

PHOTOGRAPHS: JOSEPH DE SCIOSE



Dig In

Local produce—some harvested just hours ago by your server—makes the Athens restaurant Farm 255 special.

Pungent leaks overflow her basket. So Olivia Sargeant totes them toward a tailgate-down pickup parked at the edge of a creekside vegetable patch. There more containers bulge with tomatoes, radishes, cucumbers, carrots, turnip greens, potatoes, chicory, and other produce, plus fresh-cut flowers.

It's a Friday morning at Full Moon Farms, a picturesque organic farm on 100 acres just east of Athens. Olivia's soil-smudged overalls and boots, as well as the gradually filling truck bed, attest to the hours she has spent harvesting food alongside other co-op members and friends.

Later today—after a quick shower and a change into sandals, skirt, blouse, makeup, and jewelry—Olivia will wait tables at her downtown-Athens restaurant, serving the same vegetables that she picked mere hours before.

TOP: A wide-open dining room, which is a great setting for all sorts of gatherings, allows a view of the kitchen.

RIGHT: In a fertile field at Full Moon Farms, employee Krista Jacobsen gathers 'Easter Egg' radishes.





ABOVE: Farmhands trim chicory leaves in a plastic-sheathed hoop house. Olivia Sargeant explains that a greenhouse is heated but a hoop house is not. RIGHT: Knowledgeable servers can share details about every ingredient in dishes such as this Farm Salad, telling where it came from, how it was raised and by whom, and even the mode of transportation that brought it here.



ABOVE: Former head chef Tamar Adler (left) and co-owners Kate Smith and Olivia Sargeant share laughs at their innovative Athens restaurant, Farm 255. ABOVE, RIGHT: Even flowers for the dining tables come fresh from their nearby farm. RIGHT: Kate dashes through the dining room with plates of short ribs (free of hormones and antibiotics) and risotto with greens (organically raised nearby).



Now That's Fresh

At Farm 255, an eatery named for its link to Full Moon Farms and for its address on West Washington Street, it is common to find servers this closely involved with the menu.

"Friday is my morning to work at the farm," says Olivia, one of the restaurant's six young co-owners, all in their twenties or early thirties. "So Friday night I can tell diners firsthand what is on their plates. All the owners and staff take turns harvesting. We like to be familiar with the food we serve and really know what we're talking about."

Farm 255's mission is to help people reconnect with the food they eat by learning where it comes from, how it's grown, and who grows it. "We focus on food that's raised using sustainable agricultural practices without harmful chemicals. It's grown nearby, reducing the fuel needed to transport it," Olivia says. "More than 20 organic growers in Georgia and others from neighboring states work with us regularly, and we visit farmers markets."

Healthy Attitude

Open for two years in a cavernous brick building, Farm 255 draws a loyal and diverse following. By design the place offers more than just great meals. Its high ceiling and art-lined walls also echo with concerts by local bands, salsa lessons, dance parties, holiday celebrations, fund-raising events, symposia on healthful foods and environmental subjects, and more.

Many at such gatherings share an interest in eating fresh, local, organically grown food. "Farm 255 is a restaurant, a bar, a music venue, a setting for all kinds of events, and an arm of Full Moon Farms," says co-owner and general manager Jerid Grandinetti, who also works on the farm at times and occasionally tends bar at the restaurant. "Most of all it's a part of a real community of people committed to healthy living," he adds.

Face Time

Patrons often run into Farm 255's co-owners, either working or hang-

ing out. Jason Mann, a doctoral candidate in ecology at The University of Georgia, helped establish Full Moon Farms before starting the restaurant. Jeff Stoike, a veteran of many sustainable-resources projects, is a UGA doctoral candidate in political ecology. Jerid, who with Jason and Jeff once ran an organic catering company in Berkeley, California, is a hands-on manager.

Kate Smith, the only Georgia native in the bunch (she hails from Darien, the others from California), puts her UGA horticulture degree to work at both Farm 255 and Full Moon. Olivia, who has guided arts-based nonprofit groups, farmed in Italy, and taught cooking classes in San Francisco, developed the restaurant's unique sourcing system and is assistant general manager. A sixth partner, Nicholas Zanoni, currently lives in San Diego, where he studies law.

"This is something all of us had been wanting to do," Olivia says. "We're lucky we found each other and a very welcoming community. Our

goal is to bring local, sustainable food to a wider audience. It's been going on for a while out West, but the concept is right for here too."

"It's great to serve meals to people who are just as passionate about food as we are," Jerid says.

"Our farm is the heart of our restaurant, but meeting the people who eat what we grow is the most exciting part of what we do," Olivia says.

What's Cooking?

The menu changes steadily to reflect what's available. "If we pick a lot of squash," Kate says, "we offer a lot of squash on the menu. If our seafood provider has striped bass as well as shrimp, we add that to the menu. The same goes for broccoli, mushrooms, pork, and so on. Our cooks are flexible and work with whatever ingredients we come up with on a given day."

A typical Farm 255 lineup might include goat cheese from Thomasville, collards from Ranger, shrimp from Darien, endives from New-

born, radishes from Walnut Grove, pecans from Fort Valley, blueberries from Stone Mountain, and stone-ground grits and whole-grain breads from Athens. Meats come from local sources that stay true to the pasture-raised and antibiotics-free methods this operation espouses.

"We put our sources on the menu and share stories about the farmers so people will know where the food comes from, that it's local, and why we think that matters," Olivia says. "We're not pushy about our concepts, but we do hand people the menu with the mission statement facing up, so they can read what we're all about before they turn it over and choose something to eat. That encourages the kind of dialogue we think really helps. In the long run, we're eating better, and so are a lot of others." JOE RADA

Farm 255: 255 West Washington Street, Athens, GA 30601; www.farm255.com or (706) 549-4660. Full Moon Farms: www.fullmooncoop.org.

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