



Roots Restaurant Digs Local Food

Lexington restaurant works with local producers to provide food items for its menu. Get a taste of how they got started.

By Kate Savage

Something borrowed, something new, seems an apt metaphor for Roots Restaurant on Romany Road in Lexington, Kentucky.

The building--although it's housed many businesses throughout the years-- began back in the 1950s as a local grocery store: F. Dee Roots.

F. Dee Roots was a small, friendly, family owned shop that provided the basics in food stuffs for the surrounding neighborhood. It was an old-fashioned grocery store that let its customers run charge accounts.

The New "Roots"

When today's owners tried coming up with a name, borrowing the name "Roots" seemed a natural fit. Plus, it seemed obvious that their new restaurant, which opened in late 2007, had deep roots in the area.

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Roots' Producers

Some of the local producers that work with Roots' kitchen include:

Free Range Chickens - Pike Valley Farm

Mushrooms - Sheltowee Farm

Lamb - Garden of Eden Farm

Beef and Pork - Stone Cross Farm

Garlic and Hot Peppers - Blue Moon Farm

Cheeses - Kenny's Farmhouse Cheese

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Your Truly Local Restaurant...?

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Its long-lived history notwithstanding, Roots the restaurant delivers a new concept to Lexington: Most of the foods prepared in its kitchen come from the bounty of the surrounding Kentucky farmlands.

Root's Chef Robert Myers says, "The star of any restaurant is not the cook in the kitchen, but the farmer in the field." So the name "Roots" has a double resonance.

Creating the Menu

When approached to come up with several different menu suggestions, Chef Myers was given a few guidelines:

1) Simple Dining. The owners knew they wanted the restaurant to be simple. They weren't looking for fast food or fine dining. They wanted something more along the lines of a bistro--food that didn't require touching and placing in different positions: uncomplicated cuisine.

2) Focus on Ingredients. They wanted the quality of the plate to be in the ingredients and the simplicity of preparation, not in some contrived presentation.

In conjunction with these guidelines, Chef Myers found his concept wasn't hard to sell.



It wasn't difficult to convince the owners of the merits of supporting local growers who can provide the best product, better than anything available outside the area. Plus, they thought it would be a great marketing tool.

From Quality Comes ... Perfection

One lesson Myers learned long ago was that the quality of the end product is determined by the quality of the initial product.

For him that has little to do with the price he has to pay or whether the growers are certified organic. These are secondary issues to the production.

His focus is on freshness, the quality of taste, how the animal is raised, and the conditions of its life and death. All these factors have a bearing on the final flavor.

While the average customer may be oblivious of the health benefits and the effort that has gone into their meal, they do appreciate that the food is robust in flavor, cooked to perfection and full of subtle nuances that they can savor and digest easily.

Quick Peek at the Menu

And the secret of the success of Roots will likely not only be in the flavor of its food but also its affordable price range. According to its February 2008 menu, not including specials: Appetizers average \$7.15 Side salads are \$4.95 Sandwiches are about \$7.50 Pasta dishes made with homemade parpadelle noodles average \$11.15 Entrees including chicken, rabbit, seafood, beef, lamb, pork and sausage, range from \$8.95 to \$17.95 You can also choose a pizza ranging from \$8.95 to \$12.95.

The excitement and challenges of the menu strategy is that it involves a product that is being produce locally, prepared from scratch in house and then served to people who live in the neighborhood. (Find Local Food) Every aspect of the process is localized. Relationships are developed and the community is served.

The concept, lately being replicated in numerous other places around the country, is truly a grass roots system at work.

About the Author

Kate Savage is a freelance writer and professional chef/caterer. She has been in the catering business for more than 26 years. She is the owner of Bleu Ribbon Catering in Lexington, Ky.