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# Serving fresh cuisine under starry skies at Somerset Farm

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*By Maggie Miles Correspondent July 9, 2021 Publication: Virginian-Pilot, The (Norfolk, VA)*

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Those who've been to the Secotan Market in Wanchese understand the value and pleasure of buying Somerset Farm's farm-fresh produce, grown just west in Chowan County. However, the farm and Inglis family are creating a new way to experience the locally grown fare with special outdoor dinners hosted at the farm. At a romantically lit table in the gardens surrounding the over 100-year-old farmhouse, people can enjoy those same vegetables cooked up into a multi-course meal of gastronomic excellence and connect with other guests from all over the region.

That is the experience that Ollie Inglis and Kelly Burton are bringing to Somerset Farm this summer with their Farm to Table Dinner Series, or as Inglis also calls it, Porchlight Dinners.

Somerset Farm is a diversified family-run, certified-organic farm based out of Edenton, North Carolina, about an hour-and-a-half drive from the Outer Banks. It is run by Inglis' parents, Frederick and Jeannie Douglas, who have been tending that soil for more than 35 years.

The dinners are a different theme every

time, determined usually at the last minute by what is at peak freshness and availability at that moment. They are also inspired by the travels of both Inglis and Burton. They love picking fun, international themes from across the world. Their last event, for example, was a Portuguese-inspired dinner.

"I've always been interested in cooking and eating well and traveling and going to other countries," Inglis says. "I think they [in other countries] eat a lot better than us. They have their markets where you can get your fresh foods and fish. That has really inspired me to use other ingredients and to eat more vegetables."

They started these farm to table dinners 10 years ago in the Raleigh Research Triangle. Inglis was in cooking school and getting certified in sustainable culinary arts. It makes sense that she would be passionate about this; her father was one of the first in the state to get certified as an organic farm. Somerset incorporates many sustainable practices into its farm operations. Burton was one of Inglis' instructors, and they had the idea to start the dinner series, according to Inglis, "as a way to learn more, teach more, experiment with different foods and find new ways of doing things."

When Inglis moved back to her parents' farm a few years ago, they decided to keep the series going there. The dinners are completely different each time but made up exclusively of food from the farm or other local places. For example, the dinner held June 20 included herb-seared tuna, caught locally roasted beef crusted with Inglis' own coffee steak rub and seared sausages from pigs raised on the farm. They were accompanied by a mustard made with apple cider vinegar that sourced apples from an apple tree on their farm, farro with beets and a roasted strawberry vinaigrette, cabbage date feta slaw, harissa grilled zucchini with lemon and parmesan, a cucumber salad and grilled bread. To finish off the feast, Inglis served a homemade peach-fig pie with almond ice cream.

Local, organic meats make an appearance at these events, but they are centered around the fresh vegetables, always highlighting those at peak season. On the day of the dinners, Inglis goes out to the field during the early morning and pulls the beets, picks the zucchini, peels the cabbage, and then 10 hours later people are there eating it.

"People aren't used to eating that fresh," Inglis says.

Then there is the educational aspect. Before dinner, Inglis and Burton come to the table and explain to guests what they did, how they did it and the significance behind their choices of spices and herbs.

Inglis says these dinners foster fellowship and let guests form new relationships. Something about sitting under the starry skies in the gardens of an old farmhouse, watching the fireflies and eating fresh, local, sustainable ingredients draws a bond between people. At the last dinner, two couples from different places became friends and are now going to visit each other soon. One event even sparked a romantic relationship.

Mary Scott Haigler, an Edenton resident, certainly felt that bond during one of Inglis' earliest Porchlight dinners that she attended in 2018. Not only was she delighted at the various ages and origins of guests, including a couple from New Hampshire, but she also recalled a beautiful memory of the night.

"We drank wine out of mix-matched pottery goblets that were - I'm making an educated guess here - handmade by our host's grandmother. The plates were a stunning combination of eclectic china, all set underneath strung white lights. Dogs roamed about, and cows ambled about a hundred feet away. The sunset was glorious. ... Truly breathtaking. The stars were dynamite.

Absolutely incredible. Over and over that evening, I consciously marveled at how lucky I was to be there," she says.

The group later migrated fireside, and many of the guests happened to be fantastic musicians who brought their instruments along. They all sang classic songs by the fire for the rest of the evening. She notes the only thing she regrets about the night was not giving her husband a big smooch under the starry sky!

For Inglis, the Porchlight Dinners are about inspiring people to eat a little healthier, a little more local and a little more sustainable. And, it's about bringing people together.

"The common thing in food," she says.

The communal table set for a farm to table feast at Somerset Farm. of Ollie Inglis/courtesy Inglis and Burton hope the Porchlight Dinners bring people together and inspire them to eat healthier, locally and sustainably. Ollie Inglis/courtesy

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