



Chef Jamie Allred, left, with David Taylor at Taylor Family Farms in Lakemont, Ga.

Local Bounty

One Chef Plants a Seed That Helps Grow a Sustainable Community

By Helen K. Kelley

Jamie Allred was perusing fresh produce and other local products at the Simply Homegrown Farmers Market in Clayton, Ga., when a farmer approached him about using some of his produce on the menu at Lake Rabun Hotel & Restaurant, where Allred has been executive chef since 2010.

“At the time, we were hosting Tapas Night every Thursday, offering small plates of Spanish-inspired food,” says Allred. “That week, I came up with small plates that featured the farmer’s certified organically grown leeks.”

The leek dishes were a hit with patrons, and Allred began thinking about incorporating local products into the menu on a regular basis. He decided to keep the popular small plates menu on Thursdays, but did away with the Spanish theme and renamed the evening Featured Farmer Thursday.

The Featured Farmer small plates included delicate dishes with exotic flair such as Potato Gnocchi & Padrón Peppers; Escarole,

Sausage, & Pinto Bean Dip; Persimmon Griddle Cakes; Asian Pear Salad with Goat Cheese Flan; and Peach Crème Brule.

“I thought this would be a good way to introduce our guests at the hotel and area residents to local food and the people who produce it,” he says, adding that Thursday nights have now become well received and very popular with guests.

Every Thursday night from mid-April through mid-November, the restaurant hosts a local farmer/food crafter from Rabun County and surrounding areas in the northeast Georgia region. Participants include fruit and vegetable farmers and gardeners, honey makers, gristmills, cheese makers and locally raised beef, chicken, pork and goat suppliers. The evening’s menu offers five to seven small plates, all prepared using the featured farmer’s products and supplemented with other local ingredients. Diners are encouraged to try two or three of the reasonably priced plates, which run between \$6 and \$12 each.

In addition to showcasing their wares on the evening's menu, Featured Farmer Thursdays give growers the chance to interact with hotel guests and restaurant patrons. The week's selected vendor is onsite to greet patrons as they come in and mingles throughout the evening to talk with diners and answer questions. A brief bio of the farmer and description of his products is included on the menu. Farmers often give samples of their produce and are invited to make presentations about their products and growing practices to the dining room. Occasionally, tastings of items such as wine or honey are offered during the evening.

Promoting the Sustainable Community

Allred is among a growing number of chefs who are seizing the opportunity to use and promote local food on their menus. According to What's Hot in 2012, the National Restaurant Association's annual survey of nearly 1,800 professional chefs, locally sourced meats and seafood and locally grown produce were among the top 10 hottest trends for 2012, along with sustainability as a culinary theme.

During the warm weather months, Allred says that about 75 percent of his entire menu throughout the week is locally sourced. On Featured Farmer Thursday, every item on the menu comes from local suppliers, most of whom use organic growing practices. Most of the produce Allred purchases comes from small farmers who grow their vegetables and fruit on an acre or less.

Three Reasons to Use Locally Sourced Foods

1. Locally grown foods use fewer resources and take less time to transport to your restaurant, thereby creating less pollution.
2. Organic agriculture does not involve the use of toxic chemicals for pesticides and fertilizers, genetic modification or irradiation. (Even if a local farm is not USDA Certified Organic, which can be cost-prohibitive for many small farms to pursue, many still follow organic practices.)
3. Buying local foods supports your local economy.

“For some of these growers, farming is a side business, but others are trying to make a living from it,” he says. “Using locally grown foods in our restaurant and giving the farmers a little more exposure to the public than they receive at the markets is a good way to create awareness and promote a sustainable community.”

Initially, Allred asked vendors he met at the Simply Homegrown market to participate in the Featured Farmer program, but the word spread rapidly and soon, other growers throughout northeast Georgia began contacting him. Allred has no shortage of local growers to feature on Thursday nights; he currently has a contact list of more than 50 farms and food



Caramelized sea scallop with local lettuces, sunchokes, Hakurei turnips and an applewood-smoked bacon-candied ginger dressing.



Brooks Franklin of Leah Lake Farms, which is located just across the state line in Otto, N.C., talks with Chef Allred about their produce.

crafters. From time to time, Allred visits the farms himself to assist in harvesting items — which makes for a true farm to table experience for that week's menu.

