

The Organic Adventurer

The farm is more than just a place to get your food

BY ANNA RABHAN



photo by anna rabhan
KYV's Vivian Bayona and KYV members pick potatoes



photo by anna rabhan
Twinn Bridges' owner Scott Francis showing off greenhouse

One of the benefits of sourcing your food from local farms, whether from farmers markets, a Community Supported Agriculture farm subscription, or directly from the farm, is that the farmer quickly becomes not just someone who provides your food but someone who is also a part of your personal community. What starts as reading the farmer's blog or newsletter progresses to attending events at the farm and interacting with the farmer. Having a dialogue with the person who feeds you, really getting to know him or her – philosophies, opinions, methods, reasoning – somehow makes the food you eat more than just a means to an end. Local farmers are, like anyone, glad when their work means something, and they go to great lengths to provide opportunities to form a bond with their customers.

Shortly after my husband and I joined KYV Farms' CSA (www.kyvfarm.com), farm owners Francisco Arroyo and Vivian Bayona held a farm tour and potluck for members. There were about 60 people there – parents, children, babies, older couples – at the farm field in St. Augustine. Francisco and Vivian first introduced us to their family, including their children, a cousin, and a sister and her family. Francisco mentioned that his oldest daughter was going to go to law school and joked that she was his retirement plan. A joke, but instantly this family became more than a collection of nameless people I buy food from. They became a mother and father trying to provide their children with the opportunity to fulfill their dreams, a cousin who leaves his home and friends to come help on the farm – in short, they became humans whose futures matter. You just can't make that connection in the grocery store.

Francisco then led a tour of the farm, introducing us to the fields, the equipment he uses, the bees that pollinate the plants, and finally to Mr. Whitman, the retired potato farmer who leases his land to KYV and mentors Francisco. The farm where KYV members get their food has a history that has created whole relationships, and KYV members can now see, in their minds' eye, the hive bees come out of each morning to pollinate the squash and cucumbers and the stand of trees where the birds rest between bug snacks. After the tour, everyone enjoyed the potluck. People helped each other spread out blankets and uncover dishes of delicious food. Members exchanged recipes and stories – again, something people don't tend to do at the grocery store. Everyone left that day with an unexpected gift of cucumbers and Latin American pumpkins.

A farm association also provides a way to give back. Not too long after the potluck, KYV members were given another bonus – all-you-can-pick green beans. All Francisco and Vivian asked was that we donate a portion of what we picked to their Feed-a-Family program. My husband and I showed up bright and early because, as Francisco says, "The early bird scares the worm!" The morning mist gave way to bright sunshine, and we picked two large buckets of beans as we talked and joked with Francisco and the other members who had come out that day. After picking, we dumped one of the buckets into the Feed-a-Family crate. What we got out of that day was fresh air, fellowship with people and with the earth, a sense of satisfaction knowing that we had helped feed several families and, of course, a freezer full of beans!

Local farms are also great places to learn about animals, farming practices and more. On April 10, Slow Food First Coast held its annual Tour de Farm (www.slowfoodfirstcoast.com). Local farms opened their gates to the public for tours and demonstrations, and many of the farms partnered with smaller operations, local restaurants, and other businesses to come do demonstrations or tastings at the farms. The Organic Adventurer and spouse carpoled with a friend in order to visit two of the more far-flung farms: Cognito Farm in Starke (www.cognitofarm.com) and Twinn Bridges Farm in Macclenny (www.twinnbridges.com). Cognito's farm partner, Glades Ridge Dairy (www.gladesridge.com), started things off with a goat-milking demonstration. Serena the snuggly La Mancha goat was a great sport, hanging out on the milking stand longer than she usually has to and letting everyone pet her. Listening to owner Joe Petrangelo explain, as Serena nuzzled him, how he milks each goat by hand twice a day really gave visitors a sense of how hard these farmers work, and also of how well they care for the animals. Joe explained that doing the work by hand allows him to notice right away any changes in the goat's health and to get to know the goat's personality. Knowing how careful a local farmer is with the health of his animals is reassuring in this age of

factory farming practices plagued by outbreaks of E. coli and reports of mistreated livestock.

