



*Chef Patrick Gharrity,
La Casa Sena*

Agri-Cultura



Farm to Restaurant

Getting Local onto Our Plates

PHOTOS BY SERGIO SALVADOR



Cherie Austin and Chef Kaainoa Ravey, Farm & Table



Chef Myles Lucero, Savoy



*Chef Matt Yohalem,
Il Piatto, and Farmer
Matt Romero*



Jason Greene, The Grove Cafe & Market

George Gundrey, Atrisco Restaurant



Rick Murphy, Sol Harvest Farms



Chef Jennifer James & Nelle Bauer



Maria Bustamante, Treehouse Bakery





Cherie Austin and Chef Kaainoa Ravey, Farm & Table

Duke City's Farm to Restaurant Scene

By Andrea Feucht • Photo by Sergio Salvador

When you think of the connection between farms and restaurants in New Mexico, it is easy to assume that nearly everything is happening in Santa Fe, with their year-round farmer's market and appreciation for sustainability at any cost (and a good number of folks with incomes to back that up). Over the last several years, the Duke City is catching up with a contingent of chefs and restaurants that have embraced the notion that one's food ought to come from local sources. Those sources — farms, ranches, growers — should execute high standards in their treatment of the soil and water while also caring appropriately for their plants and animals: the “products”. The restaurants range from having a long history with their favorite farmers to others that are recent converts. Some might have newly opened with the intent of good farm relations from day one, and the rare example will grow their own — either on-site or elsewhere around town. Honestly, it is a rare restaurant that does not have a few potted herbs somewhere near the kitchen for on-the-spot use, so take it as a given when considering how many freshly harvested items are in use in these progressive eateries.

On the soil side, farmers also have new incentive to cultivate relationships with restaurants that will showcase the best of their hard labor, possibly even naming their farm directly on menu descriptions. This ensures visibility in the public eye, enticing folks to join their CSA or look for their produce at markets all over town. It certainly means something to the imaginary Frank's Farm when a well-known restaurant menu lists, “spinach from Frank's Farm” instead of “organic spinach” or even “locally-grown spinach”. That said, both farms and restaurants benefit from mid-level organizations, collectives that bring together the fruits of several local farms and then sell to restaurants. The list of these is far shorter than that of the farms, but their impact is huge. The era of B Riley Fresh Herbs, a much-loved produce supplier in the Northeast Heights, ended a good five years ago and the new distribution organizations seem to be working to fill that loss.

While quite a few individual farmers sell directly to restaurants, two collectives roll off the tongues of restaurant owners over and over again, Fresh Collective: Gina Riccobono's name comes up when chefs speak highly of their ability to procure local ingredients with minimal hassle. Another strong player on the scene, the Agri-Cultura Network should not be overlooked; their holistic approach includes providing support and training for local farmers to grow capacity, as well as distribution for their network of local growers to restaurants, marketing and invoicing services complete the circle.

On the restaurant side of the farm equation, let's start with the most recent addition to the farm-friendly restaurant pack: the aptly named Farm & Table in the North Valley neighborhood of Los Ranchos. Chef Kaainoa Ravey hails from Hawaii and selects produce literally from the restaurant's back yard; this is a spot doing the farm-to-restaurant thing with full gusto. They call it Sol Harvest Farm, and as of mid-summer fully one-third of the fresh produce is from their own crop; the rest comes from a bevy of local farms from Hip Chiks to Las Palomas Farms to Skarsgaard Farm to the collectives Agri-Cultura in the South Valley and Fresh Collective. Prepared food producers are not left out of the local action, from Heidi's Raspberry Jam to Lusty Monk Mustards to Joe S. Sausage.

Founder Cherie Austin will chat your socks off when it comes to local growers and all restaurants' role in the chain. She asserts, “I love the idea of challenging restaurants to use what's fresh”. She is an advocate of chefs talking to each other and to their farmers about what they want, and to work together to find ways to use local products when they are limited, or overflowing. Think of the internet-famous photos of folks finding their car full of zucchini if they left it unlocked for a few hours. We have those periods in Albuquerque, too, and utilizing ingredients intelligently while preserving for later is a strategy more restaurants can employ.

With all that in mind, Chef Ravey accents a wide-ranging menu dotted with inspired island specialties. He even does a blue corn based New Mexican rendition of poi, the fabled taro root porridge. Late summer will see the tapering off of tomatoes and summer squash and the heartier greens appear along with root vegetables and winter squash. Come winter you might not see a single red orb on this menu; the whole kitchen staff agrees that only the best tomatoes will be served and that means summer is the time to enjoy.

On the other end of the “farms upfront” timeline, Jennifer James has proudly named names on her menu for at least a decade through Restaurant Jennifer James, Chef du Jour, Graze and now Jennifer James 101, sometimes taking in the offers of produce from small growers right into the back door of the restaurant. My earliest recollections from Graze more than five years ago were the punchy flavors in her meticulously assembled salads featuring “Cecilia's arugula”, and the repertoire has only grown.

