



What better backdrop for a dinner party than the brilliant colors of the sunset and multi-colored flowers growing tall on the horizon? Inspired by the warmth and beauty of South Florida weather and the crops on their fields, local farmers have re-invented themselves by taking the farm-to-table revolution to the next level—to the farm—where the beauty of foods is celebrated in a gathering of friends and families right under the clear skies.



The Beauty of Foods

By Maritza Cosano

Photo: Addiel Perera, WPB Magazine and Gyorgy Papp (Papp Photo)

Food served during one of the theme nights at Swank Farm in 2020. Swank Farms provides one of the premier experiences in Palm Beach County, where South Florida's top chefs, mixologists, and brewers come together. Photo by Gyorgy Papp (Papp Photo)



If you believe in the beauty of foods—made with nutritious and quality ingredients—you will appreciate how our local farmers have mastered the art of true farm-to-table by bringing even more of the farm to the table: by hosting community dinners and cooking classes where the food is grown and harvested.

What started in the early 2000s by trendsetter local farms like Kai Kai Farms in Stuart and Swank Farm in Loxahatchee, Florida, changed course last year. As South Florida shut down to curb the spread of the Coronavirus, causing food shortages to surge, the State allowed essential companies, like farms, to remain open. It didn't take long for farmers, who were already working with chefs and restaurants, to discover new ways to build community by bringing their fresh vegetables, fruits, dairy products, and locally raised meats to households.

Before this shift, the farm-to-table movement was a direct collaboration of farmers and chefs who saw the importance of using fresh produce in their kitchens, at all times.

“A true farm-to-table happens when the food comes from a farm and goes directly to the chef’s kitchen, where their menu is adjusted constantly according to what’s available and ready on the farm,” explains Diane Cordeau.

Diane and her husband Carl have owned the 40-acre Kai Kai Farms in Stuart for twenty years, producing over 80 different kinds of crops, throughout the season, which goes from October – May, depending on the weather.

“Obviously, the restaurants can’t change everything on their menus every week, but they have special items listed whose products come from our farm,” says Diane. Very often, she sees restaurants that list their farm’s name on their menu, just because they feel the pressure to list a farm there somewhere, and they’ve never bought anything from them. But, who are they kidding? Surely, not the guests who taste their food. And as for the farmers . . . well, they can spot a restaurant that’s not a true farm-to-table when their menu stays exactly the same, all year round.

The magic between farms and chefs didn’t happen overnight. It takes years for a farm to develop a relationship and collaborate with a restaurant. It really depends on the farm’s reputation and how one restaurant talks to another about their menus and resources. That’s how Kai Kai Farms started working with local restaurants like The Breakers, The Regional Kitchen & Public House, Avocado Grill, Buccan, Café Chardonnay, Coolinary Café, Oceano Kitchen, Grato, Pistache, Palm Beach Yacht Club, and Tideline Ocean Resort & Spa, just to name a few.

“Fresh is what restaurants want and that’s exactly what we give them,” says Diane. And by them, she means mostly high-end restaurants or those that don’t mind paying for quality. They have a good distributor that picks up their food in the morning and goes out the door the same day by 11 in the morning.

After working with a chef for a while, farmers like the Cordeaus learn what chefs need in their kitchens. Every year, Diane sits down with them to talk about



Pictured above: Dinner with the Swanks. Darrin and Jodi Swank (right), chefs and farmers coming together to celebrate good food, good company, and good country air. (Gyorgy Papp (Papp Photo)) Below: It all starts with a seed. At Kai Kai Farms these are planted by professional growers working on the farm year-round.



their plan for the next season. They discuss if she should grow more of one specific crop or which ones are down, so they never do without when they ask for it. She never wants to be in a position when she has to say, “Oh, I’m sorry, I’m out of that . . .” That never happens, she says. The farm and the chefs always work together in that department.

The Chefs & The Farmers

“We have partnered with our local farmers, ranchers, and fishermen to provide us with the highest quality ingredients to capture the best flavors of our area,” says Chef Tim Lipman, owner of Coolinary Cafe in Jupiter, who’s worked with Kai Kai Farms from the beginning. And like Chef Lipman, there are a handful of top chefs like Chef Julien Gremaud of Avocado Grill and Chef Dean James Max, president of DJM restaurants, who believe in consciously sourced seasonal ingredients with superpowers, and have made farm-to-table their mission.

Lipman grew up watching his grandmother grow her vegetable garden and tend to livestock in their central Florida town. If you visit, you’ll definitely taste her Southern-Italian influence in Lipman’s culinary style.

Max grew up on a farm, so he understands the importance of fresh products. “Even all the venues that we do in the restaurants, it’s not from cooking books, etc. or from wanting to do this dish or that. I never look at it like that. I always look at it from the perspective of the product,” says Max, a leader in the culinary industry who takes a lot of pride in the fact that chefs who have been with him for many years have achieved incredible success.