The learning continued as Cognito owner Jerry Williams led guests on a tour of some of his farm's 70 acres of open pasture. A hawk and a bald eagle put on an air show, demonstrating some of the predators Jerry protects his chickens from by providing them what he calls a "pasture schooner." These Old West-style wagons built on boat trailers provide the chickens shade and a place to lay their eggs during the day, when they can roam about the pasture at will, and protection and a place to roost at night. The Organic Adventurer's better half was most impressed by the thought and planning that goes into Cognito's integrated pest management and fertilization practices. "It was neat how they look at the life cycle of the soil when rotating the cows and chickens," he says. Jerry explained that they have the chickens follow the cows in order to spread the natural fertilizer they both provide and to clean up the fly larvae. That way, the natural micro-organisms in the earth can do their jobs, and Cognito doesn't have to use any chemical fertilizers or pesticides. Jerry says, "Our focus shifted, when we started doing things more sustainably, from trying to feed a cow to feeding the micro-organisms in the soil which feed the grass which feeds the cow."

At Twinn Bridges, the power of partnership and innovation was on full display. Local restaurant Bistro Aix has partnered with Twinn Bridges for 12 years. The restaurant provides the farm the means to keep chickens, and the farm provides the restaurant with gorgeous local vegetables and herbs. Twinn Bridges' owner Scott Francis feels that "the best way you can buy your food is local and in season. If you know and trust your farmer, then you'll know you're getting good food." For his part, Bistro Aix head chef Tom Gray is impressed by the quality of local, in-season produce. "Conventional Swiss chard is usually so tough you have to boil it before you use it, but Twinn Bridges' chard is so tender," he said as he expertly separated leaf from stem and popped a leaf into his mouth, "you don't have to do a thing to it."

During the Twinn Bridges tour, guests also got to see the results of Scott's efforts to create an integrated farm system that's easier on the environment. He collects used cooking oil from the restaurants he delivers to and refines that oil with a system he built himself. He then uses the oil as bio-diesel in the same delivery truck and in his tractor. He also uses the glycerin byproduct from refinement to make soap. This cycle eliminates waste and the use of fossil fuel. Plus, he says, "I get to smell food cooking every time I start the tractor. It's great!" Another example of the forward-thinking, innovative spirit of our local farmers is the USDA-purchased and monitored greenhouse on the property. Twinn Bridges partnered with the USDA and Natural Resources Conservation Service for a study on the benefits of extending the growing season and on expanding the varieties of crops that can be offered to local markets in a sustainable way. They're not allowed to do anything in that greenhouse but water. From the abundance of beautiful, healthy vegetables growing there, it would seem the results so far are positive.

Tour de Farm was a huge success as a way to get the public and local farmers together, but for those who like to get their hands dirty every now and then, Northeast Florida's local farmers are happy to oblige. This season, Cognito Farm had a thistle problem. Cows won't eat these prickly weeds, and Cognito doesn't use herbicides. Hand-pulling them is the only option left, and Cognito's co-owner Sam Williams had been trying to figure out how to accommodate all the requests by people who wanted to come work on the farm a little. Cognito sent out a call for volunteers to bring a shovel (for the thistle) and a mug and spoon (for the chili social afterward) for their first "Thistle-Thumping Hoedown." Sam reported that about 30 people showed up for a very productive and enjoyable afternoon. KYV Farm also got a big chore done while CSA members socialized and planted potatoes in January. Those potatoes were harvested and shared at KYV's April end-of-season potluck.

Sourcing your food from local farms can provide your family with healthy, safe food and serve as an investment in the local economy. But it can also provide opportunities for philanthropy, education, socialization, and some exercise and fresh air. Now that's value-added grocery shopping!

Please email your questions, comments or suggestions to anna@eujacksonville.com.