Jennifer has built a solid and respectable reputation over the years for serving the best local and seasonal specialties from New Mexico

and beyond. Her menus reflect her passion for seasonality and authenticity; it wouldn't be unusual to find Wild King Salmon from California on her menu in late spring or truffles in Autumn. Also in the kitchen is partner Nelle Bauer, a chef whose skills and creativity have blossomed through her collaboration with Jennifer. Nelle has a thing for garlic, particularly from Chispas Farm, "Even though we work with their garlic year-round, it is all the variation available throughout the summer that thrills us. Eli and Amanda [of Chispas] are masters of garlic and their focus is so exacting that they consistently produce amazing product. It's the kind of food that requires little work on my part to produce incredible results." Both women find inspiration in the seasons; mid-summer menu features included a shaved zucchini salad with goat cheese dressing and a savory galette featuring sweet caramelized onions and gruyere – essentially a French onion soup pastry, or Nelle's amazing ruby red beet soup. Year in and year out, Jennifer James 101 is one of those places you'll go and count on the fact that you can order anything on the menu and know it's going to be wonderful.



Chef Jennifer James & Nelle Bauer, Jennifer James 101

The Artichoke Café has stayed on top of the tried-and-true special occasion lists of locals for decades, not without effort. Chef Pat Keene has marshaled her talents since the doors opened over 30 years ago into keeping her staff at their very best. Current executive chef Tony Nethery (one of the original duo behind the Relish sandwich shops) continues to create dishes that use the best of local farms. He says, "Agri-Cultura [in the South Valley] is fantastic – we get the best of the best from local farms, all from one place." He's also been finding great items through La Montanita and their new warehouse, uses the offerings from Nolina's Heavenly Organics, and snips herbs from their couple of potted kitchen varieties.

Late summer means tomatoes to Tony, just like nearly everyone else on the planet. But I do believe that Artichoke Café has an edge

this year in the unique avocation of Chef Nethery – that of a master mozzarella maker. Remember that amazing fresh and salty white orbs sold and sliced at Relish? Yep, same stuff. His Caprese salad might very well be the best one in town this summer. If tomatoes are still hopping, get on over there. As Albuquerque's farm to restaurant movement gains wings, these small aggregate organizations are a godsend to a medium-volume place like Artichoke, where a farmer with a handful of beets at the back door isn't enticing enough to create a whole special for the evening.



Jason Greene, The Grove Cafe & Market

Just up the street from Artichoke, Lauren and Jason Greene are the next generation of power wife-husband teams with their six-year-old Grove Café and Market. They met while working large venue food gigs, she as marketing and management, he as chef. Leaving that world for the blossoming East Downtown (EDo) neighborhood, they launched their dream café and haven't looked back. Not one day passes with more than a few empty tables; – their reputation for excellent fresh foods spread quickly and never stopped.

Jason could hardly be more excited about the summer months, saying, "Summer here in NM is what we wait for every year. Currently about 75% of our menu is made up of local farmers produce. Every year there is a new harvest of something different or something a certain farmer has grown just for us." He's happy to have gone through

the summer with some new items: beautiful Chioggia beets, plums & peaches, and some new heirloom tomato varieties. Jason echoes the tomato-love refrain of most chefs in town, “the local tomatoes are something I look forward to every year here especially being from the South. I grew up on them as a kid by eating nothing but Tomato Sandwiches with Duke’s mayo, white bread, salt and pepper.” After tomato season passes, heartier squashes will come on the scene, and the beets will still be holding on. Every soup I’ve had at The Grove is amazing, so those butternuts can’t come too soon.

It might sound odd to visit a steak restaurant and hope to find local vegetables, but at a commanding table in Albuquerque’s Uptown, you can do just that. At Marcello’s Chop House, chefs Ryan Hallum and Jeff Walker don’t flinch at selling one of the priciest steaks in town, but the prime beef would be a one-note meal without sides that make the best use of vegetables from farms like Nolina’s Heavenly Organics, and the robust selection gathered up by Fresh Collective.

Yes, it’s true: meat, starches, and wine dominate the offerings. Poke just a little bit under the surface of the menu to find ripe local tomatoes, New Mexico chiles, and local salad greens. This spot is proof that a local farm connection isn’t only for restaurants that carry the veggie-loving torch — carnivores can play along, too.



Chefs Ryan Hallum and Jeff Walker, Marcello's



Chef Myles Lucero, Savoy

Savoy Bar & Grill remains an excellent reason to venture up into the Northeast Heights for dinner — ever more so when Myles Lucero in the kitchen, groomed from years of experience at sister restaurant, Seasons took over for Bob Peterson. Peterson had built a practice of using local ingredients when appropriate, including lamb from Talus Wind Ranch, goat cheese from Old Windmill Dairy, and produce from several farms around town. Chef Lucero continues the practice, building on his farm-friendly childhood on Isleta Pueblo, he harbors a deep appreciation for using locally grown food in his kitchen. He recently coordinated a visit with Gina Riccobono of Fresh Collective to visit local farmers where they work, connecting faces and fields to the raw ingredients he uses.

