

LOCAL FLAVOR

*Fresh produce is becoming a mainstay of Vero Beach menus,
a trend that benefits both our economy and our health.*

BUY LOCAL, BUY FRESH

BY MARY BETH VALLAR
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DENISE RITCHIE



This fresh produce comes from the Osceola Organic Farm in Vero Beach.

Local and fresh are current buzzwords that connote quality and healthfulness, plus a boost to the local economy. Today, a growing number of Indian River County residents are eating fresh fruit, vegetables, poultry and seafood grown right here. They are shopping at local farmers' markets and preparing the seasonal produce themselves. And they are enjoying the freshest ingredients in Vero Beach's finest restaurants and clubs because local chefs are demanding fresh, local – and in some cases organic – agricultural products for an equally demanding clientele.

Michael Landers, executive chef of the Moorings Club, is passionate about promoting local farmers. Last year he organized two Farmer-Chef Summits to help local farmers build relationships with their core constituents. Along with local farmers Kevin O'Dare and Linda Hart and Indian River County extension agent Christine Kelly-Begazo, they staged the first event at the Moorings Club in the spring and the second at O'Dare's Osceola Organic Farm in the fall. "Our concept was to get the right people together – the farmer who is growing the produce and the chef who is looking for the freshest product," explains Landers.

The farmers provided their harvesting schedules and Chef Landers provided a fabulous lunch using the farmers' products. (His recipe for marinated grilled



Spencer Porteous, owner of Everything Outdoors, displays his locally grown rosemary at the Oceanside Farmers' Market.



Local raw honey from Tall Pines Apiaries is available at the Oceanside Farmers' Market.

chicken appears on page 138.)

“The value of buying and eating locally produced food is priceless,” he says. “I first became involved in this because I wanted the best possible ingredients I could find. I have been dealing with Kevin and buying his produce for 10 years and now I supplement my poultry requirements from Linda’s farm.”

O’Dare produces organic vegetables and edible flowers on his 10-acre farm. For the past 13 years he has followed the USDA’s stringent and ongoing procedures for his produce to be certified as organic. “I am inspected annually to insure that my seeds are certified organic – meaning they contain no genetically modified organisms – and that I am using only approved fertilizer,” he says. “Besides a physical inspection of the farm, they inspect my books for an audit trail – the number of seeds I buy, the number of seeds I put in the greenhouse, and the number I plant, harvest and sell all have to match.”

Mother Nature dictates what O’Dare can grow, and when. In the spring and fall his crops include lettuce, tomatoes, eggplants, peppers, cucumbers, onions, dill and basil, and edible flowers, such as nasturtiums, calendula, borage and bachelor’s buttons. In the winter he plants Swiss chard, collards and other greens.

Tomatoes are available through January, and to ensure the best-tasting tomato O’Dare uses deep sea water. He collects the water himself by motoring out to the Gulf Stream and scooping up a couple of jugs of it. “Sea water contains 94 beneficial elements,” he says. “We apply it to the tomatoes and they absorb the elements, making them sweeter. We



Kevin O’Dare is pictured at his Osceola Organic Farm. He has operated the 10-acre property for the past 15 years and now supplies fresh, organic produce to many of the finest restaurants and clubs in Vero Beach.



Local poultry farmer Linda Hart with a turkey she raised on her five-acre Crazy Hart Farm in Fellsmere.

cut the water off at a certain point and that keeps them smaller and concentrated with flavor. We end up with a more nutritious and better-tasting tomato.”

Summer in Vero Beach is too hot to grow anything, he adds. “Our growing season parallels the tourist seasons, and peaks in March. So we close in May and put hundreds of tons of compost on the farm and let it break down over the summer.”

