

FARM & TABLE

At Farm & Table, one of Albuquerque's newest and most compelling restaurants to hit the scene, the real story is roots. As Cherie Montoya Austin likes to tell first-time visitors, "My dad—there's the founder of our feast!"

The sweet adobe building housing the restaurant and its modest farm about the property's nine-acre alfalfa field. Located in the heart of the North Valley, where rich soil is fed by the Rio Grande, this area has traditionally been home to sprawling, bucolic agricultural land with big spreading trees. About ten years ago, as commercial interests began to encroach, Cherie's father bought what is now the family's property to preserve it from being developed for housing. "He did it out of his love for this valley," says Cherie, who, along with her sisters, grew up in the area.

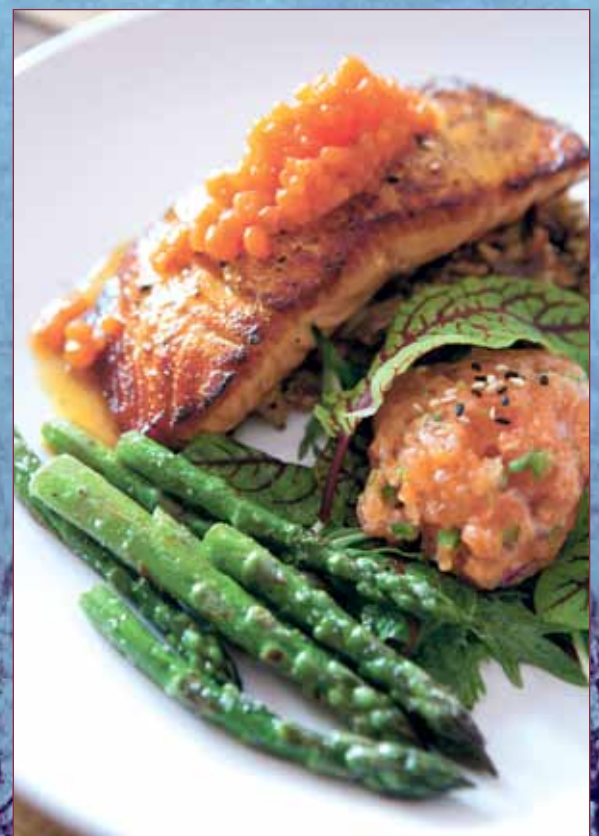
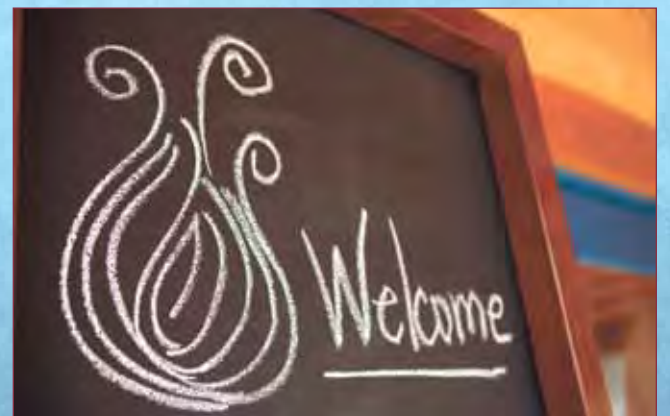
Currently, there are five generations of the family who live within a two-mile radius. People in the Valley, including her grandparents, grew most of what they ate. Cherie herself was raised to appreciate food made from scratch using local ingredients, mostly homegrown. And she remembers that slower, more relaxed time when people knew their neighbors and the community thrived on its resilient web of interconnections.

With a background like that, Cherie is the perfect person to successfully execute a plan for a restaurant like Farm & Table. Along with her husband, Joseph Austin, she opened it a scant few months ago, and so far it's been slammed every single night. With its focus on sophisticated and simple, elegant dishes crafted with locally-sourced seasonal ingredients (including those from the eatery's farm out back), a democratically run kitchen in which everyone's ideas are encouraged, genuine hospitality ("Come find your place at the table!" says their website), and the fervent desire to be a cornerstone of the community, Farm & Table offers diners a culinary concept they have obviously been hungering for.

