as Homegrown Co-op, an online farmer’s market that offers weekly produce delivery within a 100-mile radius of Orlando. The Co-op has doubled in size and membership in the last nine months, notes Emily Ruff, assistant coordinator. A \$40 annual membership fee allows customers to shop for fruits



Sig Tiedtke, chairman of the Enzian Theater, took advantage of the start-up garden service provided by My Yard Farm.

and veggies, bread, cheese, eggs, dried fruit and cereals either a la carte or by choosing from a wide variety of seasonal mixed baskets.

An informed locavore tip: Don't assume everything from a "farmer's market" is local, though some, like the Audubon Park Community Market, emphasize fresh produce and meat that is locally grown, raised or caught.

"Our products come from smaller local farms and community gardens that use sustainable farming practices, which means the food was raised without the use of harmful chemical pesticides and fertilizers," the market's director, Gabriela Othon, says.

The community market is open Mondays from 6 to 10 p.m. in front of Stardust Video and Coffee on Winter Park Road at Corrine Drive.

Audubon Park is where you'll find Tony Adams, a big-time locavore and chef/owner of Big Wheel Provisions and Catering. "Our motto is 'Local is Lovely,'" says Adams, whose fare includes vanilla pickled local cucumbers and maple sage breakfast sausage.

You might also spot Shannon Talty

of Olde Hearth Bread, an artisan bread company located in Casselberry. For 12 years Talty has run a predominantly wholesale business servicing the likes of Luma on Park and the World Center Marriott Resort.

While the bakery, located near S.R. 436 and U.S. 17/92, doesn't have a typical storefront, Talty welcomes small orders of just one or two loaves, as long as he has several day's notice. The delicious aroma of fresh baked bread floating from his shop is worth the drive.

Fruit and vegetable options are also bountiful for those who like to go straight to the source. There are several "you pick 'em farms" featuring everything from grapefruits to strawberries located within a 45-minute drive of Orlando.

May is prime blueberry season at Blue Bayou Farms in Yalaha, just south of Leesburg. Like many you-pick farms, Blue Bayou usually has live music playing on Saturdays and an assortment of fresh-baked delicacies, such as shortcakes and pies, to tempt hungry pickers to patronize its on-site bakery.

Oak Haven Strawberries in Sorrento offers hay rides and hotdogs cooked over

an open fire to amateur agriculturalists. A recorded message updates visitors on the harvest status and the upcoming harvest schedule. The number is 352-735-1996.

Lastly, Showcase of Citrus in Clermont offers more than 50 varieties of citrus at various times between November and July. April is great for Valencia oranges, Ruby Red grapefruits and Sunburst tangerines. Stop by the sashimi-style tasting table to sample varieties currently available, then head out to the grove, which is laid out like an open-air supermarket, with directional signs pointing the way to trees laden with your fruit of choice.

Showcase of Citrus also boasts grove tours, a mini-farm and a general store where jars of local, artisan marmalades and jellies line the shelves. During peak harvest times, the facility is open seven days a week, even on holidays, from dusk until dawn.



Another option taking root in Central Florida is Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). At a CSA farm, customers buy shares in the farm's harvest for the coming season. On a weekly basis, shareholders pick up baskets packed with freshly harvested seasonal produce.

Shares come in full- and half-sizes, and can range in price from \$300-\$500 per season, depending on

the acreage of the farm, potential harvest size and growing season.

But for many families, "working shares" are more appealing. These shares are half the cost of regular shares but require a commitment of about three hours a week planting, maintaining and harvesting the produce.

One such CSA is called Local Abundance, located in St. Cloud. Owner

Nancy Pratt, who runs the farm with her husband, depends heavily on working shares and enjoys seeing the sense of ownership the system fosters.

When Pratt launched Local Abundance several years ago, her operation had eight shareholders; now it has 35, almost half of whom hold working shares. On Saturday at 7 a.m., the farm's working shareholders arrive on the one-acre

swatch of pesticide-free property and go to work in the fields.

She catches herself watching them with a secret smile as they pick bugs off leaves, churn compost and pluck the harvest from the vines. “Families love it,” says Pratt. “They love being on the land. You just can’t replicate the camaraderie that’s created here every Saturday.”

Of course, just like full-time farmers, shareholders can’t control the weather and never know what the season will bring. Pratt, however, says they don’t mind taking a risk.

“Local shareholders are invested because they really care

Chef Brandon McGlamery (left) of Luma says he likes to cook with produce from Florida “rooftop” farmers, who use hydroponics and crated, vertical-growing beds. The fruits and vegetables he uses (below) are as beautiful as they are delicious.

about supporting local farms and having access to local food,” she says. “Farm life is coming back around; people are starting to slow down, and they really care about where their food is coming from and how it’s produced.”

For a list of local CSA farms, check online at localharvest.org/csa.

Finally, consider the shortest product-to-consumer pipeline of all: planting a small vegetable garden in your own backyard. My husband and I seriously considered this option last year when we attended an organic gardening class at Leu Gardens. However, the effort required seemed overwhelming, so we threw up our hands and slouched back to the produce aisle. If only we had known Henry Melendy of My Yard Farm.

Melendy offers the perfect solution for busy suburbanites interested in backyard farming but lacking time and know-how. In the two years since Melendy and his partner opened up shop, he’s installed more than 40 gardens, all of them chemical- and pesticide-free. Some of his clients are happy to take over from there. For others, Melendy stays on as caretaker, stopping by



PHOTOS: GREG JOHNSTON

FARMER'S ALMANAC

Deep Creek Ranch
deepcreekranch.us

Audubon Park Market
audubonparkmarket.com

Blue Bayou Farms
bluebayoufarms.com

Big Wheel Provisions
bigwheelprovisions.com

Showcase of Citrus
showcaseofcitrus.com/season-chart

Olde Hearth Bakery
oldehearthbread.com

Lake Meadow Naturals
lakemeadownaturals.net

You-Pick Farms
pickyourown.org/FL.htm

Homegrown Co-Op
homegrowncoop.org

CSA Farms
localharvest.org/csa

My Yard Farm
myyardfarm.com

periodically to take care of the cultivating and harvesting. Projects range from \$400 mini-gardens to sprawling backyard farms with a \$4,000 price tag.

Sig Tiedtke, chairman of the Enzian Theater, recently had two raised-bed gardens installed at her home in Winter Park. “It all started with tomatoes. I love tomatoes, and they almost never taste good when they come from the grocery store,” she says.

I know what she means. While researching this article, I sampled everything from local bread and beef to strawberries and tomatoes only hours from the vine. Everything was delicious. But I suspect that part of the reason the taste seemed so heavenly to me was the knowledge that in choosing this egg over that egg, or this tomato over that tomato, I was doing something positive for the planet, as well as for myself. ●

Artisan breads from Casselberry's Olde Hearth Bakery can be enjoyed at many of the area's finest restaurants. The bakery also welcomes small orders.

