

Article & Interview with Farmer Lee Jones and Aaron Deal
Presentation took place at Johnson & Wales University Charlotte

In the culinary world finding well grown fresh product is like discovering the Garden of Eden. For Chef Aaron Deal, his Eden is The Chef's Garden. Farmer Lee Jones, owner, and his family have made their tiny produce a must have in kitchens across the United States. In a time where the country is economically unstable The Chef's Garden is harvesting produce that is priceless. By cultivating micro greens the same day they are ordered Farmer Jones has proven that a little goes a long way. I had the chance to see a demonstration at Johnson & Wales University, in Charlotte, NC where these tiny but powerful products were shown. I was amazed at how something so small could impact a dish in such a large way. One of the most intriguing crops for me was the variety of beets grown. For me, I was introduced to beets by my grandmother. Only when I remember them they can from a can and were a odd shade of purple. It was remarkable to see and taste a small golden beet. With its beautiful golden color and succulent sweet taste I was in awe of beets for the first time. Never in my life would I have dreamed that beets could taste like that. Farmer Jones changed my mind as he has done with many.

I admit, at first I was skeptical. Listening to Farmer Lee talk about these small herbs made questions rise. Why micro greens? Why would I pay more for something that looks half the size? With today's economy struggling it is impossible not to watch every dime you have. We work in an industry that will not survive if we are "just getting by." Getting by is no longer good enough. I saw the prices of some of the produce and thought, "this is crazy." So, I did some research. I looked up produce from other farms, took a look at pricing, and did the math. What I found is that no matter where you look or how hard you search, the produce grown at The Chef's Garden is in a class all its own. The produce lasts twice as long and is well above anything you will find from a farm three times the size. The fact is, it's just better. Yes, the prices in the beginning seem higher, but in the end it is more cost effective because it lasts. When you order from The Chef's Garden you are getting a product that is grown by a family with a passion for food. A passion that is demonstrated with every small piece of produce you order.

I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to ask some questions of both Farmer Lee and Chef Deal.

Why did you start this project?

The Chef's Garden started in 1983 after we lost the family farm. We were farming commercially and chemically at the time. Then the farm was devastated by a confluence of bad circumstances. We started back over, early on at farmer's markets, which weren't nearly as popular at that time as they are today. There we met chefs who had trained in Europe. They were looking for a quality product.

In the U.S., what's happened is that farms are rewarded for producing cheap food. We measure a producer by how cheaply food is produced rather than the quality or the

integrity or even the nutrient levels. If it's not cheap enough to compete in the commodity-driven industry you go out of business. It's all about price.

The chefs we met were looking for quality and flavor rather than quantity and price. It was lifeblood for us, at a time when we were desperate to survive in agriculture. We latched on to those chefs and abandoned the farmer's markets so we could totally focus on the chefs' needs. They helped guide our vision toward The Chef and Farmer Concept™, a synergy between the chef and the farmer. Chefs have done a great job educating other chefs and the public about the importance of quality, which is I think why you're seeing a resurgence of farmer's markets around the country, reconnecting producers and users and creating a demand for quality.

So, with the help and support of the chefs, we essentially re-invented the farm out of sheer desperation, to be able to find a way to survive in agriculture. My dad has a saying that the only thing we try to do is be as good as the growers were 100 years ago. At the same time, we're adapting with today's technology, because the only way we can compete with \$3 per day labor is to embrace technology.

It's about looking back and seeing how they farmed naturally and rebuilt nutrients with natural enhancement rather than chemical or synthetic inputs, while also looking ahead and embracing the future with technology that has become affordable even at the level of a small family farm.

Farmer Lee Jones

Is the nutritional value different?

Absolutely. When you think about commercial farming, in essence what it's doing is mining the nutrients from the top 10 feet of the soil; after the first few years there is nothing left. Those natural nutrients are replaced with chemical and synthetic inputs. It fakes the plant out and increases the quantity produced, but it doesn't fake our bodies out.

Today, after 50 years of commercial farming, we're now seeing the dangerous effects of what this has done. We produce food cheaper than any other country in the world as it relates to our income, yet we have the highest health care costs. With 3,000 percent increases in kidney cancer, liver cancer, heart disease, attention-deficit disorder, autism, etc., there's a direct correlation between the way that we farm commercially and the health of our nation, or the lack thereof. What we're trying to do here at The Chef's Garden is rebuild the nutrients and antioxidant levels, and work in harmony with nature without trying to outsmart it.

For years, we've been working with chefs enhance the flavor of what we grow, so we've sought out methodologies to help us increase flavor naturally rather than chemically. We suspected that, as a by-product of flavor, these methodologies also increased the nutrient levels and antioxidant levels. Just in the past year, we've

been able to prove out some of those theories. We brought in a bio-chemist to do antioxidant testing, and we have a small lab set up on the farm to measure our efforts.

In essence, we're able to do lab analysis on the soil to find out what the soil is deficient in and then, based on those deficiencies, we plant specific crops that replenish the nutrients. Accepting the energy from the sun and letting the land sit fallow with crops that process energy in specific ways rebuilds the nutrients in the soil. We also do the same thing when we harvest the green manure from our plants - no animal manure - folding that back into the compost and then putting the compost back on the plants.

These same methods that influence flavor and make our operation sustainable also directly affect the nutrient levels and antioxidant levels.

What was your first crop of micro greens?

Beets, cabbage, broccoli were some of the first products we started harvesting at a micro stage. We believe we were pioneers in micro greens if not the first to do them. The idea was to harvest the plants younger at a much more tender state. We tried to market the product locally and kind of got laughed out of the restaurants.

Then we got a phone call from Charlie Trotter in Chicago, one of the foremost chefs in the world, as I'm sure you know. He was over muscling, which had become passé. He wanted something really sexy, something out there on the cutting edge that was going to blow everybody away.

