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Chew On This

Jamie Edlin: 'The Starter Farm' puts down roots in the Santa Ynez Valley

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Local farmer and owner of The Starter Farm in Santa Ynez, Mark Donofrio, greets Saturday morning customers.

Mark Donofrio thinks he was born with a farming gene. As a child he would help his grandfather in the backyard garden in New Jersey. He was constantly fascinated with the fact he could plant a tiny seed that would grow into a tomato or zucchini.

His fascination with farming turned into a passion when he began growing vegetables in a community garden in downtown Los Angeles for his then-restaurant Larchmont Grill.

That passion led Mark to the Santa Ynez Valley in 2011 where he and his husband purchased a second home on a five-acre property with mountains as a backdrop. He named that land "The Starter Farm," and shortly thereafter sold his L.A. restaurant for a life in Santa Ynez.

Mark first planted specialty herbs and vegetables on The Starter Farm that included a variety of heirloom tomatoes. He began selling to a few restaurants in the Valley, and eventually added more crops. A brood of chickens. A herd of goats. And finally a 1/2 acre devoted to flowers.

The Starter Farm has since grown into that small-scale farm and promising young business Mark had envisioned.

"I'm lucky to be able to do what I want and make a little money at it. That's not to say it isn't hard work – shoveling dirt, putting in irrigation lines, repairing trellises," Mark explained, as we traipsed through rows of vegetables on one side, and flowers on the other.

His fall crops include kale, broccoli, carrots, radishes, turnips, cauliflower, cabbages, persimmons, all of which can tolerate a bit of frost.

Mark occasionally sells his produce at **The Bakery FarmStand** in Los Olivos on Saturday mornings, where there is always a bucket of flowers decorating his table. Once when the flowers sold out before the vegetables, he remembers that it was easy to recognize what his customers wanted.

When many long-time growers turned from flowers to cannabis – cannabis being a more lucrative business – it left a void in the local flower market, and Mark saw an opportunity to fill that void with a focus on rare varieties.

“I’m a small-scale farmer and I’ve never been interested in growing an ordinary rose,” said Mark. “The big commercial farmers can do that at a cheaper price and so consumers will buy from them before they’re going to buy from me. What a lot of people now want are architectural cuttings and stems that florists once used as fillers, but make a dramatic statement on their own. That’s my specialty.”

His approach to growing flowers and other crops has everything to do with permaculture farming, a term that stems from the words “permanent” and “agriculture.” Permaculture is all about sustainability and the creation of a self-sufficient farming system that respects the earth and works with nature, rather than trying to tame nature.

“You grow vegetables. You plant a row of flowers next to them. The flowers attract beneficial insects. You don’t have to use pesticides. The predator insects eat the pests,” Mark explained. “It’s a natural ecosystem that simply makes good sense.”

Armed with a pair of scissors, I cut my way through rows of flowers and exited with a bouquet of unique curly chrysanthemums in varying shades of pink.

Later, we shook the dirt off of our boots and continued our conversation at **Ellie’s Tap & Vine** in downtown Santa Ynez, where earlier that day Mark had dropped off a variety of fresh vegetables. They would all find their place in owner/chef Joy Reinhardt’s ever-changing menu.



Joy Reinhardt, chef and owner of **Ellie's Tap & Vine** in downtown Santa Ynez, stands in her kitchen with The Starter Farm owner/operator Mark Donofrio after receiving a fresh assortment of vegetables from his farm.

Joy grew up bringing the farm to the table thanks to her mother, Ellie, who insisted on buying her vegetables from neighboring produce markets. When Joy's colorful career evolved into *cheffing*, she naturally cultivated relationships with local farmers.

“Buying from farmers that you know, makes the food more meaningful. What makes Mark special is that he's willing to grow crops that he probably never thought of growing, but what his customers are requesting,” Joy detailed. “He invites input from me and it makes for a relationship that will be lasting.”

Today's delivery from The Starter Farm includes sorrel which will go with the oven-roasted halibut; carrots to pair perfectly with the short ribs; and fuyu persimmons which will take center stage in the salad.

Joy set the salad in front of us.

Joy's Persimmon Salad

- 4 cups mixed baby greens
- 1 Red onion thinly-sliced
- 3 Ripe fuyu persimmons peeled and cut in cubes
- ½ cup roasted Marcona Almonds
- 2-4 oz. chèvre Cheese
- Coarse sea salt
- Fresh cracked pepper
- Fresh parsley and oregano finely chopped
- Dressing
- Juice from one half fresh lemon
- 6 Tablespoons Extra Virgin Olive Oil

Once salad is composed and dressed, drizzle with balsamic vinegar reduction. Serves 4.

The colors, the flavors, the textures all married together magically. The persimmons with their brilliant orange skin, crisp apple-like texture and rich fruit, complemented by the buttery marcona almonds, the sweet red onions, the tender baby kale, and the earthy goat cheese, came together in a simple but remarkable salad.

And yes, the dish is even more meaningful when indulging with the farmer – and the chef.