

LAND OF PLENTY

**NORTH CAROLINA CHEF CASSIE PARSONS
IS BRINGING THE FARM TO FORK
MOVEMENT BACK TO THE COMMUNITY**

**BY ALISON MILLER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS EDWARDS**



IT'S LUNCHTIME IN LINCOLNTON, NORTH CAROLINA, A TOWN of about 11,000 forty miles northwest of Charlotte, and Sara Gales sits inside the brick-walled dining room of Harvest Moon Grille finishing up a chicken salad sandwich on whole-wheat bread baked that morning. A pile of fresh zucchini, spiraled into elegant ribbons and lightly dressed with vinaigrette, sits untouched on her plate.

Sara is 37. And despite having grown up on a vegetable farm as the daughter of a third-generation farmer, she eats few vegetables. Until two years ago when chef Cassie Parsons opened Harvest Moon Grille in Sara's hometown, she ate very few fresh foods at all. Her usual lunch spot? Arby's or Wendy's.

Before Highway 27 becomes Main Street in downtown Lincolnton, it looks more like a fast food-themed Mario Kart course, one beckoning drive-thru after another, every few hundred feet. Bojangles'. Taco Bell. Popeyes. Sonic. Arby's. Dunkin' Donuts. KFC. McDonald's.

But to venture beyond the main drag is to enter an agricultural oasis. Gales Farm, owned by Sara's parents, Melvin and Cindy, is one of 651 farms in Lincoln County. Yet of the county's 120 restaurants, only one looks to local farmers to stock its kitchen: Harvest Moon Grille. How a community cradled by a salad bowl got so far away from fresh, local food is disconcerting. But it's not uncommon. As farm-to-table eating has gathered steam in cities, small towns—even towns imbedded in agriculture—are still by-and-large served by chain restaurants and grocery stores, which rely on a massive food supply network to deliver food from thousands of miles away.

"It's perplexing," says Cassie. "You see this lush land, but the community is very unaware that it's there. That's why I created this restaurant. Each time we give you a plate, we educate you on where the farmers are, what they're doing, and why you should visit them."

Cassie is part of a wave of accomplished chefs—many who've honed their careers in urban centers—who are fleeing cities for small towns, where farm-fresh ingredients are at arm's reach and sky-high rents are scarce.

Some, like Chef & the Farmer in Kinston, North Carolina, and the Shack in Staunton, Virginia, have become pilgrimage points for roving foodies. Dinner and drinks for two will run you upwards of a hundred dollars at these establishments—a price well-to-do locals and wanderlusting gourmards are eager to pay.

At Harvest Moon Grille, seared trout from Rutherfordton, North Carolina, comes in at fifteen dollars. A seared rib-eye, sourced from Lincolnton's own Overhill Farm, will cost you twelve bucks. Both come with two sides. It's a friendly price point for Lincolnton, where the median household income is \$42,000. And it's aligned with Cassie's mission to feed real food to more people—even those who've never heard of the James Beard Awards.

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CASSIE DRESSES HER SPIN ON A COBB SALAD, WITH RIVERBEND FARM CHICKEN SAUSAGE AND GRATEFUL GROWERS PORK



Lincolnton is a far cry from Uptown Charlotte, where Cassie began making a name for herself in the local food world, first with a food truck and then with a restaurant inside the historic Dunhill Hotel. But her relationship with the small town runs deep.

In 2004, after a decade working for a national restaurant corporation, Cassie quit her job and started an organic edible gardening business. Then, she and her then-partner Natalie Veres attended Acres USA, a sustainable farming conference in Iowa. “That’s when everything changed,” Cassie says. She and Natalie bought ten acres in Lincoln County and began raising Yorkshire-Tamworth hogs. They named the farm Grateful Growers and started selling pork at the Charlotte Regional Farmers Market and to local chefs.

“I got energized about what I was tasting,” Cassie says. “I was meeting other farmers, and as a chef, I began to place a lot more responsibility on that title.”

Over the years, she evolved into an outspoken supporter of local sourcing and responsible farming. In 2009, she bought a food truck, Harvest Moon Cart, and served lunch fare in Uptown Charlotte using ingredients sourced from within one hundred miles.

Soon, one of her patrons, the general manager of the Dunhill Hotel, asked her to take over its restaurant. So in 2010, Harvest Moon graduated from food truck to fine-dining destination and saw huge success as one of the city’s first farm-to-table restaurants.

Cassie swept up awards: *Charlotte Magazine’s* Restaurateur of The Year. Global Green’s Citizen Entrepreneur of the Year. The State Department even named her a Culinary Ambassador.

In 2013, she stood on stage at the NC Music Factory in Charlotte and delivered a passionate TEDx speech.

“The food industry is broken,” she warned. “As chefs, we buy food that comes through the back door and it’s from all over the world. So all

that money goes back out the door and it goes somewhere else. That’s not food justice.”

Then she gave four directives to the audience of 450: Buy food from farmers. Start cooking at home. Ask where your food comes from. She made the crowd repeat the fourth mandate out loud: “I will not buy meat I don’t know.”

Six months later, she left Charlotte.

LOCAL FOOD, LOCAL COMMUNITY

Cassie is a self-anointed savior of local food. Her all-or-nothing approach and uncensored impatience for anyone who casually tosses around the term “local” without following through has earned her both respect and disdain.