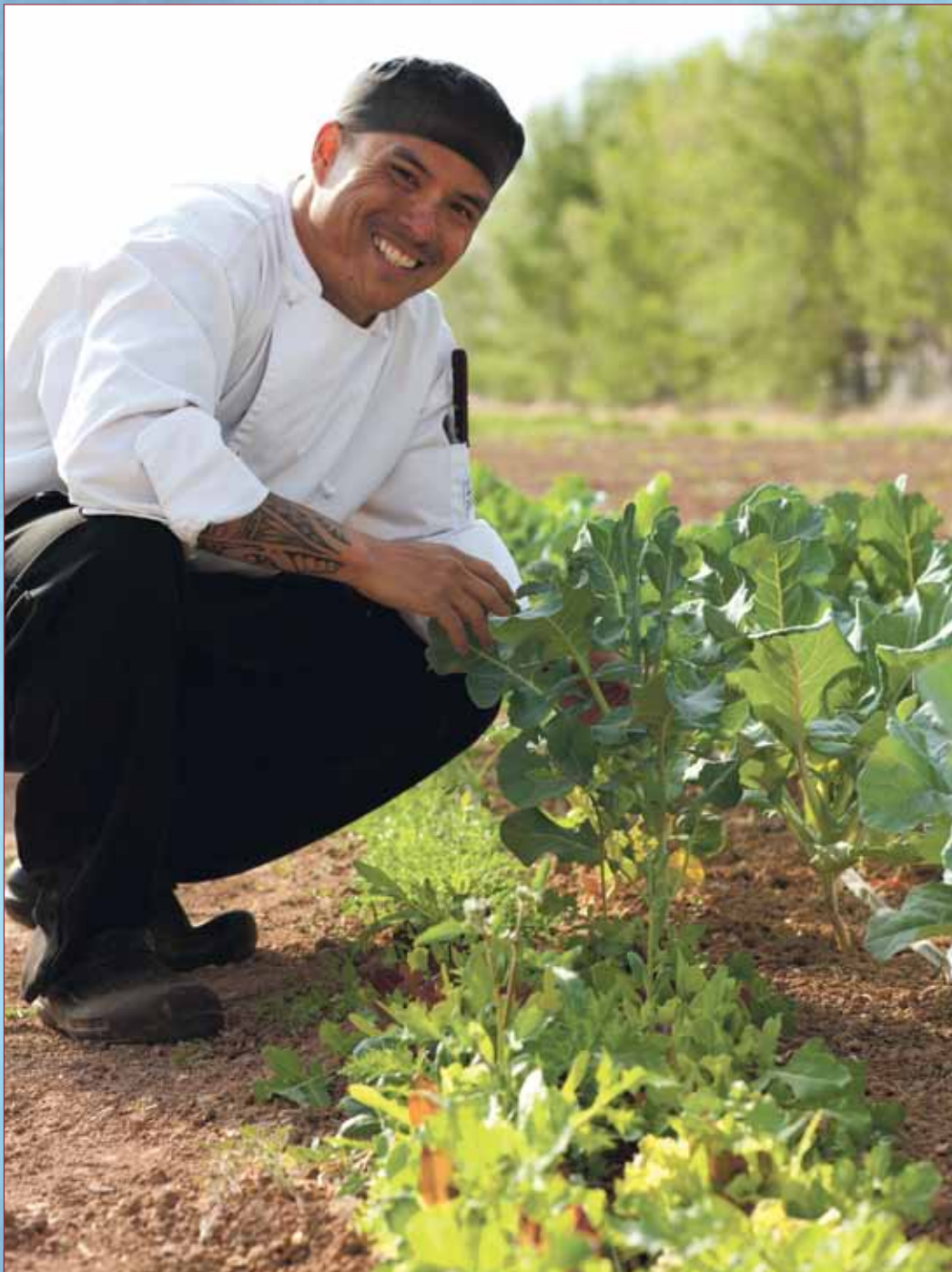
story by GAIL SNYDER
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| Chef Ka'ainoa Ravey, Joseph Austin, Cherie Austin and Ric Murphy



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It's getting dangerously close to the five o'clock hour one chilly spring evening. Most restaurants would never consent to scheduling a group interview with the owners, the executive chef, the pastry chef and the farmer (if they even had one) just before doors open for dinner. But here we are—chairs pulled up around a big corner table, Cherie folding menus as we talk, Joseph supervising wait staff in the background while simultaneously taking phone reservations—and it's a busy environment, a definitely focused, on-time environment but calm and cheerful, with everything running smoothly.

Ric Murphy, the restaurant's farmer, is talking about growing crops for Farm & Table as well as for his own small CSA and, starting in May, a farm stand. How can he do all this by himself? "I don't," he says, laughing. "We have lots of volunteers: individuals, UNM Sustainable Studies students, people here for tours and class field trips." And every Monday night is volunteer night, with a potluck afterwards. "That's a beautiful time of day to work in the field." CSA members join restaurant staff and anyone else who wants to come help—including pastry chef Rachel Patton's small son, who loves it.

