



BY DEBORAH BORFITZ

Indian River County's small farmers are struggling to meet a growing demand for fresh produce from chefs and consumers alike.

EAT LOCAL, EAT FRESH



STEPHANIE RUSSELL-HEINEKE/VERO BEACH MAGAZINE

Free-range chickens cluck around White Rabbit Acres, a working organic farm west of town, for egg production purposes.

At growing numbers of mostly beachside eateries, produce on the plate on any given afternoon was clinging to the earth that very same morning – or at least as much of it harvested from nearby fields. The buy-local phenomenon noticeably improves the taste of many a dish

while reducing our collective carbon footprint. It also lowers the odds of food contamination by shortening the journey from farm to fork. Indian River County has about 10 farming operations, ranging from Kevin O'Dare's ten-acre Osceola Organic Farm just west of the Indian River Mall to B&W Quality Growers'

expansive watercress and arugula farms in Fellsmere.

At The Wave Kitchen & Bar, Chef Michael Amaral utilizes as much lesser-traveled produce – citrus, poultry and fish – as he can get his hands on. Heirloom tomatoes, spring mix and micro-greens hail from Osceola Organic Farm 10

miles to the west. Multiple other greens, basil, shitake mushrooms, and hard-to-find baby English cucumbers come from Pure Produce, a hydroponics farm just over the county line in Micco. The citrus in the vinaigrette is also Indian River grown. A short supply chain is the logical choice for Amaral, the son of a chef and a butter-making mom who grew up in rural Massachusetts. The family homestead included not only a vegetable garden but veal calves, geese, chicken and a beloved cow named Moo.

Scott Varricchio, chef and owner of the Citrus Grillhouse, declares that O'Dare's lettuce is as good as he's tasted. Those heirloom tomatoes are also a big hit when paired with fresh mozzarella and infused with walnut basil pesto in his signature salad. Local citrus makes its way into Varricchio's ice creams and granite, crab salads, and citrus butter placed atop pasta and raw shrimp. Future buys from 15-acre Veggies of Vero, newly recovered from devastating October rains, are on the docket.

Local farms are also prominently featured on the menu of Osceola Bistro where Chef Christopher Bireley serves up his nutritiously yummy Fellsmere Watercress Creation and Mixed Osceola Farms Organic Greens. Crazy Hart Ranch in Fellsmere supplies Bireley with the grass-fed, antibiotic- and hormone-free birds for his Homemade Chicken and Dumplings. Papayas and loads of greens come from Gibbons Farms Organics in Fort Pierce. New England Seafood in Jensen Beach hauls in pompano, wahoo and tunas from the Fort Pierce Inlet. Lemons and limes grown by Adair Citrus Acres west of town get used in the tuna ceviche, tea and bar drinks. Veggies



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Irresistible-looking lettuce and tomatoes like these, grown hydroponically by Pure Produce in nearby Micco, make their way into salads at The Moorings and The Wave Kitchen & Bar.

of Vero and Fort Pierce honey supplier Gruwell Apiary are also on the "partners" list.

Moorings Club Executive Chef Michael Lander regularly buys from O'Dare and Hart as well as family-owned Schacht Groves in Vero Beach and Pelican Seafood in Fort Pierce. But he also grows whatever he can

right outside the kitchen in a garden six feet wide and half a football field long. He brought the garden idea with him 11 years ago, in keeping with professional and family tradition as well as his agricultural roots in Georgia.

The Moorings plot is tended by gardener Joyce Foerst and supplies

Lander with all of his herbs and edible flowers, multiple heirloom tomatoes, specialty lettuce, fava beans, carrots, turnips, several varieties of beets and radishes, and – new this year – several potato varieties. “Raised beds work well for us and it never freezes since we’re near the river,” says Lander, adding that he changes the menu “100 times a year” based on his creative whims as well as what’s locally available. Lander’s “salad of the moment” in early December consisted of Schacht’s grapefruit, Joyce’s radishes and Kevin’s greens.

Four years ago, Lander worked with local growers to start an annual Farmer and Chef Summit to get the two contingents together and further support the buy-local movement. “Farmers learn among other things that we don’t care if a grapefruit is square if it tastes good,” says Lander. “If you live in Indian River County, why would you get grapefruit anywhere else?” The last field tour and tasting event was held at Osceola Organic Farm, attracting 100 farmers and chefs, including students from Indian River State College’s culinary arts program.

Bireley notes that in California and Northern Italy, where he worked previously, “all chefs have their own garden.” Simply finding locally raised food was relatively difficult a decade ago when he returned to the States to chef at Ellie’s restaurant on Royal Palm Pointe. Vero Beach didn’t even get its first farmer’s market until around 2005, he says. It now has a fabulous one beachside on Saturday mornings and another downtown, which last fall was open on Fridays from noon until 6 p.m. “Buying local” is a great way for virtually anyone to give back to their community while supporting small farms with tiny profit margins.



DENISE RITCHE

Osceola Organic Farm is a regular vendor at the popular Beachside Farmer’s Market on Saturday mornings.

Osceola Organic Farm, the county’s only “certified organic” operation, is a regular at the Farmer’s Market Oceanside. Its farm stand at 6980 33rd Street is open 24/7 from

September until Mother’s Day selling whatever grows using an Amish-style honor system. But 80 percent of its business comes from local restaurants and private clubs, says O’Dare, including John’s Island, Tangos II,

The Tides, the Ocean Grill, and 10 others. “Chefs are like artists and if I can help them out I will.”

