

A Celebration of Local Agriculture

It is a profound experience to go to the table and recognize ingredients that bring the face of the farmer and their care of the land to mind as the eater dishes it onto their plate. The Valley Roots Food Hub Season Kick Off held Saturday at Frances Vander Stappen's Grille at the Cattails Golf Course provided this exquisite experience. The event at the City-owned Grille was a marrying of a visionary chef with a visionary local food movement.

The event was a celebration of the Valley Roots Food Hub's 2016 growing season where the Hub provides a local and year round aggregation and distribution service to the community. The Hub, a tenant in the White Rock Specialties packing plant in Mosca just completed its first year of operation. The event was an opportunity for community members to meet participating producers who provide local product to the food hub's weekly offerings. Sheldon Rocky an owner at White Rock Specialties is proud to house the Valley Roots Food Hub and reflects that "our two farms White Mountain Farm and Rockey Farms have been advocates and supporting local for generations."

Kris Gosar of the Gosar family in Monte Vista is another pioneer in local foods. His family has been producing fine food since Grandpa Frank came from southern Austria in 1900. Now the fifth generation of sausage makers are producing European style sausage in their organically certified USDA-inspected plant built on the ranch as well as milling Mountain Mama flours and grains. "The connection between making something and the end user is really a beautiful link. Food has become so disconnected and through this idea it becomes connected." He related a story where he delivered his sausage to Mancos. His customer saw the logo on his shirt and asked are you part of the Gosar thing? "You have got to realize this is a staple in our family. There is a huge distance between the grower and the consumer and the Hub is filling a wonderful role. We can figure this out."

Trudi Kretsinger of KW Farms grass-fed beef operation agrees, "the thing that doesn't get told is the story of the San Luis Valley." Kretsinger shared that story at the microphone Saturday night. "It takes all of us to return to a more sane and equitable local food system that builds our food economy. Thank-you to those growing the food and thank-you to those going out of their way to support your local producers."

The nation's food supply has increasingly become anonymous, faceless and storyless. Currently, only a minute portion of the food offerings in the San Luis Valley come from native soil. The nascent Valley Roots Food Hub is working hard to reverse this phenomenon. The hub exists to recreate the connections between the consumer and the farmer, the food and the story of how it is grown as well as sowing local dollars into the local economy. People need a farmer three times a day - a relationship that is more often seen as packages in a grocery store these days. Consumers can vote every day

with their wallets and their forks for the kind of food system they would like and many attendees to the event are choosing their beef and potatoes and vegetables from the San Luis Valley.

Sign up for a 14-week fresh CSA box which stands for Community Supported Agriculture was a hot item as San Luis Valley Local Foods Coalition staff Marlayna Martinez and Julie Mordecai and Board member Lurette Frost enrolled customers in the 2016 season's program. The idea for a CSA is that the consumer invests in the harvest at a time when the farmer or in this case the supporting hub, is low on cash flow and then the customer reaps the bounty throughout the season.

Valley Roots Food Hub General Manager Nick Chambers was delighted as more than 100 enthusiasts turned up to support the 2016 growing season Hub Kick Off event, "to have this many producers in the room is special and to break bread together bonds and unites us." He likened the City-owned restaurant and the non-profit-run Valley Roots Food Hub aggregation and distribution of locally-grown fare, to the commons – "The commons is where the true community wealth lies. It holds our society and our culture and our democracy. It is how value is created, assigned and managed creating a future that is community-derived and community-based and you have to nurture it."

Chef Vander Stappen has held to a vision where her ingredients come directly from the surrounding landscape complete with the stories and relationships that comes with it. "I know we can create a quality of life here that is rich with good local food, good friends and that our food dollars are sown into our family farmers pockets."

Vander Stappen's menu reads like a local map; Frontier Trout Farms Rilette with Lazy Ewe Chevre Cheese, Charcuterie with Lucas Salazar's Summer Sausages of Manassa and Del Norte's Lazy Ewe 2 Bar Gouda and Pepperjack Cheese with Cherry Chutney, Mountain Mama Crepes with Cherries Jubilee, Pickled Beets and Carrots from Sol Mountain Farms of South Fork, Wilted Greens and Creamed Onions from Monte Vista's Brightwater Farms, Organic Baby "Living Lettuce" Salad with Roasted Beets, Butternut Squash from the Arkansas Valley Organic Growers and Pepitas, With Sunflower Fresh Herb Vinaigrette, Mosca's White Mountain Quinoa Pilaf with Dried Cherries, Carrots, Shallots and Absmeier Garlic of Alamosa, KW Farms Thai Style Meatballs from grass fed beef in Alamosa County, Elena Miller ter Kuile's Cactus Hill Lamb Meatballs from Capulin with Yogurt and Chutney, Lucas Salazar Tasso Ham from Manassa and Green Chile powdered by Antonito's Tamale Connection, Ab Yoder's free range deviled egg salad, fragrant White Rock Specialties mashed potatoes complete with the texture of the nutritious skins, Eugene Jaquez's famous silky bolita beans watered by the age-old acequia system in San Luis and the fresh herbs and the first crisp radishes out of Friend Darr's gardens near Mosca.

Brightwater hydroponic farm operators and brothers Andrew and Robert Toews appreciated the chance to get together and promote what they do, "Our lettuce is local,

fresh, premium and year round. Our greenhouse is warm in the winter and cool in the summer. It is enjoyable and rewarding” which was evidenced in the bright green veggie dishes brightening the table in mid-May.

“This is major, it is like the microbes in the soil, we are making something healthier by working together as evidenced in the beauty of this food tonight. We have multiple farms bringing their product to the center where it needs to be,” stated Hooper farmer Mary Carhartt.

Producers Jenny Knoblauch brought her delectable cheeses for guests to taste and Alex, Igor and Serge the Ukrainian brains behind Three Guys Farms were touting their homemade Belgium waffles and cheesecakes, tomatoes and new berry farm.

Local beverages abounded too. Three Barrel Beers with core ale names like Trashy Blonde and Burnt Toast were available as well as Colorado Winery’s Vino Salida Wines on hand. Guests finished off their meal with a premium Solar Roast Coffee from Pueblo.

And then you have producers like Kevin Off of Del Norte who just love their animals, “I love to raise bison, I love buffalo, I love watching their spirit.” “When you hear from someone like Off who loves his animals and raises them with care on the land, there is no sizzle of concern quietly running through my synapses as to chemicals and their nebulous safety or human and animal suffering that produced the food several transactions back, said Liza Marron Director of the San Luis Valley Local Foods Coalition. “These local foods provide extra-ordinary taste. I am tasting the healthy soils giving to the plant, giving to the animal, giving to the chef, giving to me.”

The Valley Roots Food Hub would like to thanks its sponsors to the event; Seasons Café in Salida, White Rock Specialties, Soil Health Services, Rocky Mountain Farmers Union, Three Guys Farm, Gosar Ranch, The Rio Grande Farm Park, KW Farms, The Bearded Lady, O&V Printing and the Grille at the Cattails Golf Course.