

## EDIBLE ED

# THE SCHOOL OF FARM

*By Elizabeth Winslow  
Photography by Andy Sams*



“You don’t want to get anywhere near Obama’s mouth,” cautions Erin Flynn of Green Gate Farms. On a chilly December morning, she and a group of students from Austin’s Auguste Escoffier School of Culinary Arts huddle together at the farm to begin the 125 hours of hands-on work that make up the Farm To Table Experience portion of the school’s curriculum. In response to their befuddled looks, Flynn chuckles and explains wryly, “Hey, he was the smartest pig in the litter!”

The group laughs and follows her gaze to a large, friendly-looking pig with long, sharp tusks of which one would indeed be wise to steer clear. With that caveat, Flynn offers the students their choice of tasks for the day: cleaning the pigpen and lining it with fresh bedding, clearing the ground of invasive mallow (with a quick lesson on the dangers and nuisance that attend a “monocrop”), turning the compost piles, spreading seed, moving and rehabbing the shelters provided for the farm’s herd of pastured hogs or clearing the fields of last season’s eggplant plants. The hands go up: “I want to work with animals!” “I want to work on fixing things!”



These students, along with their instructor, award-winning chef Paul Peterson, are here to learn firsthand what goes into producing the ingredients that make up the recipes they're learning to create. The program is unique to this culinary arts school and offered at both the Austin and Boulder, Colorado, campuses. Flynn was surprised to discover that not all culinary programs share the Escoffier School's commitment to teaching their students where food comes from. "We believe there's no better place to learn about food than where it grows," says Flynn. "When we started our community-based farm eight years ago, one of the first things we did was reach out to culinary schools. We assumed these schools would want their students to come and learn on our farm, but there was very little interest at the time. We've been waiting for a program like Escoffier's and are very glad it's finally here. Restaurant patrons rely on chefs to be their food stewards, and this program ensures chefs make informed choices."



The founders of the Escoffier School understand the long-term benefits of a deep knowledge of local food systems and sustainable food production practices. Carla Williams, director of career services and Farm To Table Experience coordinator at the Austin campus, worked tirelessly to develop the opportunity. "We want our students to learn about, and respect, where ingredients come from," she says. "Understanding local sourcing and having a deeper knowledge of sustainable and ethical cooking teaches them to be more creative and deeper culinary thinkers. With this knowledge, they are inspired to think and connect rather than just read recipes."

When Paul Ryan, president of the Escoffier Schools and of the Triumph Higher Education Group, acquired the Culinary School of the Rockies in Boulder, the mission was to create a curriculum that adhered to a commitment to quality at every level of food production embodied by the industry-proclaimed "king of chefs,"

Auguste Escoffier. Escoffier's great-grandson, Michel Escoffier, president of the Escoffier Foundation and Museum of Culinary Arts and standard-bearer for these values, sits on the board of the educational group that owns the schools and fully recognizes the value of the Farm To Table Experience. In an initial phone conversation to discuss development of the program, Williams remembers a student asking Michel, "What would Auguste Escoffier say about the fact that a McDonald's Happy Meal is cheaper than an organic apple?" Escoffier sat in stunned silence for a moment before recalling that, in addition to cooking for royalty, his great-grandfather was also a hunter, a forager and a master pickler and preserver. This commitment to quality, local ingredients might be a so-called movement now, but in Escoffier's day, it was just called cooking. A return to this commitment to community and quality ingredients is perfectly in line with the values and mission of the Escoffier Foundation.

In its seed form, the Farm To Table Experience existed at the Boulder campus when the school was purchased by the Triumph Group. That school's founder, Joan Brett, organized a student trip to small farms to get a taste of sustainable food production. At first, they had to travel to farms in the South of France—until recently, small, sustainable family farms were more difficult to find and connect to in the U.S. Later, Brett organized trips to the Western Slope and North Fork Valley in Colorado. Ken Hause, the current campus director of the Boulder campus explains, "The students would go out to the valley and stay together in a rustic inn. They'd go out to area farms and spend days working there—doing whatever needed to be done: digging postholes, spreading manure, pulling weeds...just whatever the farmer needed. We wanted our students to understand the incredible amount of human energy that goes into every morsel of food that crosses the table. Along with that, there was intense interaction with the farmers, and they were great about educating students about all aspects of food production, from organic methods to complementary planting to raising animals."