O’Dare sells about 10 percent of his produce from his small store at the farm, and another 15 percent at the Saturday morning Oceanside Farmers’ Market on Ocean Drive, across from Humiston Park. The rest goes to local restaurants and clubs, including Ocean Grill, Tides, Costa d’ Este, Vero Beach Hotel & Spa, John’s Island, Orchid Island, The Moorings, Red Stick, Bent Pine, Quail Valley, Windsor, Riomar Country Club,



Michael Landers, executive chef of the Moorings Club, organized a “farmer-chef summit” at Osceola Organic Farm. “My staff works very hard with me in trying to make a difference,” he says. “We designed the grilled chicken recipe to feature high-quality local products, and it is intended to be prepared simply so as not to convolute the integrity of the ingredients.”

Sea Oaks and Bodega Blue.

“All the chefs demand quality and I have learned so much by working with them,” he says. “They are artists; they know that you eat with your eyes first, and then your nose and mouth. They want to use ingredients that will make a dish look the most appealing. They also know what is trendy. I love their feedback and I listen to them and give them what they want. They have made me a better farmer.”

Besides freshness and quality, buying local contributes to the local economy. “When you buy locally produced food, you support the people who work here and that money stays here,” O’Dare says. “We outsource so much as it is. We don’t have to outsource our food as well.”

Linda Hart is the only farmer in Indian River County who is licensed by the USDA and Florida Department of Agriculture to sell poultry. She raises chickens and turkeys on her five-acre Crazy Hart Farm in Fellsmere. Now in her third year, she produced 1,000 chickens her first year and doubled that number the second year. This is still considered small, but is big enough for the one-woman operation. Hart markets to many of the same clubs and restaurants as O’Dare, as well as to a growing number of private clients.

“It’s not just high end,” she stresses. “Ordinary people who are concerned about health, safety and quality for themselves and their children are also very good customers.

“They realize that buying locally is the only way they can know exactly what they are getting. Big



GRILLED LOCAL CHICKEN AND DRESSED GREENS

Ingredients for Grilled Local Chicken:

- 1 Free-range chicken, cut in ½, backbone removed and reserved for stock
- ½ bulb of garlic, minced
- 2 tablespoons rosemary, finely chopped
- 2 tablespoons thyme, finely chopped
- 2 tablespoons French tarragon, finely chopped
- Kosher salt to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper to taste
- ½ cup first cold press extra virgin olive oil
- 2 serving platters bordered with freshly picked herbs

Preparation:

Rinse chicken and pat dry, set aside. Combine olive oil, salt, pepper, herbs and garlic mix, taste and adjust seasoning if needed. Place chicken in oven-proof baking dish on a rack, pour marinade over and massage to cover thoroughly. Marinate overnight or for at least 4 hours.

Place in 350 degree oven and bake for 20 minutes, remove chicken and set aside, prepare grill. This step can be done in advance and completed quickly when guests arrive.

Once you are ready to complete the dish, place chicken

skin side down on a seasoned medium temperature grill. Cook for 10 minutes and turn, insert an internal meat thermometer and cook for an additional 10 minutes, or until the chicken reaches 145 degrees. Remove from the grill and allow chicken to rest for 5-10 minutes. Place on herb-garnished serving platter.

Ingredients for Dressed Greens:

- ¼ pound organic lettuce mix
- ½ cup organic basil, torn
- ½ cup organic tarragon, roughly chopped
- ¼ cup organic mint
- Assorted organic garden edible flowers, hold some back for garnish
- 1 platter, bordered with freshly sliced locally grown tomatoes, drizzled with first cold pressed olive oil and seasoned with kosher salt and fresh cracked black pepper.

Place all ingredients into mixing bowl, drizzle with first cold press olive oil and season with kosher salt to taste. Toss and serve onto prepared platter, garnishing with reserved edible flowers.



Bonnie, Kenny and Gayle Peterson are following in the footsteps of their father and grandfather by producing top-quality Indian River citrus.

processors have accountability to the government; I have accountability to my customers. If I put out a bad product, I will be out of business before the food safety people ever get to my place.”

