
MARVELLOUS EDIBLES FROM THEIR FARM TO THEIR TABLES

BY SHERYL KIRBY

The farm-to-table philosophy has become popular with restaurateurs over the past few years, with many chefs pairing up with area farmers, both at local food events and in their own establishments. But one Toronto restaurant has gone one step further.

Ayse Akoner and Jens Eller of Marvellous Edibles now divide their time between Toronto, where they run a successful restaurant, a bakery and a catering operation, and their 100-acre farm near Owen Sound.

They didn't start out intending to be farmers. Akoner, who originally hails from Turkey, began with a little bakery and café on St. Clair East after training in pastry techniques at George Brown College and working as a pastry chef at various Toronto restaurants and hotels.

Eller began his career in his native Germany, training at Michelin-starred restaurants there and in Switzerland before coming to Canada.

The pair met in the late 1980s when they were both working at the now-defunct Yorkville Mövenpick. From there, Eller went on to work as the sous-chef at 360 Restaurant in the CN Tower, and in 1992 Akoner opened her bakery. When the café side of things got busier, Eller left his job to take over the stoves at Marvellous Edibles, where customers were regularly lining up to get a table. They opened their popular bistro on Laird Drive eight years ago, keeping the original St. Clair shop for their bakery and catering operations.

Eller had suggested buying a small farm from the beginning, but Akoner was reluctant. "The first day we met, he said, 'Let's buy a farm, let's buy a farm.' And I always kept on saying no," Akoner explains. "And then there was a point where I said, 'Maybe we should buy a farm!'"

"We're the kind of people for whom food is a passion," Akoner continues. "We enjoy every aspect of food, and as you get more and more into it, you want to be able to control your food from the beginning to the end, especially as you read up on what people are doing to mass-distributed stuff."

Four years ago, they purchased their rural property in the Georgian Bay community of Meaford with the plan of having a small vegetable garden that would provide some produce for the restaurant, but the original goal was more to be able to control the quality of what they were eating than as part of a larger business plan.

The farm now includes an acre of vegetables, an acre of potatoes, and an orchard that takes up another acre-and-a-half. They've also planted a few rows of raspberries and asparagus. Aside from supplying most of the produce for their business, they sell twenty-two shares in a CSA program, and are vendors at the Bloor-Borden Farmers' Market in the Annex every Wednesday during the season.

In addition to growing produce, the couple raise pigs, cows, sheep and chickens, with the help of one or two employees who care for the animals when they're not there. During the summer, they typically spend four days a week at the farm and three days in the city but, with their 10-year-old son, Cengiz, attending school in Toronto, they can only make it to the farm on weekends once September rolls around.

A free-range philosophy makes the workload a little easier, but can also make living with the animals difficult: "Our animals are never confined. It's just that we have too few of everything, [so] we become attached to them," Akoner says, relating a story about the time they accidentally purchased a fixed male goat, which was quickly slated to become goat curry. But, because the goat was so tame and friendly, ap-



Jens Eller, Ayse Akoner, and their son, Cengiz, at their produce stand in the Annex/Bloor-Borden Farmers' Market



proaching people on the farm like a pet dog, he had a calming effect on the other animals and has become a favourite pet.

Animals from the farm are processed at a local slaughterhouse, but Eller does much of the butchery himself, using the nose-to-tail philosophy to not only create fantastic sausages, but to encourage the customers at Marvellous Edibles to try something new. “It’s fun. I like playing with the stuff and using as much as I can, making sausage and everything,” says Eller with a twinkle in his eye. Akoner shakes her head, admitting that the chef would put liver, tripe and tongue on the menu all at the same time if he could.

With part of the menu changing daily, Eller has plenty of opportunity to flex his creative muscles. Vegetable features change with the season and proteins can run the gamut from chicken and fish to rabbit. The couple are amused that Eller’s take on jerk chicken, served with rice and a sweet mango sauce, is something their customers insist remains on the menu every day. Likewise, their fabulous sweet potato fries.

“I think we make just as many sweet potato fries now as regular fries,” says Akoner. “And Jens was the type of chef who refused to make French fries when we first opened. Then the local papers kept on choosing him as the chef who makes the best fries – it’s our claim to fame.”

It’s clear the pair have a special love for the humble spud with fifteen varieties of heirloom potatoes taking up a full acre of their farm. “I love growing potatoes,” Akoner says with enthusiasm. “It’s a pleasure to work with them and I can grow all kinds of different colours and shapes. I can shamelessly say we make a lot of potatoes!”

Because they also run a catering operation, Akoner and Eller acknowledge that they supplement their farm products with those from the food terminal. “Whatever I can use from my farm, I do,” says Eller, pointing out that he prefers to support local farmers because of quality and flavour.

The same goes for fish. “I bring in fish,” Eller tells me. “Lately, I’m trying to be as local as possible; pickerel from Lake Huron, some whitefish from Lake Erie.” The pair does offer farmed salmon and trout at the restaurant due to a high demand for both fish, but Eller has misgivings about the quality of the farmed products. “Rainbow trout to me should be a whitish colour, maybe a bit pink,” he says, “and now they look like salmon; they all look the same.”

And while their own farm is completely organic – even the weeding is done by hand – they’ve chosen not to apply the same standards to the produce they purchase, in order to keep prices viable for their

customers. In the same vein, they admit they tend to under-price the products from their farm, particularly the meat items, to be able to keep prices consistent throughout the year.

Along with a heart-stoppingly beautiful array of cakes – made with fresh cream and butter – in a glass display case, the other thing that catches my attention in the cozy restaurant space is a wall of jams and preserves. These, too, are made in house from the produce at the farm. “It’s all homemade,” Akoner says with a huge smile on her face. “A lot of stuff is in season right now; we’re preserving like crazy. Everything that comes out of the garden that we can’t sell or we haven’t used... we’re making pickles, we’re making hot sauces. Soon we’ll be swimming in salsas.”

Akoner tells me the preserves sell almost as fast as they can put them on the shelves, especially between the height of harvest season and Christmas, when they make gift baskets combining the various jams, jellies and pickles. They also sell the preserves at their Wednesday farmers’ market booth, something other farmers might not be able to do because they lack an inspected industrial kitchen.

The joy and enthusiasm reflected by Akoner and Eller for everything about their farm and their restaurant is highly infectious. We end the interview talking about planned changes to the seasonal menu. Eller is looking forward to the cold weather so he can add hearty winter foods like roasts and stews to the restaurant’s blackboard, and I find myself wishing I lived nearby so I could stop in more often, not just for some marvellous edibles but for a real lesson in farm to table living. □

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Above right: Chef Jens Eller