Even when every last scrap of farm produce has been utilized, pots with herbs of all culinary descriptions are on-site, ready for a micro-harvest. While the growing season is in swing, the menu will utilize produce from Fresh Collective, Amyo Farms, Nolina's Heavenly Organics, Vida Verde Farms and many more. Chef Lucero is especially excited for late summer's tomato crop and the juicy orbs he'll receive from Los Jardines de Moktezuma, Skarsgard Farms, and Cecilia McCord's farm outside Socorro.

Wine expertise and local legacy meet at Myra Ghattas' haven of both breakfast and bottles: Slate Street Café. The initial menu debuted seven years ago when the doors opened, the creation of an Albuquerque restaurant scene veteran; it has recently been renovated by John Guillory, bringing touches from Beneficial Farms eggs to the heady red chile cooked up at Duran's. Produce from farms all over town augment an already popular menu, for all meals of the day. The middle of summer found them enjoying Opal Basil and Candy Onions from Vide Verde Farm, and of course tomatoes.

Both John and Myra are working with a friend who has a farm on his property in Los Ranchos, anointed the 'Little Field Farm.' They swing by when needed to weed and harvest, and have enjoyed both the fruits of the farm as well as events centered on cooking from the farm. Ghattas is enamored with the farm, "So far we have harvested spring greens, spinach, arugula, radishes, beets, swiss chard, turnips, and kale . . . coming up next are cucumbers, tomatoes, eggplants, and a variety of chiles. My husband and I go there and help with the weeding, irrigation, etc., and we also have harvest parties where we provide dinner for friends and they help weed and harvest. It's a lot of fun, a lot of work, but nothing beats fresh food from the farm."



Chef Cory Gray, Farina Pizzeria & Chef Tony Nethery, Artichoke Cafe

Four years ago when Farina Pizzeria branched out from Artichoke Café, I was sad to see Stewart Dorris depart from tending Artichoke's wine bar to overseeing pizza assembly; boy, was I overreacting. Stew and Richard Winters have built a contender to rival the very best Naples-style pizza in the country. Adding to their locally sourced toppings like Exotic Edibles oyster mushrooms and Old Windmill Dairy goat cheese, are decadent meatballs with pork from La Montanita Coop. Chef Cory Gray was happy to gush about the greens they are getting from Chispas and Vida Verde Farms. He says that if they bought from the big chain suppliers, "all that money goes somewhere else," instead of to local interests. Early summer the kitchen staff all loved the squash blossoms for risottos and garlic scapes for pestos and bruschetta.

After musing about the wonders of fresh radishes and how short their season lasts, Cory mentions a side project, "we want to work on pickling and preserving so that we can take advantage of the local farmers and produce in general to have items available through the winter." They are taking in more tomatoes than they can use in order to blanch and freeze for the winter season — a smart tactic straight out of a turn of the century domestic handbook.

Coming up soon are the squashes and pumpkin, and also the heavier greens like kale. For potatoes, they love those from Cecilia McCord's Socorro farm. And then there's the chile: Cecilia's neighbor Albert just happens to grow some of the best green chile in the state — and Farina uses it. Even proteins like ground beef and eggs come through La Montanita Coop; herbs for now come largely from Aroma Fresca but there's talk of a rooftop garden. It definitely seems like Richard and Stew and crew are doing nearly everything they can to keep their supplies as close to home as possible.

Chris Pope might sound like the name of the boy next door from a nice small town (and he very well could be) but he is the technically precise chef at Zinc Bistro and Wine Bar, and has been since the day they opened. Few happy hours in town beat the Cellar Bar's menu and beverage specials; the unheralded bonus is the inclusion of much from local farms and suppliers. Like their sister restaurant Savoy, local ingredients are speckled throughout the menu, with or without mention. Take for instance the basic salad greens. No matter what the season, Pope and his staff try to procure locally and usually they succeed. Individual farms come into play, such as Chispas Farms, Amyo Farms, and Vida Verde.

Chef Pope has also contributed his skills to the late summer Dinner in the Field at the Rio Grande Community Farm, challenging himself to dazzle a high-dollar crowd with all local ingredients from produce to proteins. He normally works with Old Windmill Dairy for cheese and Red Canyon Ranch for lamb — finding inspiration in the strong flavors to pair with each month's ripe out-of-the-ground offerings.

All over town, things are moving and shaking, mostly in a good direction. To keep this progress, a few things should happen that would benefit all parties. Cherie Austin of Farm & Table and I agree — there are two gaps in the flow, both having to do with predictability. First, cooks and restaurant buyers tend to want to know they can get X number of pounds of Y variety of vegetables. Farmers have variable harvests, and this can create conflict. When restaurants trust the farm, and put their faith in their own ability to cook with what they have, both sides of the relationship grow. The second part is with us, the dining public. If you know that your chef is talented, why not let them cook what they want, especially if it's in season? Don't fret if arugula is what you're expecting and it's not on the menu, but local frisee or kale is. The spirit of adventure and willingness to embrace seasonality is a key aspect of a rewarding and memorable meal. With this trust, the already blossoming farm/restaurant connection will flourish.



Rick Murphy, Sol Harvest Farms

