

Baltimore style

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DAVID STUCK (3)

Clockwise, from left: Chef Mark Levy of Magdalena prepares an oyster at Farm to Chef; Topside serves a sweet potato eclair with chili chocolate and marshmallow; and The Food Market offers a little brisket dinner with potatoes and carrots. All three restaurants are in Baltimore.

FRESH FROM THE FARM

Celebrating 10 years of a foodie event

BY JESSICA GREGG

For the 10th annual Farm to Chef cooking competition earlier this fall, David and Laura Alima, owners of The Charmery ice cream shops in Baltimore, were paired with Oak Spring Farm, an organic vegetable and fruit farm in Free-land that feels like it's within shouting distance of the Pennsylvania border.


"They gave us a list of what they had,"

David says. "And they had all these beautiful herbs."

From them, The Charmery team crafted a cheesecake ice cream with African blue basil and lemon balm served with a graham cracker and thyme crumble. Herby, flavorful and definitely farm-inspired.

This is the part of the job that David

loves the best, flavor creation, "the most fun I've ever had," he says. "I can't believe this is my job."

Laura was part of the first Farm to Chef, which is an annual fundraiser for the Baltimore-based TasteWise Kids, and has missed only one of the events in the past decade. The first event paired 12 restaurants with 12 farms; in comparison, 



Through TasteWise Kids, students visit farms like this one, learn where food comes from and how to make it.

this year's event, held at The Assembly Room, partnered 27 restaurants with 27 farms. As it has grown, it has remained one of Laura's favorites. "A lot of the chefs bring it every year," she says, "and the guests get to benefit from that."

When the event started, "farm to table" was a hot term for the latest culinary movement. Now it's a trend that fills the nation's plates and is a regular part of local menus in restaurants that can easily source fresh ingredients from nearby growers.

"We got lucky," says TasteWise's executive director Wendy Jeffries about an event that has blossomed with the national trend. "Baltimore is a special place when it comes to food. We are lucky that farms are so close, the chefs here are very talented and they like to give back."

Farmers & Chefs

For this year's event, Mark Levy, executive chef at Baltimore's Magdalena, partnered with Sapidus Farms, an oyster farm in Heathsville, Virginia, to create a fried oyster with a gluten-free corn crust made with rice flour, corn starch and, of course, buttermilk. The oyster was topped with a habanero hot sauce with beet peppers, honey and French curry. It was photo-worthy finger food and one that got guests returning for second



helpings. (In this state, does one ever really stop at just one oyster?)

Levy, who is from England, stood behind his oyster bar and contemplated the day's cuisine. "I've always said to people, I don't know when food didn't come from

the farm," he says.

For him, farm to table now means "stretching out" to suppliers beyond the Mid-Atlantic, but at the same time, he has gone from working with one or two local suppliers to five or six now, depending on



DAVID STUCK

Chris Amendola, chef at Baltimore's foraged., garnishes a meatless parmesan dish made not with chicken but an orange-colored chicken mushroom.

the season. That's what's exciting.

"They are starting to develop their product, and their variety has improved," Levy says. "They are getting it to us better as well."

Next to him, Chris Amendola, chef at foraged., served a chicken-less chicken parmesan made with what's called a chicken mushroom, a bright orange fungus the color of a highlighter and which grows on dead trees. Large, vibrant and reminiscent of sea coral, the mushrooms sat on the table next to servings of his entrée in a cool ingredient display and a colorful shout-out to Mother Nature. It was a crowd pleaser, too — the chicken-less chicken parmesan won the Judge's Award and the People's Choice Award that night for best vegetarian dish.

Despite leading a kitchen that serves "hyper seasonal" cuisine that very much relies on local producers, Amendola, like Levy, is not terribly keen on the term "farm to table."

"I hate that verbiage," he says. "It's lost its meaning." Some farmers support local markets and some don't, he adds.

Farm to table has always meant serving what's available, and there are factors beyond season and weather that affect that availability. At Ida B's Table, the chefs served sorghum-glazed pork

jowls provided by Pahl's Hogs. Before soul food was soul food, it was Southern food "and it was slave food," says Tonya Thomas, who owns the restaurant with her husband, chef David Thomas, and is known for the bread puddings, biscuits and hand pies that she creates as the restaurant's pastry chef.

Pork jowls were a part of the pig that farm and plantation owners didn't want to eat, so they gave them to the slaves, she says. The Thomases serve the jowls with black-eyed peas and okra chips and are readily picked up by diners.

Food Is Fun

"Food is fun" is one of TasteWise's three core values. The other two are "use your hands" and "ask an expert" — three solid tenets for kids about to have a good time, as they stir up a vinaigrette with a chef. Each year, the organization, which is run by four part-time staffers and lots of volunteers, introduces about 4,000 fourth-graders to farmers and chefs who teach them where their food comes from and why eating healthy is so important. The kids learn about agriculture, nutrition and food-industry careers.

"We want the kids to discover things for themselves," Jeffries says.

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Other food events

Like to go to events for a good cause or just a good meal? Here are a few suggestions.

- Farm to Chef, tastewisekids.org
- Empty Bowls, St. Vincent de Paul Baltimore, vincentbaltimore.org/emptybowls
- OktoBEARfest, The Maryland Zoo, marylandzoo.org
- Santé: A Taste of Baltimore, National Kidney Foundation, kidneymd.org
- Taste of Maryland, Catholic Charities, catholiccharities-md.org

And here are four that are all about the food

- Charm City Night Market — A one-night celebration of what once was Baltimore's Chinatown, this popular and art-filled event also has more than 20 food stalls, every September. charmcitynightmarket.com
- The Emporium — Delicious dishes from all over the country are served up Nov. 8-10 in Washington, D.C. theemporium.com
- The Maryland Seafood Festival is held every September in Annapolis, mdseafoodfestival.com, and the Maryland Wine Festival is held every September at the Carroll County Farm Museum. marylandwine.org

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Fresh from the Farm

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The program actually began more than 20 years ago as part of the American Institute of Wine & Food's Days of Taste program. Nationally, Julia Child was the ambassador. Five years ago, the AIWF reorganized, and TasteWise formed to run the Days of Taste and other "food-wise" programs here for kids in Baltimore City and Baltimore, Harford and Howard counties, Jeffries says.

In the small world of Smalltimore, she actually attended the very first Farm to Chef as a guest. "I was like, 'This is a fun fundraiser,'" she says. So fun that it motivated her to volunteer for the second event. The event is always held on a Monday night, when many restaurants are closed, so guests get to meet the chefs—and also the farmers.

"Other events focus more on the culinary, the chef side, but we focus on both because that's a big focus in our education, where food comes from" she says. "This is truly an authentic version of what we are all about."

While wine, beer and spirits were always served at the event, eight years ago Farm to Chef featured its first Maryland-based spirit, Sloop Betty Vodka from Blackwater Distilling in Stevensville.

This year, The Elk Room in Baltimore teamed with Frederick-based McClintock Distilling for a coffee and gin cocktail infused with chicory, rose hips, hibiscus and other botanicals and made on-site in a tea syphon that steamed and sputtered with chemistry-set perfection.

MISCellaneous Distilling in Mount Airy paired with The Bluebird Cocktail Room for a drink made with rum, fermented pineapple salsa, lime, cinnamon bitters and tropical green tea from Wight Tea Co. in Baltimore.

"We wanted something that would capture that late-summer, early-fall vibe," explains Bluebird bartender Tammy Bouma.

Jeffries loves that attitude. "Food is part of our everyday lives, but we don't always think about it," she says. "It's fun to get excited about it." □

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