Guys like Jeremy Ford, who after his Bravo’s Top Chef victory, the Jacksonville, Florida native, opened Stubborn Seed in Miami Beach. And Executive Sous Chef, Paula DaSilva, who was the runner-up on Season 5 of Hell’s Kitchen. In the kitchen, Paula quickly became the leader of her team. Her passion, attitude, solid

performances, and consistency led to her competing in the finals and being the runner-up of her season.

“Teaching is a passion of mine. I’m pro exposing as many people I know to good techniques and products. It benefits us all,” says Max. He and his team of chefs look at the products that we have locally. They look at the seafood and the meat and whatever else we have around and build their dishes from that. For Max, his connection with farm-to-table is super important because it generates how he does business. He grew up in Stuart, and one of his first jobs was as a produce broker. His dad also worked out of a farm in Pahokee by Lake Okeechobee.

Since the movement started here in Florida, Max has seen the differences that exist between cities that support the real farm-to-table dynamic. “I lived in California as a chef and the difference between the two is that in Florida you have a lot of big farms,” he says. “You have US Sugar and all of these south big growers and all those huge farms that



Carl Frost is seen here supervising tilling works as farmers begin to prepare the fields in September.

grow thousands of acres. A lot of times they are very profitable in growing just one variety of products, while other farms will grow twenty-five different products, like celery, tomatoes, lettuce, etc. Then, you have a farm like Swank Farms with 20 acres but they farm only eight acres of that. And out of that, they probably have like 150 different products.”

This is very similar to California, he says. Which has a lot of small farmers in one area, which makes it unique for products. When he came from California in the early 2000s, Swank Farms was one of the small farms in the area making noise. And he liked what he heard.

When Jodi and Darrin Swank started the West Palm Beach GreenMarket 21 years ago in Downtown West Palm Beach, they couldn’t have imagined that their 20-acre farm would grow in popularity beyond the market, which they ran for 19 years, selling their produce every Saturday. “It was fantastic,” says Jodi, who says she met the best people and the best following. The WPB Green Market always ended in mid-April. So, seven years ago, the Swanks decided to bring it up to their farm for about six to seven weeks to finish out their growing season and still allow their customers to get the Swank produce.

“Darrin Swank has a real talent for growing a nice product and his style is very natural,” says Max. “In the early days, when I met Darrin and Jodi, the first thing I did was to put their names on my menus and I talked about it with other chefs. Other chefs will look at your menus and look at what you’re doing and when they see “farms” they’ll investigate what you’re doing differently.”

Darrin was growing a great variety of products for chefs. He and Jodi learned quickly that having a small specialty product like that, you don’t deal with retailers or whole-sellers, you deal directly with chefs and farmers markets. So, they sell directly to the customer and directly to chefs, allowing them to set their prices and sale to be profitable.

Chefs like that too. Over the past twenty years, Swank Farms has been producing great products for the local market. And



Diane Cordeau and Carl Frost, the owners of Kai Kai Farms.

that just means better restaurants and better food quality for all of us eating in the area.

The True Farm-to-Table Explosion

There’s something special that happens when the person who grew the foods you love hands it to you, and you get to shake the hand that feeds you. Jodi Swank considers fall not just harvest time, but the “perfect time to gather your friends and family for some outdoor fun,” since it kicks off the beginning of the season.

Even before the pandemic, farms like Swank Farms and Kai Kai Farms were hosting a series of dinners and cooking classes, inviting top chefs to cook the meals for a group of 50 or more, with great success. “We did the first dinner at their [Swank] farm,” says Max. “I wanted to celebrate what they’re doing because all of that becomes sustainable—it keeps them growing, and us too.”

The true farm-to-table explosion happened quickly across the country, as there’s a transparency in itself that attracts people. That’s the farm saying, “Hey, we’re proud of what we produce, come and take a look at our garden. We invite you to have an exquisite

straight-from-the-vine four-course dining experience with delicious foods like greens, mushrooms, avocados, grilled corn, and heirloom tomatoes, which are often paired with regionally-sourced cheeses, meats and wines, and live music that’s enticing and welcoming.”

That’s great because people like to see where their food is coming from and how it has been handled. And then the other piece of that is just the connection with “this isn’t just about this green that we’re eating on a plate and we have no idea where it came from.”

When you go to a farm and you can see the process of how foods are grown and harvested—the whole connection becomes elevated. The same for the chefs and farmers, who have tremendous fun creating special menus with beautiful place settings for their guests, and the chance to connect with a fun group of diners for an especially memorable experience.

If you want to sit down to an alfresco farm dinner or take a cooking class this fall, check out Kai Kai Farms at 8006 SW Kanner Hwy, Indiantown, or Swank Farms at 14311 N Rd, Loxahatchee. “Y’all have fun now, y’hear?”