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Ripe & Ready
Southwest Florida

Find fresh organic produce and more at these farms
where tilling the soil is a healthy lifestyle

BY GINA BIRCH

PHOTO COURTESY OF ROSY TOMORROW HERITAGE FARM
PHOTOS BY GINA BIRCH

rganic, non-GMO, sustainable and farm-to-table are a few of the hottest buzzwords in the food world today. However, these concepts are not new and certainly not new to Southwest Florida. What is new is your increased availability and options for finding fresh and healthful offerings.

Worden Farm

For more than 10 years, Worden Farm has been growing organic fruits and vegetables on 85 acres of land in Punta Gorda. The produce here is so beautiful you can hardly wait to get it home and cook it. It tastes as good as it looks.

Formerly farming on the east coast of Florida, Eva and Chris Worden were looking for more space, good soil and a good community where they could settle and grow their business. They converted an old orange grove into a successful farming



business and created a farm membership program that offers their 600 subscribers access to a weekly harvest share of organic produce, plus discounts on workshops and tours along with other perks.

Surprised at how well the community has embraced their concept, Eva says, "People who grow are often invisible to people who eat food; when they become part of the story it enhances the experience for the consumer and makes a better situation for the producer."

Constantly encouraged by the support of her farm members, she adds, "It's incredibly exciting to see people not tolerating the degradation of land, or the exposure of agriculture workers to toxins, or eating veggies that have been grown in a way that is potentially hazardous to long-term health."

Denise Zynda and her husband, who own Bellissimo Salon in Fort Myers, joined the Worden's movement before organic became trendy. She says, "When the farm is closed, I find myself not cooking as much."

Members come to the Worden Farm each week and browse tables overflowing with colorful, ripe produce. No money is exchanged at checkout; it is deducted from a prepaid market share account. Workshops, recipes and children's activities are also offered at the farm along with a chat and chop table. It's not only a space to clean and prep your produce before taking it home, but also a place to share ideas and bond with other health-conscious locals.

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Physically going to the farm on Wednesday is not possible for everyone, so the Worden's also have a delivery program that stretches as far south as Naples. Boxes of produce with about eight seasonal items are dropped off at central locations for pickup. Each box provides enough for two to four people.

Rosy Tomorrows Heritage Farm

While Rosy Tomorrows Heritage Farm in North Fort Myers also has organic vegetables, the most important thing grown here is grass—food for livestock, pigs, chickens and goats.

The animals here are heritage breeds, the kind traditional farmers won't raise because of the time and effort it takes

Eva and Chris Worden prepare freshly picked produce for market day, when farm-membership participants come to Worden Farm in Punta Gorda.



These stately longhorn cattle at Rosy Tomorrows Heritage Farm in North Fort Myers are grass fed throughout their stay on the farm.

Rosy O'Dell King is a food and wine writer, a classically trained chef, a certified sommelier and a former sheep farmer who gave up suburbia nearly two years ago to raise animals organically, holistically, sustainably, humanely and as close to nature as possible.

to nurture them. Owner Rose O'Dell King calls them, "slow-growing animals, celebrated for the flavor of their meat."

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The animals rotate through numerous pastures on the 100-acre farm, providing natural fertilizer and holistic land use. King says, "Our grass is the most important thing on the farm. If our grass isn't nutritious and healthy, then neither are the animals."

The Longhorns are first to enter the green pasture. The stately cows are 100 percent grass fed from beginning to end. When they move to a new spot, the chickens are next up. Rosy Tomorrows has "layers," chickens that only lay eggs. Their eggs are creamy and delicious with beautiful yolks that sit up nice and high; you'll want to eat them every day.

New this year are her "meat birds," chickens raised for their meat, which King says, "are so tender and juicy; we are so excited."

The Red Wattle hogs are the last to work the field. Classified as a threatened breed, the only real way to save them may sound counterintuitive but it works: Raise them and eat them.

Wednesday is market day, when the public can buy the flavorful meat, eggs and produce, as well as sample food from area chefs who appreciate her food philosophy. King compares it to a local James Beard House saying, "I want the chefs to walk through the garden, see what we have, really play around and have fun with it because it's not the kind of

stuff they get in the restaurant all of the time because of the volume of people they are feeding."

Her calendar of events also includes farm-to-table dinners, Sunday Suppers and brunch; Music on the Meadow and 50 Mile Dinners where everything served comes within 50 miles of the farm.