It reminded us of what we had tried earlier with young plants. Chef Guillermo Tellez, who was Chef Trotter's right hand man at the time, came over and we did some tastings. He offered some suggestions and asked us to grow a few other things, and we were willing to work with them.

Chef Trotter is constantly asked to go different places to speak, to do cooking demos and prepare dinners for special guests. Wherever he was going, we would send product from the farm to his destination. There were usually a dozen or so chefs in the kitchen working with him who would see the products, so our business grew organically because other chefs would see Charlie and other great chefs using our products.

How do you control pests you might normally see in farms?

I don't know that we control anything. I think it's about working within the confines of nature and really trying to complement nature. Insects operate under the same premise of 'survival of the fittest,' like animals. If you have a healthy soil and then if you do a selection for the healthiest seeds, you help to increase the plant's chance of survival.

We find a huge disparity in the quality of the seeds we get - up to 300% difference in the weight of the seed. There's a direct correlation between the weight of the seed and the quality of the endosperm, therefore, by sorting for the quality of the seed and by having healthy soil full of healthy biology, you then provide for a very healthy plant.

It's just like a child that has a highly nutritious diet; they tend to be able to fend off the colds, the flues and the sicknesses. It's the same parallel for a plant – a healthy plant in healthy soil being fed properly tends to be able to fend off the insects. An insect will be more likely to attack a weaker plant rather than a stronger one. For some reason, the healthy plant doesn't seem to taste good to the insect.

What is your main goal in starting Veggie U?

The goal for Veggie U is based on the premise that children are very intelligent, but they need to be educated and informed to make better decisions. Veggie U helps empower kids with the knowledge that there are other food choices, other vegetables than the fast food French fry. Veggie U's curriculum teaches them how to read a food label and where vegetables come from, and that a vegetable can taste good. It enables them to go home and influence their parents that this is good for us, we should be eating this.

Is the program just for 4th graders or can other grades be involved?

Predominately, the program is designed for the 4th-grade classroom because the curriculum was developed to align with requirements for nationwide proficiency tests. Proficiency tests are how the teachers are being measured, so Veggie U's curriculum weaves in the science, math, language arts and health aspects of sustainable Agriculture and healthy eating to help teachers prepare the students for these tests.

At the same time, the program has been adapted to fit advanced students, as well as autistic classrooms and kids as early as pre-K. The lessons are even being incorporated in a high school culinary class. We are also currently developing a new curriculum to satisfy 5th-grade science requirements and we plan to make that available in the upcoming months.

Overall, the program has an impact beyond the students who participate because we've found that each student shares what they've learned with eight additional people. In this way, we're spreading the message beyond the students and the classroom.

How do you market your produce in a time when the country is in an economical struggle?

It's so critical, particularly in this difficult economic time, that chefs recognize our product as the best value. Our products are nearly 100 percent usable because of our commitment to Earth to Table™ in 24 hours and our hand-harvesting and hand-packing methods, which eliminates virtually all waste.

It's amazing to me that you can go around the country and look in nearly every chef's cooler and find products that are coming from South America or third-world countries. Because of the way we grow our products, working in harmony with nature rather than against it, the freshness and intensity of the flavor of the product will go so much further than something that has been traveling for 10 days by the time a chef gets it.

Diners are eating out less and they're pickier than ever. There's an expectation that, when they go out, the dining experience will be something exceptional. As diners are being more cautious of where they spend their dollars, it's more important for a chef to use the finest ingredients and to be able to add value by making sure the guest knows the product is grown in a way that increases flavor, that it is environmentally conscious, and that it comes direct from the farm for a truly Earth to Table Experience™.

**What are the plans for the future? What are your dreams for the farm?
We're at a historic low as far as the number of family farms. Fifty years ago, 50 percent of the population was either directly or indirectly involved in agriculture. Agriculture has truly been the backbone of the United States. It's one of the few industries in which we've been able to compete globally.**

We have to create an environment in which agriculture is socially acceptable so people to want to stay on the farm. There used to be a saying that if you couldn't make it in the real world, at least you could make it on the farm. We all want to be proud of the work we do, so it is important to shed this perception.

Furthermore, a sustainable business has to be environmentally friendly, socially responsible and economically viable. The socially responsible and environmentally friendly part I think everybody gets, it's kind of the warm and fuzzy side of it. The reality is we also have to be able to generate enough revenue to sustain and reward our team members so they want to stay on the farm.

For the future, the dream is for our family farm is to be sustainable, so that our family and our team members can stay actively involved in agriculture for many generations to come. We hope to continue to set a precedent across the industry as a sustainable leader on the cutting edge of agriculture that others will continue to follow.

Aaron Deal:

How were you introduced to The Chef's Garden?

I was introduced to The Chef's Garden through word of mouth coming from other chefs. Everyone seemed to praise them all!

Why did you decide to use products from The Chef's Garden?

First and most importantly, I decided to use products from The Chef's Garden based on flavor. Shortly thereafter, I was wowed. They produce things unlike anything in the world and do it consistently with a sustainable mind set.

Was it because of the low carbon footprint?

The low carbon footprint definitely helps. It is harvested right when I order. It isn't crossing the country on a truck or train.

Is there an advantage to the product that you do not get from other providers? How do you warrant the high prices that you are paying?

The cost is justified through the product quality and shelf life. If I pay \$20 a20week for lettuce that only lasts 6 days from the "other guys" and I pay \$30 for a lettuce that lasts twice as long from The Chef's Garden, how does that not make sense? Buying from The Chef's Garden makes good business sense.

How cost effective is the produce?

It is of higher cost than what you may see through a local provider. However it is justified through the shelf life, flavor, and the distinct character that is custom produced for our restaurant.

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