“In Charlotte, I was riding on a really nice lift and it was fun, but there were things happening to me soulfully,” Cassie says, over coffee in the dining room of her 119-year-old house, located two blocks from Harvest Moon Grille in Lincolnton. “I felt like I had integrity in the kitchen but I was looking around at the community and I didn’t see it.”



“I’ve come to the realization that serving real food is my job,” she says. “I’m supposed to give you the right information about your food, not hype it up, not exploit it, just show you the real deal. I live and eat and breathe and will die by that.”

The thirty-nine-seat restaurant is on the first floor of a narrow brick building on Main Street. Just inside the door, a small larder of local ingredients—from fruits and vegetables to jam, honey, pickles, and pepper relish, is available for purchase.

The restaurant is open for breakfast and lunch six days a week, and serves dinner on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights. The food is familiar. Grits. Biscuits and gravy. Omelets. French toast. Po’ boys. Tacos. Burgers. Meatloaf. Pimento Cheese. But each dish is carefully prepared with fresh, local ingredients.

Order the huevos rancheros, and you’ll be greeted with glowing orange egg yolks, pickled red onions, vivid green lettuce and cilantro, and flavor-packed Grateful Growers sausage on a landing pad of crispy homemade corn tortillas. The sweet potato burger, a staple since Harvest Moon was a food truck, is a luscious patty laced with shredded carrots and finely chopped onions, resting inside a pillowy yeast roll smeared with sriracha aioli.

“Right now I’m not about having a Michelin-starred restaurant; I’m about reaching more people,” Cassie says.

“I’m trying to express forgotten food arts and make them so appealing that people want to learn how to can, preserve, or cure. And I want to show them that anyone can do it, because anyone can do it.”

Harvest Moon Grille’s bread is baked by Patty Shay, who turns out buns, flatbreads, and dutch-oven boules from the Hub, an industrial kitchen in the basement of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church around the corner. The space doubles as a classroom where Cassie and Patty lead cooking classes. It’s just one of the many ways Cassie has become more than a chef in Lincolnton, and Harvest Moon Grille has become more than a restaurant.

“There’s just a good community feeling when you know the food you’re eating was grown by people you know,” says Kara Brown of the Lincoln Economic Development Association. “Sometimes food you never even knew we had around here shows up on your plate. So in addition to the food, Cassie has brought awareness and enlightenment about what grows here. Harvest Moon Grille is a gathering place. You’re part of the family when you walk in the door.”

Earlier this year, the restaurant hosted the town’s annual prayer breakfast. Guests—ranging from pastors to hospice nurses to interested members of the community—shared a buffet of cucumber-strewn butter lettuce, homemade granola and yogurt, scrambled eggs, cheese grits, biscuits, and Grateful Growers sausage gravy.

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The restaurant has recurring Friday coffee talks, in which locals gather to discuss everything from cooking to current events. Cassie even hosts potluck dinners at her home, challenging every guest to bring a dish made with a local ingredient.

“I don’t want to help a couple people, I want to help millions of people,” she explains.

“But it’s a slow process.”

FIRST TASTES

The simmering success of Cassie and other country-bound chefs aside, there are unique challenges to running a local-food restaurant in a small town. Challenges like winning over the hearts and appetites of locals whose palates and pocketbooks are used to fast food. Locals like Sara Gales.

Between sips of a real-sugar, glass-bottle Coca-Cola, Sara talks about the restaurant. “The food here is different than what people are used to,” she explains, drawing out the syllables in her viscous Southern accent. “People around here are old-fashioned. We’re used to plain eating. But they need to give it a chance.”

Since Harvest Moon Grille opened, Sara has had risotto, frittata, and beet juice—all for the first time. Her favorite thing on the menu, though, is the Cluck It sandwich. “It’s chicken in a patty, like a hamburger,” she explains. “One of the things it has on it is...” she stops to think of the word, “Is it pesto? Something like that. It’s green. I like that, and I never would have eaten anything like that before.”

With an ever-more receptive audience in Lincolnton, Cassie recently turned the kitchen over to Vanessa Smith to allow herself time to pursue her next venture, a locally sourced restaurant at Rivermen Brewing’s new facility in Belmont, North Carolina, a town of 11,000 fifteen miles west of Charlotte.

“The menu is based around the same concept—local, real, authentic food,” says Cassie. “It’s not easy, I can assure you of that. But at the end of the day I’m having a blast. I’m creating food that I never thought I would be creating, I’m meeting people that I never thought I would meet, and I’m not in Uptown Charlotte.”

OPPOSITE PAGE: JOHN CARROLL OF BIG JOHN’S HYDRO FARM KEEPS CASSIE STOCKED WITH TOMATOES YEAR-ROUND; **THIS PAGE, TOP:** CASSIE CHATS WITH REGULARS; **MIDDLE:** LUNCHTIME AT HARVEST MOON GRILLE; **BOTTOM LEFT:** THE RESTAURANT’S “MONSTER BURGER” FEATURES GRASS-FED BEEF AND OTHER INGREDIENTS SOURCED WITHIN LINCOLN COUNTY; **BOTTOM RIGHT:** CASSIE WITH SARA GALES