Hart starts with chicks from hatcheries that are out of state and raises them from three to eight weeks, feeding them a specific high-protein diet. “At three or four weeks, we produce a Cornish game hen; at six weeks, we have a chicken and at eight weeks, a roaster. It’s all one bird, and just depends on how long we grow it out.”

Hart handles her own processing at a plant in Ocala, which is one of the requirements for her license. “I hire a crew of six to eight and we can

process 300 to 500 chickens in one day.”

She sells her poultry at both the Oceanside Farmers’ Market and the Fort Pierce Farmers’ Market, and is gaining recognition and support from local chefs. Chef Landers ordered 300 Cornish game hens for Christmas for the Moorings Club. And Jeff McKinney, executive chef of the Orchid Island Golf & Beach Club, sponsored a turkey tasting for Hart in 2009.

“Jeff invited a number of chefs and caterers and he cooked one of my turkeys and a brand-name turkey,” Hart says. Everyone rated her locally raised turkey far superior. This past holiday season she provided over 160 turkeys for local family and restaurant dinners.

Hart is also gaining professional recognition. Last sum-



SPARKLING GRAPEFRUIT PIE

- 1 9-inch pie crust, baked
- 4 Indian River ruby red or pink grapefruits
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup white sugar
- 2 tablespoons cornstarch
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup grapefruit juice
- 1 3-ounce package strawberry flavored gelatin
- Whipped cream

Peel grapefruit, removing all the pith. Cut into bite-size pieces, then drain in a strainer for 4 or more hours, collecting the juice. This can be done the day before.

Combine the sugar, cornstarch and $\frac{3}{4}$ cup juice in a small saucepan; if the collected juice does not measure $\frac{3}{4}$ cup, top it off with water. Bring to a boil. Stir in strawberry gelatin. Cool slightly.

Spread grapefruit in the bottom of the baked shell. Pour gelatin over the fruit. Chill until set. Serve with whipped cream.



Produce from Young's Market, one of many vendors at the Saturday morning farmers' market.



Monti's Flower Market displays beautiful sunflowers grown in Indian River County.

mer at the Florida Small Farmers' Conference, sponsored by the University of Florida and Florida A&M, she received one of three prestigious Florida Innovative Farmer Awards.

All farmers and growers laud the health benefits of eating fresh fruits and vegetables and, as we work our way through the flu and cold season, these benefits take on more urgency. Indian River County citrus is world-renowned as the finest, and probably nothing contains more vitamin C than fresh citrus.

Kenny Peterson – who, along with his sisters Gayle and Bonnie, is a third-generation citrus grower – explains that Indian River's reputation is justified. It's because of the soil composition, he explains, the close proximity to the Gulf Stream, the nearness to the salt water of the Atlantic Ocean and the optimum amount of rainfall.

In 1913 their grandfather, Axel Peterson Sr., started growing citrus on 20 acres of land in what would become Indian River County, and is credited with cultivating the first navel oranges here. His son, Axel Jr., expanded the business, planting additional acres of trees, building a packing house and operating a successful retail and shipping operation. "He served his customers for 50 years

until his death in 2007," Kenny says. "As the third generation we are continuing in the footsteps of our father and grandfather."

The trio have transformed their father's old "honey barn" into a country store, located at 6755 37th Street. From November to May each year they sell grapefruit, oranges and tangerines, as well as other locally grown produce. In addition, they participate in the Oceanside Farmers' Market. Besides marketing their citrus at the weekly event, they often offer samples of their "Sparkling Grapefruit Pie" and take custom orders for the pie made from a special family recipe shown on the left.

Food consumers in Indian River County have numerous choices as to what to buy and where. Buying locally grown products is certainly a popular option; at farmers' markets, roadside stands and specialty shops, shoppers can experience the nuanced aromas and flavors of the freshest products. They can let the colors, shapes and textures inspire them to create a delicious menu using the items that were grown in local soil and harvested by local hands.

What are the ingredients of a bountiful life? One answer lies in the title of this article, "Buy Local, Buy Fresh." Enjoy! ☘