King explains, "We want to focus on all things Southwest Florida, not just what we grow on the farm but also stone crab, shrimp and things important to the area, including local breweries."

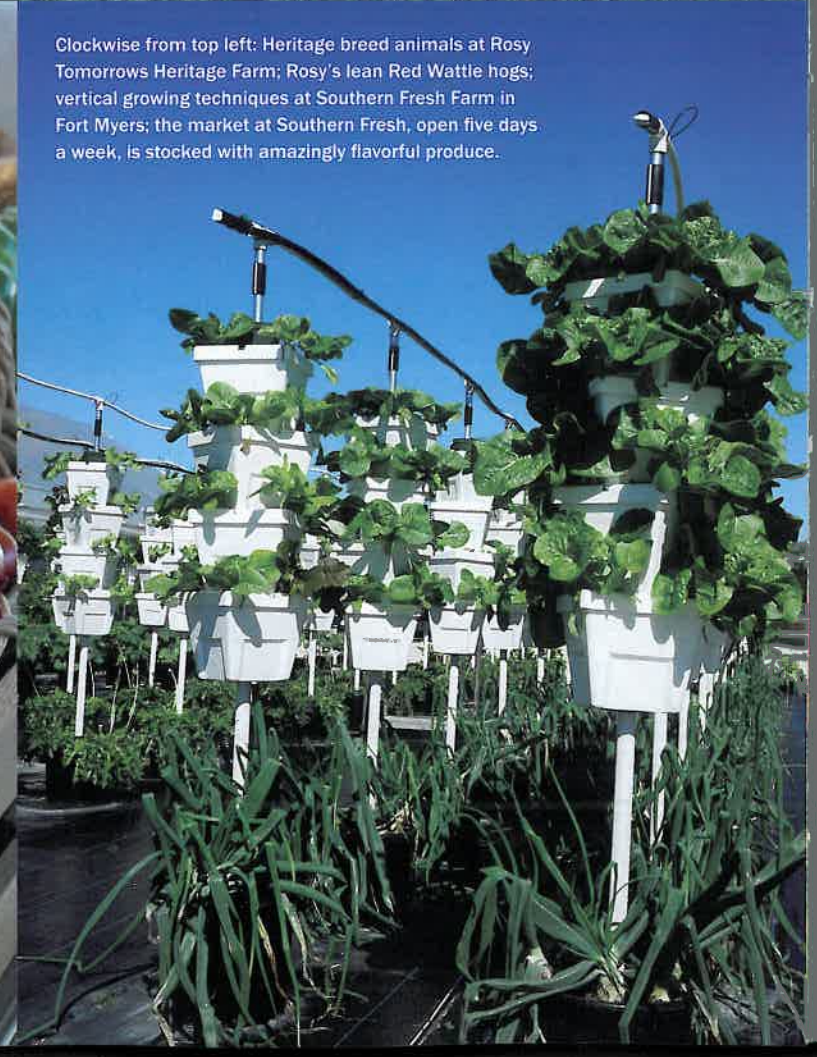
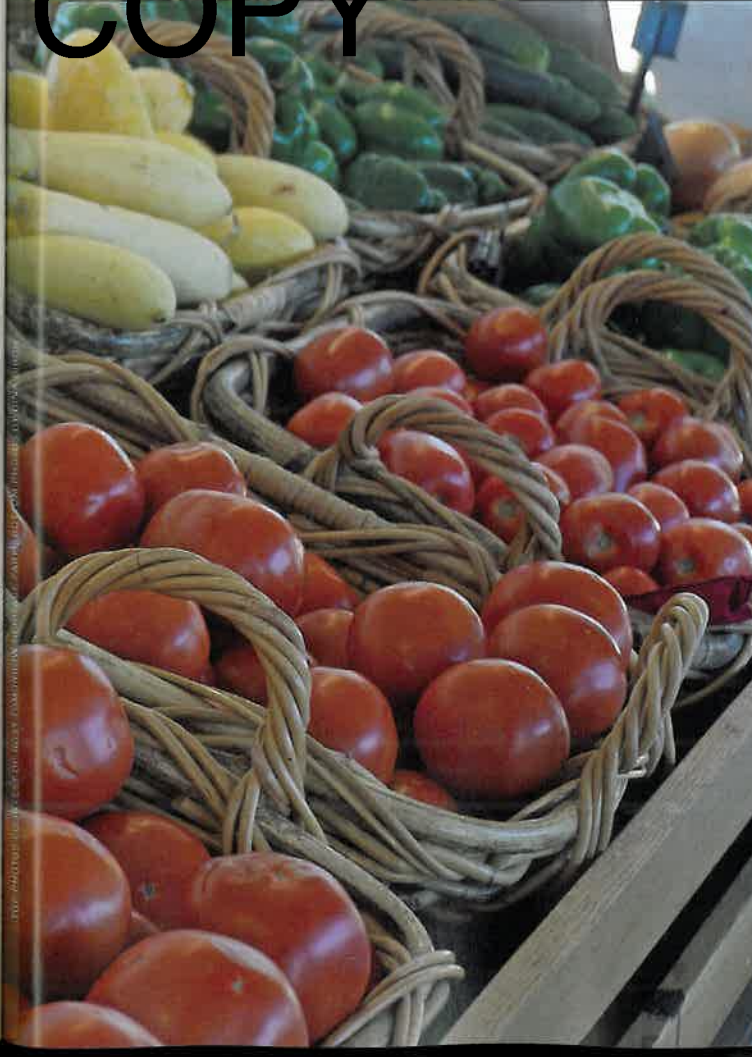
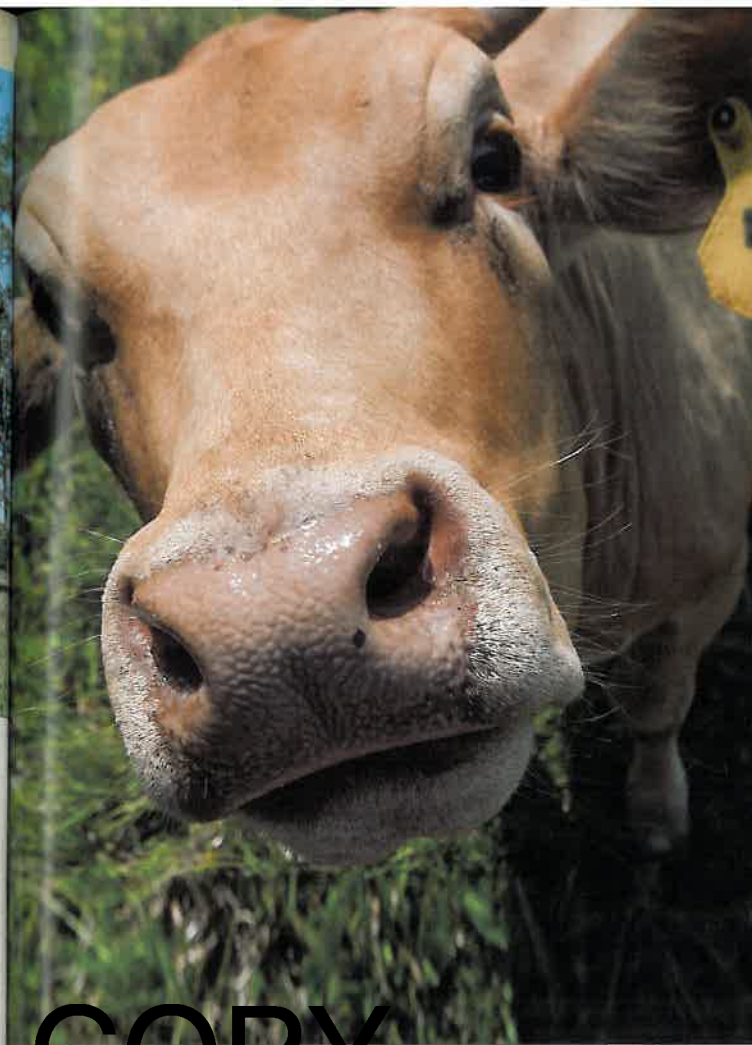
Southern Fresh Farms

