



A BOUNTY OF BEAUTY

IN TEXAS' BLACKLAND PRAIRIE COUNTRY, GARDENERS AND FOOD LOVERS CAN LEARN THE SECRETS OF ORGANIC FARMING AND GLORIES OF FIELD-TO-TABLE COOKING. **SUSAN L. EBERT** DELIGHTS IN THE SYMPHONY FOR THE SENSES

PHOTOGRAPHY BY WYNN MYERS



TASTE THE RAINBOW
The Inn at Dos Brisas has earned a Forbes five-star ranking for its restaurant, with an ever-changing menu, fueled by the property's colorful organic garden.



COOPEd UP

“Farmer Steve” King oversees Dos Brisas Farm’s 42 certified-organic acres and grows more than 400 varieties of plants, which get a little help from 150-plus chicken flock.

A HUNDRED MILES EAST

of Austin, the landscape unfurls into soft, undulating farmland punctuated with quaint small towns such as Chappell Hill, which I drive slowly through, admiring its lovingly restored Main Street. I nonetheless press north, as my destination, the Inn at Dos Brisas, is just 6 miles ahead.

The elegant, mission-style boutique resort is nestled into the folds of the rolling, verdant hills of the Brazos River bottomlands along its tributary, Peach Creek. Notably, The Inn has earned a Forbes five-star ranking for its restaurant, with an ever-changing menu, fueled by the organic bounty of the property itself.

As a lifelong organic gardener, myself — one who knows too well the vagaries of Texas’ drought-or-flood climate, withering summers and multitudinous flying, walking, crawling and burrowing garden predators — I’m here not only for spiritual restoration in these sumptuous surroundings, but to also glean some tips, both in the garden and in the kitchen.

For in addition to its more-standard country inn offerings of sporting clays, tennis, horseback riding and swimming, Dos Brisas welcomes guests both out in its gardens and in its kitchen for custom-tailored, field-to-table culinary workshops. After donning my tall rubber boots, I hop onto one of the “Dos Brisas limos,” the staff’s tongue-in-cheek name for the fleet of golf carts used to get around the expansive property. At the wheel is Steve King, the gregarious general manager of Dos Brisas Farm. Farmer Steve, as he’s affectionately called, earned his doctorate in plant breeding with minors in plant molecular biology and plant pathology from Cornell University.

“Dos Brisas currently has 42 certified-organic acres on its 313-acres property and grows more than 400 varieties — all with non-GMO, primarily heirloom seed and without synthetic herbicides or pesticides,” he tells me, shoving back the brim of his Indiana Jones-style fedora as we roll to a stop in front of the 7,000-square-foot greenhouse complex. “We definitely produce far more than our restaurant is able to use, but naturally, they get first pick. We also

supply Houston's Oxheart [2016 James Beard Best Chef in the Southwest winner Justin Yu's restaurant], Coltivare, and Pondicheri restaurants, as well as food trucks and Southwestern Energy's company cafeteria. On top of that, we were able to donate 3,500 pounds of produce to food banks in 2016 alone."

King leads me to the tomato and cucumber greenhouse, where vines are trellised on a Rube Goldberg-esque contraption of overhead wires from which dozens of spools of string are suspended, each supporting a vine. I comment that I'm seeing this system more and more.

"It's really an old system that's come back into vogue," King says. "I'll have two rows of pots, back to back, and as soon as each plant's a foot or so tall, attach a string to it. As the plants grow, we keep rolling up the string until it reaches the spool. Then, we keep moving the spools counterclockwise, cutting off any side shoots that we'll root in water to make more tomato plants. As we keep moving the spools, the vines can trail up to 50 feet along the floor, but as fruits only grow on the trellised upper part, they are quite prolific."

On one entire greenhouse row, waist-high beds contain several inches of water, on top of which float



NUTRITIOUS AND DELICIOUS
To grow the best produce possible, Dos Brisas carefully monitors its soil — adding organic nutrients, rotating crops and even analyzing water to ensure the right composition.



sheets of 3/4-inch Styrofoam with holes punched through it at regular intervals. Farmer Steve notes my quizzical look and explains: "Oh, this is my system for hydroponic lettuces," he says, grinning. "That's rock wool cubes stuffed into the holes, and each cube holds a lettuce seed. This is how I grow our butter lettuce, several types of mini-romaines and eight varieties of bagged lettuce."

As we head out to the fields, King elaborates on challenges an organic grower — whether large-scale farmer or backyard gardener — needs to surmount. Healthy plants begin with healthy soil. Water, not just too much or too little, is crucial as well. Water and soil are delivery systems for the three primary nutrients (nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium) and three secondary nutrients (magnesium, sulphur and calcium) your organic garden needs to thrive.