But O’Dare, who employs four people part-time to wash and pack the produce he harvests, says his one farm can’t meet rising demand. “Florida has more ag land but fewer small farmers than any other state. That’s why we have a seminar every year, trying to grow more small farmers.” O’Dare, a former cable technician and surf-shop owner reared on organic produce in Miami, got into the farming business with wife Wendy in 1993. The farm’s locally celebrated baby lettuce is its main crop.

Pure Produce is one of the area’s oldest players, started 25 years ago by Chuck and Mayta Gomez. Eldest son Alex, another former surfer, says he joined the family business after briefly “running away” to attend business classes in South Florida. The 2½-acre hydroponics farm includes 50,000 square feet of greenhouses. Local deliveries go to The Moorings as well as The Wave Kitchen & Bar. The only way its produce sells to individuals is via the Farmer’s Market Oceanside.

On a far more significant scale, B&W Quality Produce has been growing watercress, arugula and pea tendrils (popular in salads in sautéed Oriental dishes) in Fellsmere for more than 20 years now. “We’re the largest watercress producer in the world,” says Vice President of Marketing Andy Brown, “but it’s a small niche. We sell all over the U.S. and parts of Europe.”

In Florida, chefs gain access to B&W products through distributors. “Ours is the only watercress allowed on Disney property,” Brown notes, as a consequence of its food safety, harvesting, and hiring practices. When cruise lines bid for watercress, they routinely refer to the tender leafy greens simply as “B&W.”



White Rabbit Acres sells a diversity of organic produce direct to the public at an on-site store.

Crazy Hart Ranch owner Linda Hart has been raising meat chickens, Cornish game hens, heritage turkeys and laying hens for a more modest nine years. The business began as a backyard operation but became commercially certified in 2007, spurred by a phone call from Chef Michael Lander a year earlier. Hart has been

rallying for small-farm interests statewide, most recently helping to re-write rules pertaining to eggs and poultry. If all goes well, she says, she’ll soon be able to sell eggs without the “for pet consumption” label currently required due to some bogus food safety concerns. Once building codes for processing facilities are created, Hart also plans to

start her own small-scale poultry processing plant rather than rely on the only currently approved facility in Ocala. Pre-slaughter, between 2,000 and 3,000 birds roam freely on at least five grassy acres in Fellsmere throughout the year. Hart says she's happy to have buyers visit the ranch and inspect the feed anytime.

Chickens are also clucking around White Rabbit Acres, a working organic farm at 7020 37th Street, for egg production purposes. There are also a few cows and sheep for sale, plus six or so milk-producing goats. But 30-acre White Rabbit is best known for its diversity of high-quality vegetables sold directly to the public at a modest on-site store open year-round from 8 a.m. to dark. Brian and Valerie Quant, neither of whom have a traditional ad background, started the farm in 1999 with the intention of transitioning an existing citrus grove from conventional to organic farming practices. But the "nitrogen junkie" trees were uncooperative and then the 2004 hurricanes struck, says Valerie. White Rabbit thereafter focused more on pasture for animals and gardening.

The Quants started the area's first community-supported agriculture (CSA) program, which they now call the White Rabbit Garden Club, a few years ago. The Club has 30 members this season, two-thirds of whom put in sweat equity at the farm for a lower (\$450 annually) per-share fee of the resulting produce. The bounty includes a variety of lettuce, greens, tomatoes, cucumbers, potatoes, turnips and strawberries.

Another CSA was started by Veggies of Vero for the 2010 fall planting season, with about 250 non-working members paying either \$24 weekly for a traditional box of fresh-harvested fruits and vegetables or \$34 weekly for a larger "foody" box that also includes more exotic stuff like Swiss chard and radicchio. Vegetables that grow particularly well come with recipes, like Good Fennel Pasta or Eggplant Hummus, to help members cope with their perpetual reappearance, says Rebecca Hornbuckle, who runs Veggies of Vero with her husband Mark. Beets and cauliflower – purple, yellow and white varieties this year – are the most welcome items overall.

Half of Veggies of Vero members hail from the beachside and many of them opt to pay the \$6 delivery charge rather than trek out to the farm just west of 58th Avenue on 5th Street SW, says Rebecca. "Our goal is to feed 400 families and we're not there yet. We had a freeze the first year and a flood the second year. It's not easy being a farmer!" The business employs one full-time farmer, plus a few fellows to help with plant-tending and harvesting.

Meanwhile, fourth and fifth graders at Pelican Island Elementary School in Sebastian have been learning



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A few cows call White Rabbit Acres home until a buyer is found.

first-hand how to grow vegetables, herbs and fruits. The gardening project doubles as an opportunity to encourage healthy eating. Last year, the behind-the-school garden received \$500 in support from the Education Foundation of Indian River County.

Even the "homeless, hungry and forgotten" in the county now have access to fresh, locally grown produce thanks to the non-profit Shining Light Garden Foundation Inc. On 20 acres of private property west of Vero Beach, Shining Light farmer and organizer Joel Bray labors in the field year-round and a team of volunteers distribute the bounty to area soup kitchens, food pantries, the Gifford Youth Activity Center, a pair of senior complexes, and doorsteps in needy neighborhoods, says Vice President Greg Vafiades.

In the summer, when most farms are idled by the heat, Shining Light manages to raise okra, eggplant and greens. "We focus a lot on seniors – those who have to decide between medicine and food – and accommodate their dietary needs," says Vafiades, who is also a self-employed sales rep for an oil company. "For example, people on blood thinners can't eat green cabbage but they can eat red cabbage, so we grow both." Tomatoes and herbs grown in a greenhouse are "strictly organic," he adds. "Every dime donated goes to help the needy."

Local veggie lovers of all means, take note: A more or less complete list of growers in and around Vero Beach is available on the web at www.localharvest.org for your shopping pleasure. ☘