



FARMING FOR CHEFS

*When the people who cook your food team up with those who grow it,
delicious things can happen*

BY ALEX JONES □ PHOTOGRAPHS BY KRISTEN TEREBESI



A view of Blue
Moon Acres farm
across rows of
young lettuces.

Much has been written about the star chefs whose creative cooking has made Philadelphia one of the best restaurant cities in America. Less has been said about the farmers growing the standout ingredients that make many of their menu items possible. The fact is that chefs and farmers frequently work closely together, collaborating on what to plant and when to harvest. Often the most desirable crops for chefs are the trickiest to grow, requiring serious TLC on the part of an attentive and committed farmer. The challenge pays off, though, in terms of both the premium prices restaurants can pay for these ingredients and the satisfaction that comes from cultivating items that once seemed impossible for the region. The relationships between these chef-farmer duos are an integral part of what makes food in Philly so great right now. Here's an inside look at how they work.

Green Meadow Farm

When Glenn and Karen Brendle started Green Meadow Farm in 1981, there was no farm-to-table movement in Philadelphia. Since then, the Brendle family has built their business on supplying the city's top restaurants. In the early days, though, chefs were slow to catch on that the best products could be grown so close to home.

"It took years of building trust with chefs," says Ian Brendle, Karen and Glenn's son and business partner. Glenn was ahead of his time, growing rare heirloom varieties that stood out in flavor and quality. Varieties like the richly flavored Mortgage Lifter tomato and the tiny, fragrant Charentais melon were uncommon back then. Soon, however, the Brendles had a reputation among ambitious chefs for their standout produce.

Today, Green Meadow offers more than 80 different fruits, vegetables, herbs and legumes to more than 100 restaurants in and around the city. Its usual offerings are pretty special: They include Hosenshank pears, a local cider variety from the farm's 250-year-old tree; Tromboncino summer squash, with a flavor similar to sweet corn; and fresh Orca shelling beans, whose skin is patterned in black-and-white splotches.

Even more remarkable are the banana leaves, which chefs often use as a wrapping to steam or grill meat or fish. For a short time each summer, Green Meadows even offers local bananas. A biofuel-powered greenhouse allows the farm to defy nature by growing tropical fruit in southeastern Pennsylvania in a sustainable way.

"There is a huge difference in both flavor and texture in a tree-ripened banana," says Brendle. The texture is creamier and the taste is more pronounced than in store-bought bananas, which are picked green, shipped long distances, and ripened in ethylene gas. When the fruit ripens on the tree, usually early summer, the farmers have to act fast. The skins split quickly, and ants will invade to get to the sweet flesh. These bananas have made their way onto plates at the likes of farm-to-table restaurants such as Russet, where pastry chef Kristin Wood turns this anomaly—a Pennsylvania-grown banana—into a truly local dessert. With last summer's bananas, Wood roasts the fruits with brown sugar and rum, then adds them to a vanilla-caramel base to make an ice cream that is served with hickory-nut cookies

(naturally, the cream and the nuts are also sourced through Green Meadow). "We have been using Green Meadow products for over nine years and love working with them," says Wood. "At Russet, we buy as many ingredients as possible from people we know personally, because we know that's the best way to get the highest quality."

The rapport the Brendles have developed with chefs over the years influences what they grow. Chef Joe Cicala of Le Virtu in East Passyunk has worked with the Brendles since 2010. What the team at Le Virtu can't bring in directly from Abruzzo, the region in Italy that inspired the restaurant, Cicala buys from local farms like Green Meadow.

Cicala and the Brendles have collaborated to bring Abruzzo staples to Lancaster County. Cicala prizes a particular variety of red garlic he brought back from a trip for its pungent, fresh taste, but he and the Brendles estimate that it will take them six to eight years to establish a commercial crop at Green Meadow. Although Cicala won't get to cook with a local version of the garlic for several more years, the wait is worth it—for chef and farmer alike.

Peppers transition from the Mediterranean to the mid-Atlantic a little more easily; Ian Brendle grows more than 30 different varieties that go into a hot-pepper mix he dries in his barn. Hot peppers, along with garlic and olive oil, are the backbone of Abruzzi cuisine, and a little of the mix ends up in almost every dish. Cicala's pasta dishes are served with *peperoni cruschi*, literally "crispy pepper," on the side—along with scissors diners can use to trim slices of this dried and fried pepper onto their pasta.

The relationship between chef and farmer is one of give and take; neither can exist or excel without the support of the other. Chefs are willing to pay a steep price for specialty produce items grown at a high level of quality, which helps farmers like the Brendles keep their operations profitable.

"The only way that we are able to grow these different types of things is because Philadelphia is such a wonderfully chef-driven city," says Ian Brendle. Otherwise, he adds, "we wouldn't be able to do it."