HEALTHY PLANTS BEGIN WITH **HEALTHY SOIL**. WATER IS CRUCIAL AS WELL. WATER AND SOIL ARE DELIVERY SYSTEMS FOR THE NUTRIENTS AN ORGANIC GARDEN NEEDS TO THRIVE.



"You must know your water and know your soil," King insists. "Rainwater is the absolute best, so water from a rain barrel whenever you can. Well water, especially, can have high salt content; tomatoes can only tolerate 100 ppm [parts per million] of sodium, tops." King uses Waters Agricultural Laboratories, which will perform tests for under \$20 with less than a week turnaround time. Soil amendments, in the form of rich, black compost comprising manure from Dos Brisas' 35-horse stable, its 150-plus chicken flock, spent plants, landscape trimmings and kitchen scraps, enrich the heavy clay-and-sand Brazos bottomlands.

Seed choice also plays a key role in a garden's success. "Some heirloom varieties are harder than others," says King, "so when I find one that works well here, I'll save seed from it so I can continue with that variety." In addition to heirlooms, King will plant some curated



PASTA TO PECANS

In the kitchen, Chef Matt Padilla guides guests through recipes — like fresh pasta topped with herbs, roasted organic vegetables and candied nuts — that feature ingredients from Dos Brisas' fields.



“WORKING IN THE BAY AREA ... WAS THE PERFECT PREPARATION FOR THIS POSITION WHERE I WORK DIRECTLY WITH FARMER STEVE AND HIS STAFF, WHO BRING ME THE FRESHEST POSSIBLE INGREDIENTS.”

hybrids, such as the supersweet Red Delight tomato, which scores a whopping 8 to 9 on the Brix scale.

“Rotate your crops whenever it’s feasible,” advises King. “It’s your No. 1 organic tool to break the life cycles of pests and diseases particular to that plant family. Plus, rotation will keep your soil from wearing out, as members of the same family draw out the same nutrients from the soil. Rotate your heavy nitrogen-, phosphorus- and potassium-feeding crops such as tomatoes with soil-building crops such as beans, which enrich the soil, followed by light-feeding members of the onion family, such as onions, garlic, leeks or shallots.”

While King and I have been afield, members of his staff of 10 have been harvesting for today’s culinary

offerings. We wend our way back toward the mail buildings, and he pauses at the Chef’s Garden, built in a Texas Star pattern of walkways and beds. A riotous bloom of edible flowers — dianthus, bachelor buttons, snapdragon and nasturtium — greet us as we stroll through fragrant groupings of freshly snapped herbs. My anticipation is building to join the chef in his kitchen.

Executive chef Matt Padilla and sous-chef Ryan Dunn have prepped a mini-lesson for me — much like the ones they offer their guests. To my left, Padilla has laid out baked russet potatoes, eggs from Dos Brisas’ henhouse and flour. “This is 00 flour,” he tells me, “the soft, low-gluten flour preferred for pasta-making. Today, I will teach you to make gnocchi.”

As we proceed with the lesson, I learn that the handsome young chef is a son of the Southwest. Born in Colorado, he studied at the Johnson & Wales Culinary School in Denver, and then worked both in Colorado and Arizona before venturing abroad to Copenhagen’s Noma — at the time, the No. 1 rated restaurant in the world. Returning stateside, he plied his craft in several San Francisco restaurants, including a stint as sous-chef at Michael Mina, under star chef Ron Siegel and at the highly regarded French restaurant Masa’s.

“Working in the Bay area, I was able to make connections directly with farmers,” he tells me, as he deftly shapes gnocchi dough into delicate seashells (whereas mine resemble clumsy miniature logs). “It was the

perfect preparation for this position where I work directly with Farmer Steve and his staff, who bring me the freshest possible ingredients.”

While Chef Padilla blanches the gnocchi in boiling water, I join sous-chef Dunn to assemble a pesto sauce from just-harvested arugula, red-veined sorrel, baby kale and other spicy greens. “Pine nuts are traditional in pesto,” Dunn says, “but today we’ll use native pecans, as they are so plentiful at Dos Brisas.”

Padilla deftly drains the gnocchi and transfers it to a sauté pan with a bit of oil; into this go quartered fresh tomatoes, miniature bok choy and broccoli florets. He tosses the mixture gently, then drizzles in some of the pesto Dunn and I have just made before handing me a pristine white plate. Mounded in its center, the plump gnocchi and limpid notes of the fresh vegetables shine like so many radiant jewels under a gauzy film of pesto. I close my eyes to savor the first mouthful, a bright orchestration of the essence of Dos Brisas and its incomparable organic table-on-farm cuisine. ✨