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FROM YOUR OWN BACKYARD

Thanks to a slew of local farmers, Birmingham offers the best of city and country living

BY AUDREY MCDONALD



SNOW'S BEND FARM

Growing up in rural South Alabama, Citronelle to be exact, I spent many a hot summer day shelling peas by the bushel until my fingers were a delicious shade of purple that took days to wash off. We ate syrup made from sugarcane my grandfather grew and cobbles overflowing with blackberries from the roadside. Greens, pears, quince and corn grew in abundance. I was intimately acquainted with the chickens that gave us our eggs since it was my job to gather them from underneath their feathery little bottoms. We gathered, preserved, pickled, blanched, shelled, jellied and canned our way through most of the year.

What we didn't grow, we bought from our friends and neighbors, who, in turn, insured their farm equipment at my mother's insurance agency or deposited their hard-earned money in the bank where my daddy worked. This money paid my grandfather, a barber, for a back-to-school haircut. High and tight, thank you very much. Seeds were bought for next year's crop, along with parts for the John Deere and

other supplies. Ten percent, of course, went to the church. It was the cycle of small-town life.

Then I moved to Birmingham — the big city. There, in the bright lights of the supermarkets were starfruit, mango, chard, jicama, cherries (fresh, mind you, not in scarlet sugar syrup), daikon radish, lemongrass ... foods I'd never seen before and some I'd never even heard of. I was in gastronomic ecstasy. My choices were limited only by the scope of my imagination. And I indulged. I experimented. In short, I ate my way around the world.

AN AWAKENING

A few years after my move, my future husband took me to Highlands Bar & Grill to celebrate my birthday. Sitting there in the absolute lap of luxury sipping an Orange Thing and perusing the menu two thoughts hit me like a ton of bricks. The first was rabbit. There it was right there on the menu in beautiful script. Rabbit. I'm here in the high cotton and they serve rabbit? Like it's a delicacy? That sure is something, I thought.



JONES VALLEY URBAN FARM

The second thought concerned what wasn't on the menu. There was no starfruit. There was no jicama. There were turnips, mustard greens, squash and sweet potato. I was floored. There on the menu of one of the finest restaurants in the city were the staples of my agrarian childhood all done up in their Sunday best. I realized that I had been so blinded by the fluorescent mega-grocery lighting and the exotic array of all things edible that I had completely forgotten the seasonal bounty of my upbringing.

After that dinner, I was on a different sort of mission. It had been easy to suss out fresh vegetables and fruits in rural Mobile County. In fact, most of the time people were trying to give away their excess squash or cucumbers for fear they'd go to waste. But where could I find home-grown and farm-fresh in the city?

I didn't know it at the time, but all along there was a name for my former bucolic way of life — Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, CSA “consists of a community of individuals who pledge support to a farm operation so that the farmland becomes, either legally or spiritually, the community's farm, with the growers and consumers providing mutual support and sharing the risks and

benefits of food production.” Often the consumer purchases actual “shares” of the harvest in advance providing the farmer with the overhead to buy supplies. In return, the shareholder receives a portion of the crop at regularly scheduled intervals. In my hometown, we didn't literally buy shares in our local farms, but our little community did share in the benefits of a good harvest and bemoaned the lean years both nutritionally and economically.

THE MAIN COURSE

CSAs are plentiful in the Birmingham area. Jones Valley Urban Farm (JVUF), the brainchild of Page Allison and Edwin Marty, is, according to

According to legalization advocates, marijuana is the largest cash crop in Alabama (and in Tennessee, South Carolina and North Carolina). SOURCE: DrugScience.org

its website, “a non-profit project in the heart of Birmingham, Alabama, that promotes sustainable agriculture and alternative land-use.” Over the last few years, JVUF has reclaimed several vacant lots around town and turned them into organic farms, including one downtown called The Gardens of Park Place. The Gardens of Park Place provides a place for the residents of downtown to enjoy a little green





QUALITY FARMS ARE ABUNDANT IN ALABAMA.



space, get their hands dirty and learn about nutrition and sustainable agriculture. From June through August, JVUF will open an after-work market of fresh produce and flowers at The Gardens of Park Place every day from 4-6 p.m. During April, May, September and October, the market will be open at the same time, but only on Tuesdays. JVUF also offers CSA boxes featuring a variety of the harvest which can be picked up on a regular basis.

Farming Birmingham's inner city is a fairly recent concept, but the rich soil on the banks of the Black Warrior River has been cultivated for more than 700 years according to artifacts from the Mississippian era found by David Snow and Margaret Ann Toohey of Snow's Bend Farm. With an eye toward preserving the watershed and restoring the surrounding wetlands, Snow and Toohey have been growing everything from arugula to zucchini since 2004. For the 2008 season, CSA shares will be delivered to Birmingham on Thursdays, but you will also be able to find Snow's Bend Farm's produce at Pepper

Place Market starting in May.

A little further down the road from us, in Alpine, are the Gardens of Huckleberry Hill, which also sells shares and half shares of their bounty from late May through September. Sandra Simone and her daughter Tynesha not only have fruits and vegetables for your consideration but Boer goats as well. Yes, goats ... for food. According to Simone, goat meat is lean and healthy and, as I can attest from the ones my grandfather barbecued every 4th of July, delicious. Be forewarned, however, that the kind staff of Huckleberry Hill does not butcher the goat for you. Simone and Tynesha will provide a place for said event to occur, and for the adventurous sort, it might be well worth the drive and the effort.

