



CALGARY HERALD

In praise of farmers

Harvest meal recognizes agriculture's contribution to the dinner table

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Urban cooks usually don't see the garden from their kitchen windows. For most city dwellers, the closest they get to the field is a weekly stroll through the farmers' market.

Not so for Andy Bujak. This past year, the young River Cafe cook has spent his Tuesdays in the garden. Far from the madding crowd, Bujak has hoed in his bare feet, hand-pulled weeds, prayed for raging rivers to abate, plucked peas and daylilies.

It is part of an ongoing partnership between Highwood Crossing Farm's Penny Marshall and the River Cafe's kitchen staff. Under the deal, Aldersyde farm produces organic vegetables, flowers and herbs exclusively for River Cafe's seasonal menus.

"I enjoy the head space and peace and quiet -- just being part of the cycle. I enjoy having my hands in the dirt," says Bujak.

"Seeing the vegetables grow, bringing them back to work, I have a greater appreciation for them and pass it on to the servers. It is how food makes its way from the seed right to the table."

Those vegetables will be front and centre at River Cafe's upcoming annual harvest dinner.

Chef Scott Pohorelic plans to pass out big family-style bowls of carrots, beans, beets and heaps of potatoes in symphony with platters of meats -- air-dried bison, pastured poultry, wild boar sausage -- from his favourite suppliers.

Crowning the feast will be a sugar pumpkin pudding cake. The recipe for it is featured at right.

Sal Howell, owner of River Cafe, calls this annual festival of food her favourite time of year.

"It is our chance to say thank you in public to the people who sustain us," she explains.

Through the decades, farm and town women have loaded tables in church basements with evidence of their families' summer wages and work. Simple stuff, with the flavour shining through: roasted turkeys; pink hams; soft buns; the first pickles of the year; salads of green cabbage; red-skinned spuds; jelly salads alight with shreds of carrot.

That same bonhomie envelopes the crowded dining room at this annual River Cafe event. Each table is anchored by a local grower and all the diners have a chance to get closer to the garden and learn more about picking peas and sweet-talking recalcitrant lambs.

Pohorelic is hoping to welcome some of his favourite producers, although he says that for many farmers, Sunday is an inviolate family day.

Among others, he is expecting prime potato grower Rosemary Wotske and her partner Robert Boschman from Poplar Bluff east of Calgary; Avalon Range's certified organic buffalo rancher Guenter Weiland and Nadine Waddell of Pine Terra, where she tends certified organic cattle.

What is important about this chance to meet the men and women behind the food we eat?

Pohorelic pauses and finally says slowly, "Cooks understand how to work really hard. We feel kinship for farmers when we see their hard work. It is respect for someone else's toil and the love and effort they have put into it.

"I used to be one of those cooks who ordered food, nameless and faceless, from a computer, just an ingredient.

"Now, I hate to see our heart-and-soul food delivered by any server who doesn't care. We want the farmers' work, and ours, to be honoured."

Tickets for the dinner are \$110 (plus GST) and include food, wine, gratuities and a \$30 donation to the Community Kitchen Souperstars program, which teaches children about food and nutrition.

Call the River Cafe at 261-7670 to book a seat at the harvest table.

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Sugar Pumpkin Pudding Cake With Goat Milk Caramel and Lemon Verbena Ice Cream

Scott Pohorelic of River Cafe uses goat's milk from Fairwinds Farm to make the Latin treat known as cajeta, then uses the caramel as a base for his cake. Sugar pumpkins are small, sweet pumpkins. You can also use canned pumpkin puree in this recipe.

Goat milk caramel (cajeta)

8 cups (2 L) goat milk

3 cups (750 mL) white sugar

1/4 tsp (1 mL) baking soda

1/2 cinnamon stick

In one heavy-bottomed pot, combine half of the milk and the sugar. Simmer slowly until caramel coloured. This may take up to one hour. In another pot, warm the remaining milk with the

baking soda and the cinnamon stick. Slowly add the warm milk into the caramel coloured milk and continue to cook until thickened, approximately 20 minutes. Keep warm. Makes 2 cups (500 mL).

Sugar Pumpkin Pudding Cake

1 to 2 sugar pumpkins

3/4 cup (180 mL) melted butter

1/4 cup (60 mL) molasses

1 1/2 cups (375 mL) roasted sugar pumpkin puree

6 eggs

1 3/4 cups (430 mL) all-purpose flour

1/2 cup (125 mL) white sugar

1 cup (250 mL) golden sugar

1 1/2 tsp (7.5 mL) ground ginger

1 1/2 tsp (7.5 mL) ground cinnamon

1 tsp (5 mL) ground nutmeg

1 1/2 tsp (7.5 mL) baking powder

1 cup (250 mL) Goat milk caramel (see preceding recipe)

To make the puree, cut the pumpkins in half and remove the seeds. Roast at 350 degrees F (180 degrees C) until tender. Scoop the meat out of the skins and puree in a food processor. Reduce the oven's temperature to 325 degrees F (160 degrees C).

Mix together the butter, molasses, pumpkin puree and eggs. Sift or stir together the dry ingredients in a separate bowl. Fold the wet mixture into the dry and mix only to combine.

Ladle 2 tbsp (30 mL) of caramel into each of 8 8-oz (250 mL)

ramekins to cover the bottoms. Fill each ramekin 3/4 full with the batter.

Make a water bath by placing a folded kitchen cloth in the bottom of a large baking pan and placing the ramekins on the cloth. Pour in hot tap water until water comes halfway up the ramekins. Bake for 30 to 40 minutes. Cakes are done when they spring back when gently pressed. Cut around each cake with a paring knife and remove, upside-down, onto individual plates. Top with a scoop of ice-cream and some extra caramel.

Lemon Verbena Ice Cream

Use fresh spearmint, basil, star anise, thyme, cinnamon or any other flavour you can't find lemon verbena.

1 1/2 cups (375 mL) milk

1 1/2 cups (375 mL) whipping cream

1 1/2 cups (375 mL) lightly packed lemon verbena leaves

4 egg yolks

1/2 cup (125 mL) white sugar

1 tsp (5 mL) lemon juice

In a heavy-bottomed pot on low heat, bring the milk, cream and lemon verbena leaves to a simmer. In a mixing bowl, combine the egg yolks, sugar and the lemon juice.

Strain the lemon verbena leaves out of the cream and pour the liquid into the mixing bowl while stirring. Place the mixing bowl over a pot of boiling water and continue to stir until the mix thickens slightly.

Be careful not to exceed a temperature of 185 degrees F (90 degrees C). Strain the mixture and cool. Let stand covered overnight in the fridge and then freeze in an ice-cream maker the next day. Serves 8.

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