

## Farm to Fork

*Farmers, customers come together to enhance the dining experience*



Chef Kristen Lyon plans to use wheat berries from Medford's Dunbar Farms and the property's Rocky Knoll wine in the new Farm to Fork dinner series starting in June. Bob Pennell

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By **Sarah Lemon**  
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With restaurants the stage and menus the script for "farm-to-table" cuisine, local diners often relate to farmers only as bit characters in the cast.

Starting next week, farmers and consumers will play roles in the same scene for a new dinner series that runs through November. Founders of "Farm to Fork" are bringing their tables to the farm, their kitchen to the food and farmers and customers together for a meal.

"Meeting the farmer is kind of the first step, and then meeting the land ... is even more enriching," says Kristen Lyon, personal chef and Farm to Fork organizer.

Lyon, 31, enriched clients' food experience last year with help from Lori Campbell, owner of Blackberry Lane farm in Grants Pass. The two hosted an August event for about 40 people, who received five courses comprising the herbs, berries, edible flowers and specialty vegetables Campbell sells to local restaurants. The response was so favorable that Lyon and Campbell planned a series of six such farm dinners this year.

Unbeknownst to Lyon, personal chef Matthew Domingo and small-farms advocate Sascha Meier were planning a similar project in the Ashland-Talent area. When Lyon and Domingo crossed paths at Ashland Food Co-op cooking classes, their supper-club concepts quickly merged.

"We wanted to create something everybody could be proud of — Southern-Oregon style," says Domingo.

The Willamette Valley has hosted its version, dubbed "Plate & Pitchfork," for eight years. While employed at Portland's Park Kitchen, Domingo, 29, worked an event and decided the Rogue Valley should showcase its rival wines and specialty foods in the same manner.

"Why does no one else in Oregon know about the crazy bounty down here?" asks Domingo, who moved to Ashland last year.

"We're just trying to shine the light on other folks."

Involving the statewide organization Friends of Family Farmers, partners in Farm to Fork hope to spread Southern Oregon's culinary reputation and boost support for local food sources. The Molalla-based farmers group will split about a quarter of Farm to Fork proceeds with Rogue Valley Farm to School.

Education about farm operations, products and unique aspects of terrain, soil and climate will be incorporated into each Farm to Fork event. Farmers will lead tours before dinner, and intervals between courses will allow some 50 participants to ask questions and a dozen special guests to make short presentations. Lyon and Domingo plan to prepare each event's five courses in a certified outdoor kitchen.

"As much of the food as possible will come from the host farm," says Lyon.

"It's gonna be subject to change — weather ... and what looks best in the field," says Domingo.

If they can't get an ingredient on site, the two chefs will purchase it from other local growers and ranchers, the farthest source being Northern California for olive oil marketed and distributed by Rogue Valley Brambles of Talent. Additional sponsorship comes from local wineries and coffee roasters.

"The local food isn't a feature of the meal; it's the meal — the whole meal," says Lyon.

Pastoral settings also constitute much of the feast. At Dunbar Farms in East Medford, guests will dine in a field of ripening wheat. At next week's sold-out series opener, calves frolicking in lush pastures will provide the backdrop for a meal of Salant Family Ranch natural beef. The ambiance likely will please "little, old ladies" who asked Lyon if cows would be at the event.

"They know where the good stuff comes from," says Lyon. "Their childhood was lost, and now it's being found again."

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