If it's beef or pork you crave, call Santiago Lima and Karen Wynne of Rosita's Farm in Hartselle. Argentineans are known for producing exceptional beef, and Rosita's Farm is no different. All of Lima's cows and pigs are naturally grown and pasture fed. And at Rosita's, the livestock is sold butchered as well as live. Whether you need ribeyes, hamburger or a slab of ribs, the good folks at Rosita's Farm have everything you need for your next barbecue and will even deliver it to you.

ACCOMPANIMENTS

As I was looking into the issue of locally grown produce, I was surprised to find how many other things were produced in our area. Eggs, for example. At Dunlooken Farms

in Argo you can find Diane Stewart sitting out by her driveway most every day selling eggs laid by Lucy, Ethel, Dolly, Reba and all their free-range friends. Sometimes the eggs are blue, mostly they're brown, but they are always fresh and delicious. Ms. Stewart says she is always glad to give children a tour of her farm, so take the little ones and show them that eggs don't just come from a carton.

What about honey? Bill Hewett started keeping bees as a hobby some 15 years ago and just gave the honey away to a lucky few. Soon word spread about his amazing wildflower honey, and the demand began to exceed the supply. Now, Mr. Hewett, along with his son Geary, maintains 60 hives in Duncanville, and they hope to double that number this spring. Their honey is considered "raw," which means that nothing has been added to or taken away from the honey nor has it been pasteurized. This pure product of Tuscaloosa and Hale Counties can be found in several stores in Tuscaloosa and through the Hewett's website. If you're in the neighborhood, though, just drop by their apiary and get some right from the source.

Belle, a French Pyrenees dairy goat not to be confused with the aforementioned Boer goats, lives in Elmont, Alabama. Belle produces the milk found in the artisan goat cheese made by Fromagerie Belle Chèvre, a company founded nearly 20 years ago by Liz Parnell. On a trip to Paris with her husband, Mrs. Parnell fell so in love with the creamy French chèvres that she couldn't see



living without them on her return to Alabama. Faced with relocating to France or giving up cheesy goodness forever, Liz decided to make chevre herself. Now, Tasia Malakasis, who shares Mrs. Parnell's affinity for cheese, has taken over the helm of the company and continues to produce the same award-winning cheese that has been hailed as an "American Treasure" by internationally-acclaimed cheese expert Steven Jenkins. If you share in Mrs. Parnell's fervor for fromage, Belle Chèvre can be purchased from many local markets and through their website.

The only milk produced, bottled and sold in state is from Wright Dairy just outside of Anniston. A family farm in the true sense, if you stop by Wright Dairy any day between 3 and 4 p.m., you can witness the milking process and get a sample of their ice cream, too. Wright cows are primarily grass fed, free to graze at will and never given hormones, so their products are healthier and tastier than any brand you'll find in the grocery store.

AFTER DINNER DRINKS

Can't you just imagine sitting down to a plate of delectable roasted vegetables, some lightly salted hard-boiled eggs, honey and cheese? You might as well be in Tuscany as Alabama, and no fine meal in the Italian countryside would be complete without wine. Harpersville is the home of Morgan Creek Vineyards, where owners Charlie and Mary Brammer and their son, Charles, Jr., specialize in heirloom wines made from muscadines and other native Alabama fruits. While you can buy their wines at your neighborhood grocery, don't miss the opportunity to visit Morgan Creek Vineyards and take part in their daily tours and tastings. Whether you prefer a dry red or a sweet dessert wine, Morgan Creek has something for every palate.

If your aperitif of choice is coffee, there's also a local option. Out in Leeds, the good folks at Higher Ground Roasters have made it their business to roast only Fair Trade, 100% organic, shade grown coffee beans and sell only the best and freshest coffee possible. But they don't stop there. If you take a look at their website, you'll see such varieties as the Jones Valley Urban Farm Blend, the Greater Birmingham Humane Society Blend, the Cahaba River Society Blend, the Literacy Council Blend and the Alabama Environmental Council Blend, just to name a few. Are you noticing a pattern yet? Higher Ground, in the spirit of true community beneficence, pledges to donate 10% of the sales of its non-profit blends to the designated agency. So, all you coffee drinkers out there forget the Sanka. By purchasing Higher Ground's coffee, not only can you ensure that you are getting some of the best coffee available, but you can also give back something to your very own community.

Famed epicure Jean-Anthelme Brillat Savarin once said, "Tell me what you eat, I'll tell you who you are." With such a wealth of fresh foods in Birmingham, we city folk can be proud of both.

★ For more information regarding any of the farms or products listed, contact them directly:

BELLE CHÈVRE
(800) 735-2238
www.bellechevre.com

DUNLOOKEN FARM
467-7524

GARDENS OF HUCKLEBERRY HILL
(256) 268-1379
www.localharvest.org

HEWETT'S HONEY FARM
344-1098
344-0166
www.hewettshoney.com

HIGHER GROUND ROASTERS
(800) 794-85575
www.highergroundroasters.com

JONES VALLEY URBAN FARM
439-7213
www.jvuf.org

MORGAN CREEK VINEYARDS AND WINERY
672-2053
www.morgancreekwinery.com

ROSITA'S FARM
(256) 520-2400
(256) 694-7810
www.rositasfarm.com

SNOW'S BEND FARM
394-3561, 242-1054
www.snowsbendfarm.com

WRIGHT DAIRY STORE
Inverness, AL
980-8844
www.wrightdairyicecream.com

WRIGHT DAIRY
Alexandria, AL
(256) 820-1020
www.wrightdairy.com/farm.htm