

Food & wine

We've got you a table right by the barn

Eat at the source at farm-to-table meals

By Kelly DiNardo
Special for USA TODAY

On a recent fall night, more than 100 people shelled out nearly \$200 to tromp through a rural Virginia field in the near-dark to an outdoor table illuminated only by candles. Their reward? A five-course meal from chef Anthony Chittum of Vermillion in Alexandria that included crispy soft-shell crabs, cornmeal-crust catfish, bison chops and peach-and-blackberry pie — all made on a makeshift

kitchen at the George Washington Birthplace National Monument.

The site was two hours away from Chittum's restaurant but just a stone's throw from the aquafarm where the catfish were raised.

Such farm-to-table dinners — where diners interact with farmers, even eating their meals outside — are the cornerstone behind Outstanding in the Field, a group founded by California surfer-

turned-chef Jim Denevan. The group travels around the country promoting locally grown food.

The movement has taken root among foodies around the USA. Chefs nationwide are hosting farm dinners in their restaurants, and organizations such as Meadow Lark Farm Dinners in Colorado and Plate & Pitchfork in Oregon are bringing diners and the meal to the farm.

"When we started doing dinners, 'local,' 'sustainable' and 'organic' were not buzzwords," says Erika Polmar, one of the co-founders of Plate & Pitchfork, which began hosting dinners at Portland-area farms six years ago. "Now everyone is talking about that."

Denevan has seen his events blossom since the mid-1990s, when he first hosted dinners where area farmers came to his restaurant to provide commentary with meals created from their produce.



In Montross, Va.: A table for more than 100 diners winds through the trees at an Outstanding in the Field dinner.

By Kelly DiNardo

To sample farm-to-table meals

Outstanding in the Field, outstandinginthefield.com

Meadow Lark Farm Dinners, Boulder County, Colo.; farmdinners.com

Plate & Pitchfork, Oregon; plateandpitchfork.com

Vermillion, Alexandria, Va.; 703-684-9669; vermillionrestaurant.com



In Troutdale, Ore.: Diners enjoy their meal at Dancing Roots Farm.

By Erika Polmar, Plate & Pitchfork



Tartlettes:

Prepared by Fife Restaurant of Portland, Ore., at Sauvie Island Organics for a farm dinner hosted by Plate & Pitchfork.

By Erika Polmar, Plate & Pitchfork



Cedar-planked salmon wrapped in fig leaves: Dinner at Smith Berry Barn in Hillsboro, Ore.

By Erika Polmar, Plate & Pitchfork

Guests ate up the experience, and the next step seemed obvious to Denevan: take the meal to the farmer's field. In 1999, he hosted three dinners in California farm fields. Half of the guests were family and friends.

That first year "was a money loser," Denevan says. "It was pretty difficult to convince people to come out to the farms. But seeing the farmer give a tour and having the table right at the (food) source, well, that was profound."

In less than 10 years, Denevan has gone from cajoling friends to attend his dinners to hosting hot-ticket events. The group has thrown more than 100 dinners, most of which sell out quickly.

As farm dinners have become more mainstream, the price has increased. Outstanding in the Field dinners started at \$60 and are now \$180. Plate & Pitchfork dinners began at \$75 and now range from \$90 to \$150, depending on whether the event is also a fundraiser. Denevan says the increase is necessary for the high-end experience he aims to create. Polmar cites rising food costs.

"Not being able to offer these dinners to an audience that isn't affluent is a stumbling block for us," Polmar says. Being able to afford the dinner, however, is the only common denominator among guest lists that blend flannel-clad hippies with Fendi-bag-carrying foodies.

"We see twenty- and thirtysomethings who are coming on date nights," Polmar says. "We get forty- and fiftysomethings in groups. We've had businesses buy an entire table for a client appreciation night. We wouldn't have seen that six years ago. The client would have thought they were loony."

The changes Polmar has seen go far beyond ticket price.

"Today, diners 'are much more informed,'" Polmar says. "People are paying far more attention to how their food is being raised, processed and how it gets to their table."

For the chefs, farmers and organizers involved, that is the point. It's education with a sweet glaze of entertainment. And the foodies who try the farm-to-table experience because it's sexy or adventurous are getting the point, too.

"You lose where food comes from, especially in a city environment," says Pete Webb, 34, who attended Chittum's farm-to-table dinner with his wife. "It was eye-opening to hear from the vintner and the farmer who raises the buffalo. We've been more environmentally conscious. We're buying more local produce. It's already changed our habits."