Eventually, the local food system began to blossom closer to home and the students no longer had to travel long distances to get a taste of life on a farm. Brett nurtured relationships with small family farms near Boulder and the program began to look much like it does today, with students rotating hours at a wide variety of farms in their local community. “We buy from all these farms for our campus,” notes Hause. “So by the time our students get out there, they’ve already been cooking with ingredients from the farm and can’t wait to see where they are grown.”

Making the connection even stronger, the Boulder campus has a booth at the farmers market every week—to entice prospective students, but also to feature produce from the farms and inspire home cooks. “We buy seasonal food from the farmers at the market and make small bites for the shoppers to taste and hand out recipe cards,” Hause says. “We really love being there each week with all the farmers.”

When the Triumph Group bought the school and planned on expanding the brand to Austin by purchasing the Culinary Academy of Austin, Ryan knew that this initiative was vital to the educational mission of the schools. Williams came on board in 2010 and became committed to its creation. When she moved to Austin and saw the community’s commitment to the local food movement, she knew the program could be successful. Brett came down to help her begin nurturing relationships with local farmers, and the two used the experience of the Boulder campus to craft a plan that would work in the Austin community.

Williams understands the time commitment required of the partner farms and food producers, and wants to make sure they feel the value of turning out graduates who value local food and the work that goes into it. Renee and Cookie Rangel, of RRR Farm, were some of the first farmers to sign on with the program. Renee says they did have some initial concerns about opening their farm to students. “We were worried that this might be just another class in their curriculum,” she says, “but the students have expressed genuine interest in the process and they’ve been hard workers. It has been great having the extra hands; we are a small family operation and cannot yet afford to hire any help. The students have been a blessing.”

In creating the Auguste Escoffier School of Culinary Arts, the Triumph Group wanted to offer a smaller, more boutique environment with a local, sustainable focus, and this indeed resonates with students making a decision about where to go to culinary school. Recent graduate Jascha Killinger was in the first cohort of students participating in the program and says the Farm To Table Experience was definitely the deciding factor in making his school choice. “I worked in the corporate food world for years before deciding to go back to culinary school,” Killinger says. “I finally realized corporations only care about the bottom line. I was raised with strong sustainable values, and I knew I needed to figure out how to bring those in to what I’m doing every day. This experience is close to my heart—knowing where my food comes from and who’s producing it, I can really put my whole heart into my work.” Killinger loved working at RRR Farm and was inspired by the sheer variety of different things there are to do in a day’s work. He is also fully aware of the impact a commitment to local food systems and sustainable practices can have on a community. “Before I went through the Farm To Table Experience, I was focused on opening my own place, and I still am. But now I want my own garden when I have a restaurant; I want relationships with pig farmers and ranchers; I want to give back to my community.”

Hause acknowledges that the Farm To Table Experience offers graduates an extra edge. “Joan Brett recognized that the farm-to-table movement was more than just a fad,” he notes. “She had the foresight to know that our larger community would realize that these choices are about what’s morally right, ethically right. That it’s a required experience in the program actually helps the school be selective. Students who

don't share our values are just not going to be interested in working a hundred and twenty-five hours on a farm."

Green Gate's Flynn couldn't be more pleased with what the school has created. "We're delighted that Escoffier is helping their students get their hands in the dirt. When chefs do more than buy local food, when they understand the obstacles farmers struggle with—the lack of affordable water, meat-processing facilities, access to capital—we find common ground for working together to provide the highest quality food to our communities. Where's a better place to learn about food than where it grows? Here's to more farm-based education!"

*For more information on the Auguste Escoffier School of Culinary Arts or the Farm To Table Experience, visit [escoffier.edu](http://escoffier.edu)*

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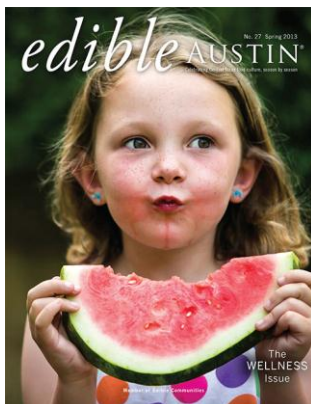
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