The farmers' wares are purchased at an agreed-upon price (or the farmer may opt for credit at the Lake Rabun Hotel & Restaurant). Allred makes arrangements for pick-up or delivery by Wednesday each week so that everything can be prepped for the following night's menu. He's also found a way to make the process more efficient by ordering many of the week's items online through the Northeast Georgia link on LocallyGrown.net. (See sidebar for more on this resource.)

"I can go online on Sunday and buy direct from several different growers at one time," he explains. "Then, on Wednesday, I go to a specified location to pick up and pay for my order. It saves a lot of time and gas over having to drive to each farm or garden to pick up what I need."

One week out of the Featured Farmer season is devoted to the Sustainable Mountain Living Communities (MSLC), a non-profit organization working to develop a sustainable food hub in Rabun County. Allred buys produce grown in the MSLC community garden and features it on his menus. All of the proceeds from the garden go back into the organization's projects, which include free education films and lectures in the community, farmers market sponsorship and development of a community kitchen.

Cost vs. Benefits of Going Local

In general, the cost of food for restaurants is rising weekly due to factors such as increased transportation and fuel, dairy, feed

and chemical prices. Even though he has found the cost of local produce and other products to be a little more expensive than buying it through other outlets, Allred says that the expense is offset by the fact that local prices tend to fluctuate less.

"I feel like our menu prices are right in line, if not less than, other restaurants that are similar to us," he says. "With respect to local fresh food, I have found that the yield is higher than mass marketed items due to less waste — which helps offset the price some. And of course, the greater flavor and more nutrient-dense food offered by local growers is almost priceless."

Allred says he keeps his costs in line by implementing best practices such as waste control, correct pricing of menu items, proper portions and a weekly inventory process, which helps him manage his weekly food cost percentage.

"I feel like if I have all of these factors in check, I'm less likely to need to pass extra costs on to the customer," he says. "Our patrons are able to dine at a reasonable price, knowing that all items are fresh, a majority of the items are local, and I (the chef) know the origin of all of the foods that I serve my customers."

Success All the Way Around

According to Allred, Featured Farmer nights have steadily grown in popularity, not just with hotel guests, but also with local patrons. Between 70 and 100 people take part in each Thursday evening dinner, with summer and fall the biggest seasons. The restaurant's indoor dining room seats 50 people, and in warmer weather an additional 30 people can be seated outdoors.

Support Your Local Farmers

There are nearly two million farms in the U.S. About 80 percent of those are small farms, a large percentage of which are family owned. More and more of these farmers are now selling their products directly to the public and restaurants via CSA programs, farmers markets, food co-ops, independent farm stands and other channels. By buying direct from local growers, you are helping to create a sustainable community while also providing your guests the freshest produce available.

Two websites are specifically set up to help chefs source more local foods: Athens, Ga.-based [LocallyGrown.net](#), which Chef Jamie Allred of Lake Rabun Hotel & Restaurant uses, and [LocalHarvest.org](#).

LocallyGrown.net was started in 2007 to help market local growers online. The site offers farmers a way to supplement their presence at their local farmers markets or to reach their own select lists of customers. Users can access a list of growers by state and region within the state, take a virtual tour of individual farms through photos, place their orders online and arrange for pick-up and payment at a central location. The produce is harvested to order, so customers can be assured that their items are the freshest available.

LocalHarvest.org, an organic and local food website, maintains a public nationwide directory of small farms, farmers markets and other local food sources. The site helps people find products from family farms and local sources of sustainably grown food and encourages them to establish direct contact with small farms in their local area.



“We’ve seen our business more than double since the original Tapas Night we started a few years ago,” Allred states. “Featured Farmer Thursday is so popular now that reservations are highly recommended.”

Additionally, Allred is collaborating with Martha Ezzard, co-owner of Tiger Mountain Vineyards (a regular participant in Featured Farmer nights) on a cookbook that will spotlight the local growers and food crafters. The book will include a bio and three recipes from each Featured Farmer, plus a local wine

section, and is expected to be available for sale later this summer or early fall.

“The Featured Farmer program has been a big success for Lake Rabun Hotel & Restaurant, its guests and area residents,” Allred says. “The evenings bring members of the community together, offer them fresh foods that are very nourishing, and help many sustainable farms continue to thrive through the purchase of their products and the introduction to many potential future customers.” ■

From left, Martha and Lisa Ezzard taste some wines with Chef Allred from their vineyard, Tiger Mountain Vineyards in Tiger, Ga.