Blue Moon Acres

If you've ever been served a plate garnished with pretty, Lilliputian greens, they may well have been grown at Blue Moon Acres Farm in Buckingham, Pennsylvania. Jim and Kathy Lyons started growing these chef-friendly microgreens there in 1993 with an eye toward wholesaling the tiny sprouts to fine-dining restaurants. At the time, it was a novel idea for area farms.

Since then, the Lyons family has built a small empire around their organic microgreens, baby salad greens and vegetables, with on-farm stores in Buckingham and in Pennington, New Jersey, and a retail presence at many other venues, such as the Doylestown Food Co-op. Their wholesale accounts stretch from New York to Philly. Blue Moon was one of the first local farms to grow tropical crops like turmeric and Hawaiian ginger, which chefs prize for its gentle flavor and tender, tuberous flesh.

In 2013, with their reputation as innovators of organic agriculture firmly intact, the Lyons family, along with Pennington farm manager



Fork's Chef John Patterson



Scott Morgan, did something that, as far as they knew, had never been done before: They grew rice in New Jersey. “There’s not one chef I didn’t get a surprised reaction from when I told them that we could grow rice,” says Ashley Lyons Putman, Jim and Kathy’s daughter and Blue Moon’s sales manager. “They were staring at us in disbelief. It was really something that chefs wanted to get their hands on.” The 2014 crop went on sale in December and was sold out by March.

What’s even more remarkable about Blue Moon’s rice is that it’s not grown the usual way—in a paddy flooded with several inches of water—but in a dry field, just like other grain. The farm offers short, medium, and long-grain varieties in brown and white—suitable for sushi, risotto, and pilaf, respectively—as well as a sticky, inky-colored black variety that will stain white rice lavender when the two are cooked together.

While the rice was initially in short supply—New York City’s Gramercy Tavern snapped up most of the crop that first year—Blue Moon has started retailing one-pound bags at its farm stores. Chefs across the region have had a chance to wrap their heads around the ingredient and are now incorporating it into their menus.

Last winter, chef Eli Collins of Pub & Kitchen in Rittenhouse Square experimented with a wintry stew. In his dish, the Blue Moon rice was no afterthought or blank canvas: It had a starring role alongside the meatballs, vegetables and savory pork broth. “The rice’s flavor is almost peanutty—it has an amazing nuttiness and earthiness to it,” says Collins. “I’ve never cooked rice like that before.”

“There’s a great synergy in working with chefs,” says Ashley Lyons Putman. “We realized this early on, growing microgreens. They’ll come to you with something that you’ve never even heard of before. It’s fun to do that research, try something, and send it to the chef [for] feedback [and hear], ‘This is exactly what I was looking for, and I had so much trouble finding it.’”

But rice farming is not without headaches. While Blue Moon has been pleased with its yields so far, the product is expensive to grow and process, retailing at \$10 per pound. The grains are stored, then cleaned and milled to order on specialized equipment, which results in two byproducts: rice bran, also called *nuka* (the brown part of brown rice), and broken rice. At the end of the season, the farm offers the broken rice to chefs, who can use it to make congee or rice grits, a classic Southern dish.


Finding a use for the bran, however, requires pickling skills that might be unknown to even the most avid fermenter. *Nukazuke* are a type of Japanese lacto-fermented pickle that’s made by roasting the *nuka*, then adding salt, water and optional flavoring agents like pepper, ginger or kombu. This forms the *nukadoko*, or pickling bed, in which vegetables are buried to ferment. The mixture must be aerated and turned by hand at least once a day. “Rather than tasting the vegetables, you taste the *nuka*” to check its progress, says John Patterson, chef de cuisine at Fork in Old City. “If it’s bland, you can add more salt. If it’s too salty, you can add more *nuka* to even it out.”

At Fork, devotion to the local goes beyond the kitchen: The site hosts a weekly mini-farmers’ market featuring Bucks County’s Plowshare Farms. Patterson works with Plowshare to rescue any leftover veggies, which are pickled to a pungent, bright flavor and crisp texture in the *nukadoko*. This symbiosis shows the cycle of Fork’s relationship with its purveyors through the pickles, which make their way to a crudité platter that’s served during dinner, perhaps alongside crisps made from Blue Moon rice.

“The *nuka* pickle is a way that we can present some of those ingredients and have it [continue] to evolve,” Patterson says. “It’s utilizing



TOP TO BOTTOM: Ian Brendle of Green Meadow Farms; Ashley Putnam, Blue Moon Acres, nests a handful of rice for a close-up of the two-toned grains; Country time farm porkbelly porchetta style, endive, red onions, arugula from Le Virtu.



A biofuel-powered greenhouse allows the farm to defy nature by growing tropical fruit in southeastern Pennsylvania in a sustainable way.

Imported Pugliese stracciatella, English peas, pancetta vinaigrette at Le Virtu

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