Chef Ka'ainoa Ravey, originally from Hawaii, has worked in kitchens both there and in New York. He loves how much free rein he's given at Farm & Table to stretch his creative muscles; Cherie says that Ravey's constantly asking his team what they'd like to see on the menu, which shifts gears five times a year. "I like to keep thinking and learning constantly," he says, "not do the same thing, or I get burnt out."

Clearly gifted, this chef enjoys creating memorable meals that run a unique and impressive gamut. Case in point: a salad of quinoa and roasted root vegetables on a bed of mixed local greens with panko-encrusted goat cheese and a braised local pork belly appetizer with crisp apple slices and butterscotch-miso sauce. Then there's an entrée he calls Salmon Two Ways, served seared on a bed of mushroom-quinoa pilaf and as a tartare salad over field greens with shaved asparagus—layers built upon complex layers. ("And then, when you take a bite," he says, "it all combines.") What it all combines into is divine. And with such elegant presentation! House-made focaccia is delivered on a ceramic tray accompanied by small square dishes of olive oil and fresh, sliced radishes—the whole, in its sleek



simplicity, strikingly Asian. And, as Joseph observes, “The menu isn’t pages and pages. We’d rather have ten quality plates than 20 mediocre ones.” Right now, Farm & Table serves dinners Wednesdays through Saturdays and brunch on the weekends.

Pastry chef Patton calls Ravey “definitely, hands down the most even-tempered chef I’ve ever worked with, very friendly, very mellow, no yelling or slamming things.” Whenever he gets tense or angry, she says, he just makes jokes. (“Really bad jokes,” Cherie adds, and everybody nods his way, laughing.)

As the crew waits for some of the early spring fruits, like berries and cherries, to appear, Patton is baking a variety of breads (including the green chile–cornmeal bun for the grass-fed beef burger) and using local eggs, honey and cream to create an enticing selection of desserts: a light but dense red chile–chocolate cake with vanilla bean flan and special tortilla chip, a deservedly exclaimed-over bread pudding.

She’s already brainstorming menu ideas for summer, including fruit tart samplers and homemade jams (for which she’s won awards at the state fair).

Before embarking on life as a restaurateur, Cherie, who used to work in the world of nonprofits, and faithfully followed that industry’s dictum in the process of setting up Farm & Table: “Don’t duplicate services already in place, enhance those services.” So she asked for guidance from chefs she admired and respected (Joseph Wrede, James Campbell Caruso, Phil Beltran, Jonathan Perno of Los Poblanos, among others). “Ninety-five percent responded, saying things like, ‘I’ll be on your board,’ ‘I’ll do special dinners,’ ‘Count me in as a mentor.’ There’s so much to learn and share. We had no secrets.”

The chef community’s generosity and enthusiasm for Cherie’s idea kept her on course, even through the obstacles that inevitably followed. “We aren’t trying to compete,” says Patton. “In fact, our goal is to help this idea trickle out—or even explode!”

Cherie gets excited about all the possibilities for bringing people together at Farm & Table. “We’d like to have flamenco and paella on the patio,” she says. “And, out back, in the strip of grass in front of our farm field, I want to collaborate with local filmmakers, serving dinner at tables

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set up out there and showing movies against the fabric wall of the greenhouse on summer nights. We'll also definitely have big celebrations for Cinco de Mayo and the Day of the Dead!"

What she and Joseph aim to provide, Cherie adds, is a not a fine dining establishment but a restaurant that accommodates both flip-flops and sport coats, a genuine back-to-basics experience that is expressed through the food and the place. "This building is all adobe," she says. "My dad brought all these reclaimed timbers from a fire up north, that we used as the vigas."

Outside, as you enter the restaurant by crossing the wide patio, you'll notice what Cherie describes as a "water feature." This, she says, is to honor her father, who feels it imperative to include the story of water and its importance here, in any conversation about New Mexico. "This one flows toward the fields, in one direction, another channels water the other direction, flowing the other way, across the patio. The curving stone pathway running through the patio was designed by my sister. It describes and celebrates the acequia system in the Valley."

On any given day, Patton adds, everyone on the staff's family is here, "including parts of mine," and it's true. Tonight, Cherie and Joseph's ten-year old daughter wanders in and out talking on her cell phone, laughing with her mom.

"My personal goal" says Patton, "is to live Farm & Table." And having been there myself, I have to admit that's now my personal goal, as well.

Farm & Table is located at 8917 Fourth Street NW in Albuquerque. They are open for dinner Wednesday through Saturday and serve brunch on Saturday and Sunday. 505.503.7124. www.farmandtablenm.com.



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