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Slow Down!

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Trace Giornelli made a farmer's salad with homegrown greens, fresh-picked strawberries and edible flowers.



JARRETT BAKER/ Special to The Sun
Guests serve themselves during a Slow Food potluck dinner at Possum Hollow Farm.

Slow Food and Fun

Slow Food Gainesville meets once a month for food, farm tours and fun. To learn more, visit www.slowfoodgainesville.org.

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A Slow Food potluck dinner, which featured locally grown produce and other food items, was held at Possum Hollow Farm.

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Squeaky the cat relaxes while guests eat a Slow Food potluck dinner at Possum Hollow Farm.

JARRETT BAKER/ Special to the Sun

Her husband, Joe Durando, an organic farmer whose crops supply area restaurants, cooked a peasant-style Thai soup with coconut milk, lemongrass, onions, kaffir lime leaves, cilantro and chestnuts.

Liz Snyder, a grad student working on a Ph.D. in soil science at UF, brought deviled eggs from her chickens Althea (from a Grateful Dead song), Lizard, Black-Feather, and Goldie Hen.

"We broke the first rule of farming," she tells the group of about 15 people gathered around the kitchen table at Giornelli and Durando's Possum Hollow Farm in Hague. "We named our chickens."

Laughter erupts from the group, temporarily interrupting the introductions of the Gainesville area working professionals and students who have come for a monthly potluck dinner and farm tour hosted by Slow Food Gainesville.

The newly formed convivium, which had its first meeting in January, is part of a national organization, Slow Food USA. Both the parent organization and the local chapter belong to the Slow Food movement, which took root in Italy in 1986 to encourage people to savor the flavors of locally grown foods and to preserve the heritage and cooking traditions of the local culture.

"We're mostly interested in good, clean, fair food," says Anna Prizzia, outreach coordinator at the University of Florida's Office of Sustainability and

one of the founding members of Slow Food Gainesville.

In other words, Prizzia explains, the group encourages the use of food that's good in taste and quality, that's free of chemicals and pesticides, and that's fairly traded so that the

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people who grow it can make a living.

So far, says Prizzia, the group has held pasta-making, tempeh and lacto-fermentation workshops for its members. They've also had a monthly potluck dinner and farm tour, such as this one.

"We're also working on getting sustainable foods in schools, creating markets for endangered foods and offering culinary workshops and 'taste education,'" says Prizzia, who spent two years serving in the Peace Corps before moving to Gainesville a few years back. One of her goals is to host an "Ark of Tastes" potluck in the fall, in which all of the foods served are made from heirloom varieties of fruits and vegetables indigenous to the area.

For this evening's potluck dinner, everyone was asked to bring a dish made from locally grown produce or ingredients.

Lee Seabrook, who owns a graphic design firm in Gainesville, brought kimchee, a Korean dish consisting of cabbage, spices and dill that are then marinated for a few days. She also contributed a batch of home-brewed kombucha tea.

"It's an acquired taste," she says of the tea, the base of which is made from a fermented yeast-like fungus derived from mushrooms. Seabrook learned to make both dishes at the group's daylong lacto-fermentation workshop in March.

Seabrook, who tends her own backyard garden and belongs to a couple of community-supported agriculture (CSA) farms, joined Slow Food Gainesville soon after it started.

"You eat what's available, what's in season," says Seabrook of the slow food lifestyle.

Proponents say buying and consuming locally grown produce helps save energy that is often used in growing, shipping and storing produce grown elsewhere, helps protect the environment by reducing carbon emissions, and supports the local economy.

There are some practical benefits as well, says Seabrook.

"I can keep lettuce for two weeks because it's picked that day and hasn't had a week of travel before you buy it."

After dinner, in spite of swarms of hungry mosquitos and a steady drizzle of rain, Giornelli and Durando treat the visitors to a tour of their 33-acre farm. The farm bears little resemblance to large-scale agricultural operations with uniform rows of a single crop planted on acres and acres of flat fields. In fact, only a few small plots of land on the Possum Hollow Farm are actively in production at any given time, which is about all that two people and a tiller-tractor can handle, Giornelli says.

Necessity is the mother of invention on this farm, Durando explains. During the 15 years that they've owned it, Durando and Giornelli have adopted a number of practical organic growing methods, some of which Durando learned while earning a master's degree in horticulture, but most of which were learned the hard way, through trial and error.

To avoid having to pull weeds, for example, the couple plants their crops close together so there's no room for the weeds to grow. Instead of using insecticides, when insects strike, the couple simply moves on to another field.

"We try to keep one step ahead of the nematodes," Durando says.

When the crops in the field have exhausted their yield, the farmers just plow them under, using the remaining vegetation as fertilizer.

Even with all of its sustainable practices, the farm isn't quite able to sustain them without a little help from the outside. Giornelli works two days a week for the City of Gainesville.

After the tour, the slightly soggy group strolls back to the farmhouse for a much anticipated dessert. Giornelli has prepared a lime-leaf flan. Jill Lingard and Scott Jantz have brought strawberry shortcake, taking advantage of the bounty of strawberries at the peak of strawberry season in North Central Florida.

Jantz explains that the guests have their choice of two kinds of shortcake biscuits: the darker colored ones were made from scratch with whole wheat flour from a recipe he found in a newsletter that promotes local food options, called "Hogtown HomeGrown." The lighter ones — whipped up at the last minute, just in case there weren't enough homemade biscuits to go around — were made from (Shhh! Don't tell anyone!) Bisquick.

Which biscuits did the crowd favor? Hard to say.

"Frankly," says Lingard, "with enough strawberries and whipped cream on top, who would notice the difference?"

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