Southern Fresh Farms in Fort Myers also has farm-to-table aspirations with items grown on site, both produce and protein. The protein here is farm-raised tilapia.

Currently there are two large tanks, full of fresh water and fish that are fed with natural food. Want fresh fish for dinner? Go to the farm and tell them how much you need. The tilapia is scooped out and filleted on site for you.

Bo McMahon, vice president of operations, is a fourth generation farmer whose family owned a significant amount of farmland along the Daniels Corridor in Fort Myers. Much of that land was sold and developed for high-end communities such as Paseo. However, the family held on to a parcel across the street, where Southern Fresh now conveniently sits.

The farm uses the concept of hydroponics through vertical growing. While true hydroponics is water-based, McMahon's operation is soil-based. Organic containers are filled with a compost mix that includes coconut fiber. Eventually, the plants



Clockwise from top left: Heritage breed animals at Rosy Tomorrows Heritage Farm; Rosy's lean Red Wattle hogs; vertical growing techniques at Southern Fresh Farm in Fort Myers; the market at Southern Fresh, open five days a week, is stocked with amazingly flavorful produce.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF ROSY TOMORROWS HERITAGE FARM

"I had no idea the demand for farm-raised eggs—people fight over our eggs. I'll be expanding that for sure."

— Bo McMahon, Southern Fresh Farms

will be hydrated with water from the fish farm. "No fertilizer on the market can match what fish water can do for plants," explains McMahon.

This type of growing allows farmers to intermix vegetables that don't always do well when next to each other in the ground. It saves water and space, needs less equipment and fuel, not to mention the huge yields over traditional farming. McMahon says, "I can get 200,000 pounds of produce on a ¼ acre."

You will still see some traditional growing here: flowers, herbs, corn and sugar cane to name a few.

Like Rosy Tomorrows, Southern Fresh has delicious farm fresh eggs. "I had no idea the demand for farm-raised eggs—people fight over our eggs. I'll be expanding that for sure," he says with a chuckle.

The market is full of local products and open six days a week with a smoothie bar and limited lunch items. Inspired to try your hand at farming? Join the garden club and get your own plot to tend under the McMahon's tutelage.

Future farm plans include alligator exhibits, dock fishing and seasonal festivals. McMahon calls the whole process agritourism adding, "It's not entirely unique, things like this are being done but not in town."

Southern Fresh also has a playground, petting zoo and more to entertain kids while the parents shop.

Including children is important to all of these farmers and the parents are grateful, most telling stories of how much

easier it is to get kids to eat produce that is picked ripe and grown without chemicals.

Christina Hester, a Worden Farm member for almost 10 years says about her then three-year-old son, "He would pick the tomatoes right off of the vine and pop them in his mouth. They are so sweet, but yet you're getting a veggie."

Slow Foods Southwest Florida

With all of these options for great tasting locally grown foods has come the rebirth of Slow Foods Southwest Florida. Both King and Worden are founding members of the group now under the auspices of the organization's president, Julie Glenn.

Slow Foods is an international movement born in the late 1980s in response to the invasion of fast food. It's an attempt to get people to slow down and think about what they are eating and where it comes from.

Sounds simple, however Glenn says, "Part of the problem Slow Foods has had across the nation is, it's kind of seen as an elitist thing, but that is not the case."

Buying organic, carefully raised food tends to be costly and when many people get it home they still don't know the best ways to prepare items that no longer need to be dredged in sauces because they have little flavor.

Highlighting local producers and chefs who follow the Slow Foods mission of "good, clean and fair food for everyone," Glenn is assembling an army of volunteers to present tutorials,



Instructors at Bonita Springs Middle School with the help of Slow Foods is not only teaching students to eat healthy, but to grow their own produce as well.



workshops and cooking classes at affordable prices so almost anyone who wants to learn, can now afford it.

Money raised at these events is reinvested in local food initiatives, like a container garden at Bonita Springs Middle School. Assistant principal Mary Blackmon says, "The kids are so excited."

She says Life Skills (special needs) students were the first to work the garden. The science classes have worm compost bins and will learn about life cycles through growing the garden. Even the art students are getting involved by decorating the containers.

Slow Foods will follow up by bringing in chefs to teach the kids what to do once they've grown their own food. The process becomes fun, hope, hopefully starting a lifelong practice of food awareness that the young ones can share with others.

After attending the Slow Food University's masters program in Italy, Glenn returned to the United States with dismay over the amount of judgment in the health and food industry.

"There are a billion people telling you what you should and shouldn't eat. In Italy no one was telling me you *have* to try this, you should *never* eat cured meat. It was more like 'Here is what we have; you are welcomed to enjoy it,'" explains Glenn.

She brings that philosophy to Slow Foods, hoping to educate residents on the good foods available in Southwest Florida, where to find them and what to do with them.

