



# Bounty of the Harvest

—A Farm-to-Table Restaurant—

By Wade Luhn

As a restaurateur, I believe the “farm-to-table” principle is the most advantageous way to structure a restaurant, as it provides higher quality, fresher, healthier food for the restaurant, while offering more profits for local farmers, who are the very life-blood of the restaurant. It is also much more enjoyable and interesting to really know those who are growing your food.

The food that we serve at our restaurant is supplied by farms located in close proximity to the restaurant. The farm produce is fresh, delivered frequently, and in season. It is prepared from “scratch” by our chef and then served immediately to the guest at the table. The food on the table comes directly from specific local farms, without going through distributors, markets or handlers along the way. We have a relationship with the farmers that supply our food, and we have at least some understanding of the uniqueness of each of our supplying farms: what they can offer, and a basic knowledge of their seasonal rhythms.

For our restaurant, being “farm-to-table” means that we

have a limited, seasonal menu. Our menu is a single page and changes frequently. We make everything in-house and are not populating our menu with frozen entrees or pre-prepared items from distant corporate kitchens. We have dozens of farmers who come to our back kitchen door each week. These are people whom we know on a first name basis and treat fairly, offering a reasonable price for their product. Sometimes we are forced to make compromises and to order from farms or purveyors outside of our region. However, sourcing from local farms and making our food in-house is our goal and a guiding principle in the restaurant.

I also view “farm-to-table” as a broader philosophy that seeks to repair our food system, food culture and our food economy. Wendell Berry has written that “eating is an agricultural act.” When we come to the table to enjoy a meal, whether at home or at a restaurant, we are making choices that affect our nation’s farms and farmers. When we eat, we are making decisions that make us participants in a larger

food system. We live in an age where fewer and fewer “eaters” have any notion of this system: where their food comes from, how it was grown or processed, or who is receiving the bulk of the profits from its sale. The corporate food world promotes anonymity. For the sake of all those involved (as well as for the quality of the food itself), Berry urges us to become more aware of all the interactions that transpire between the farm and the plate. In the restaurant, our farm-to-table concept provides us with a direct and intimate knowledge of our local food system, along with a greater awareness of our role within it and ability to affect it.

Although I own a restaurant, I do not pretend to be a chef, and I am really not a classic “foodie,” though I recognize good food when I taste it. Prior to owning a restaurant, I spent many fulfilling years as an organic fruit and vegetable farmer. My gifting, however, revolves around hospitality. I see the restaurant, and ultimately “the table,” as the one place that unites my diverse talents and interests. Our restaurant, Bella Luna, is a unique place where I

can fulfill both my gifting and my vocation.

Throughout history and across cultures, the dinner table has represented a grace-filled place where God's creation--His gift of food and His people--come together. "The table" represents a place where something almost miraculous occurs again and again: through the farmer's toil, the land has been tamed, its fruits harvested and its bounty brought into a kitchen where human hands create a delicious masterpiece. There is something special about sitting down at table with others to enjoy the final act of this drama. Whether it be in a home or restaurant, a shared meal is a unique moment to enjoy one another's companionship and to be nourished by the good food that God has provided.

As Catholics, we know that our spiritual lives here on earth culminate at the Lord's Table when we receive the Eucharist at Mass and, finally, when we dine with the Lord at the heavenly Wedding Feast of the Lamb for eternity. It is important that we acknowledge the emphasis that Scripture and the Church place on coming to the table and dining together. As individuals and as a community, we should take our cues from these gatherings and realize how precious and important it is to come together and to share a meal with others as often as possible.

Ironically, my own life as a restaurant owner has meant that I have sacrificed many meals with my family for the sake of the restaurant. I have had to be very intentional, often with mixed re-

sults, at keeping the demands of the restaurant at bay in order to make time to dine with my family. In our fast-paced, fast-food culture, where the number of families who actually sit down to eat together decreases each year, this struggle will only intensify, for myself and for many others.

That said, my restaurant has allowed me to serve others by providing the opportunity to uniquely combine my gifting and vocational calling. Our farm-to-table concept gives me the chance to personally know those who are providing our food. These farmers and purveyors are no longer anonymous links in the food chain but unique individuals with whom I have an opportunity to personally do business. My staff and I treat them with dignity and respect. Our kitchens also provide an environment for teaching and transmitting culinary skills, in an era where most kitchen labor positions are being dumbed-down. Lastly, I can offer our guests and diners a healthy alternative to the homogeneous industrial food being offered by so many restaurants.

Ultimately, the farm-to-table emphasis of my work is something that helps to keep me grounded in a sacramental reality of the world, one that is truly Catholic and consistent with the Incarnation. Every day I have the pleasure of interacting with God's created world, of seeing farmers bring the bounty of their harvest to the restaurant, and of watching human hands transform it into a meal that is then shared and enjoyed around a common table.