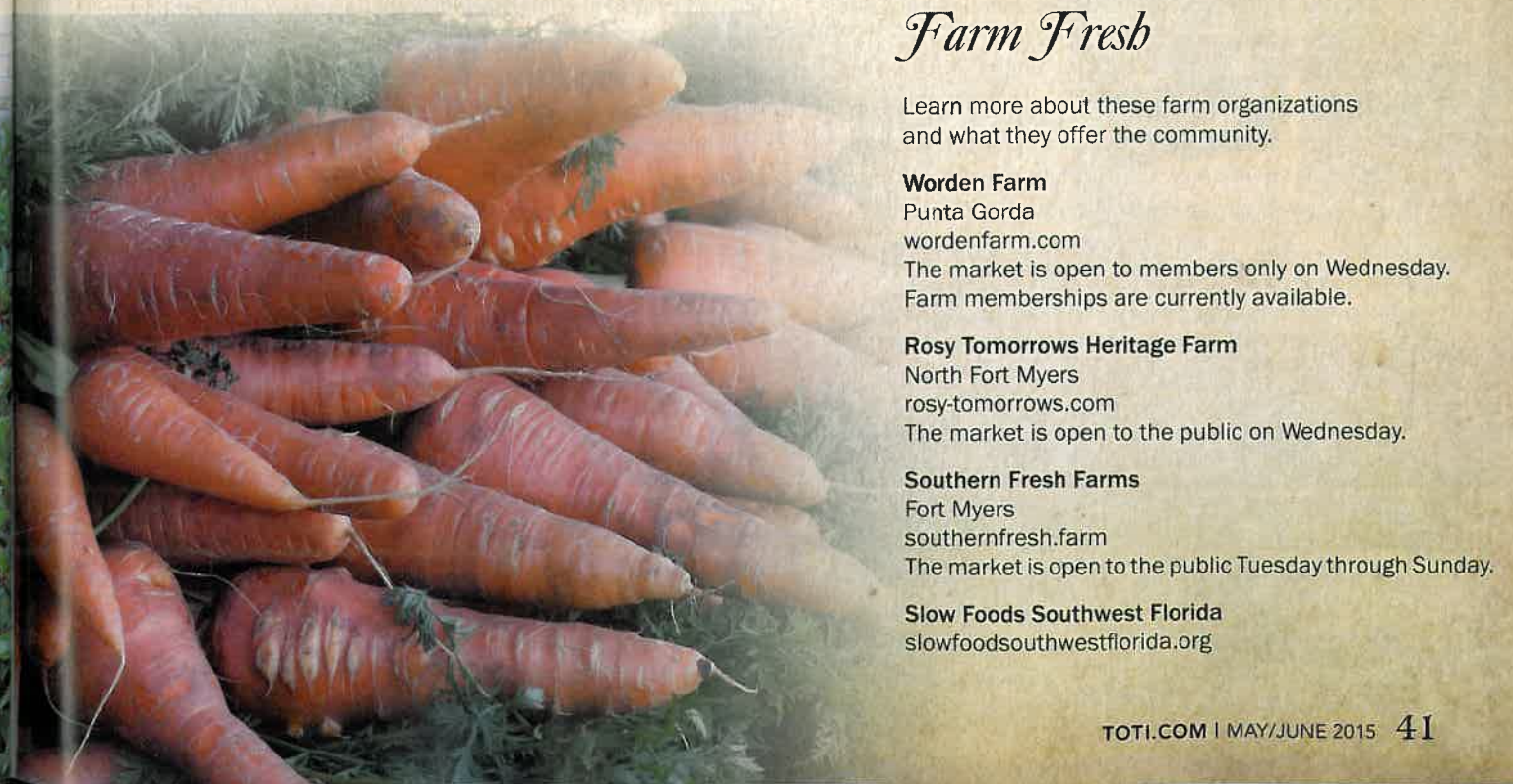
"Shopping is a sport for many people," Glenn points out, "But one of the most intimate things we do is eat. You eat something and it becomes a part of you and it becomes you."

That is why these farmers are so passionate about what they do to improve the food supply, the environment and the health of Southwest Floridians.

Gina Birch is a well-known Southwest Florida broadcast journalist and frequent contributor to TOTI Media. Read more of her musings at thebirchbeat.blogspot.com.



Slow Foods Southwest Florida's fundraising efforts helped to create a container garden at Bonita Springs Middle School.



Farm Fresh

Learn more about these farm organizations and what they offer the community.

Worden Farm

Punta Gorda
wordenfarm.com
The market is open to members only on Wednesday. Farm memberships are currently available.

Rosy Tomorrows Heritage Farm

North Fort Myers
rosy-tomorrows.com
The market is open to the public on Wednesday.

Southern Fresh Farms

Fort Myers
southernfresh.farm
The market is open to the public Tuesday through Sunday.

Slow Foods Southwest Florida

slowfoodswestflorida.org