



FARMER MO MOODIE WALKS ARCADIA'S SUMMER FIELD.



A Farm Plants Historic Roots

Arcadia feeds urban deserts,
top restaurants in D.C. area

Pamela Hess

Photos by Liz Elkind

If you've ever dreamed of having a farm, it might go something like this: You'd start with a couple of acres laid out in quadrants. Centuries-old brick paths would separate one from the other; loose stone walks would bound the corners. Vegetables and fruits would grow in long, perfect rows in between. You'd anchor the south end of the path with a latticework shade house, behind which your bees would buzz busily in hives. At the north end, you'd plant a decorative herb and flower garden. The farm would sit on a hill high enough to catch evening breezes. And to christen your farm, 120 friends would come at dusk to dine on its early summer offerings at a long table stretched between the spring and summer fields. Rain would threaten, but it wouldn't come.

You don't need to dream your way here—this place exists just 17 miles south of Washington, D.C. It's called the Arcadia Center for Sustainable Food and Agriculture.

Arcadia sits on the grounds of Woodlawn Plantation, a parcel of the Mount Vernon estate gifted by George Washington to his nephew, where it exists under the protective wings of both Woodlawn and the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Arcadia, in Renaissance art, was a mythical idyll of pastoral harmony. Arcadia Farms isn't far off its namesake. So let's get the physical perfection of Arcadia out of the way: it's like Martha Stewart came here and exploded.

But the beauty masks the serious work that goes on at this non-profit farm. With its considerable start-up costs funded by the Neighborhood Restaurant Group—which counts D.C.'s Birch and Barley and Alexandria's Evening Star among its nine outposts of farm-centric eating—Arcadia has a list of projects as long as Maureen Moodie's tanned right arm. She is the 28-year-old farmer that runs the place.

"There's a really romantic notion of what it means to farm," says Moodie, "but I spend most of my morning killing bugs."

Arcadia is a historic site, a teaching farm, a learning farm, a kitchen garden for the restaurants' tasting menus, and the main supplier for a mobile market that will sell fresh, farm-grown produce at reduced prices in neighborhoods in D.C. and Virginia that are underserved by grocery stores.

Mobile markets can be tough sells in some neighborhoods, but that is exactly why Michael Babin, the 43-year-old owner of NRG and visionary behind Arcadia, intends to do it: because no one else will.

The Mobile Market's plan is, ultimately, to put itself out of business. The Market will, over time, either build and prove demand for fresh produce in neighborhoods where it is not otherwise available. When there is a steady clientele, the Market will hand its produce business over to a corner store. In exchange for eight feet of space, it will stock and maintain the store's fresh fruit and vegetable supply and buy back anything that doesn't sell; it



A ROTATING CAST OF VOLUNTEERS WORK THE FIELDS ALONGSIDE MOODIE.

“There’s a really romantic notion of what it means to farm,” says Moodie “but I spend most of my morning killing bugs.”

is a risk-free endeavor for the store. Then the Mobile Market will move to a new neighborhood, prove demand there, and repeat the process.

Nothing in the Mobile Market will end up in the compost bin.

“We will pay top-of-the-market prices and we will buy anything they can’t sell in any other way that day,” says Babin.

Arcadia “is the fullest expression of the public spirit of the company,” said Babin, sitting at the Thursday night Wharf DC farmers market—another of his projects to bring fresh food to neighborhoods where it’s not always easily accessible.

“We felt we had a real obligation to get involved in the causes of the neighborhoods we serve—so we donated to the Cancer Society or to the March of Dimes. But there’s a limit to the impact we could have throwing gift certificates at something we know very little about.

“But we live and work every day in the food system and there are serious issues of nutrition—diabetes and obesity. The food system is fundamentally broken. That’s what we know.”

So Babin began noodling the idea of a suburban farm—the keystone in what he hopes will eventually be a network of working farms surrounding the nation’s capital—to supply a mobile market. And then last summer he met Linda Ossman, the director



BEE HIVES ANCHOR THE SOUTHERN EDGE OF THE FARM.

of the Woodlawn Plantation house museum in Alexandria, Va.

Ossman was looking for a way to reinvent the staid but beautiful mansion. Babin was looking for land.

“It seemed like Kismet,” said Ossman. “The vision he had for Arcadia, the connection to his restaurants—it’s the next level, not just referencing the history of the site but making this a cultural center.”

Arcadia broke ground last fall. The plantation’s original kitchen farm between the brick pathways was turned over. NRG chefs sat down with Moodie to look over seed catalogs and decide what to plant. By March the spring garden was in. Summer plants—tomatoes, peppers—are now thriving. A children’s garden is being laid in the third quadrant. The fourth is fallow for now—Moodie plans a peach, paw paw, and apple orchard there. In the meantime, her mornings start at 7 a.m. She works in the field until about noon or 1 p.m.—“because it’s so flippin’ hot in the afternoon”—then handles farm business until around 10 p.m.

Trained as a cultural anthropologist,

Moodie taps her academic background to decide what to plant. Farm records are scant, but the historical mistress of Woodlawn, Nellie Custis, described her lavish dinner parties well in correspondence, and surviving recipe books give clues to what was cultivated.

Arcadia is also the new headquarters for the D.C. Farm to School Network. School groups will come to explore the connection between farming and food. The children’s garden is planted with easily picked veggies—such as pea pods, carrots, and radishes.

“This isn’t interactive in the sense that you push a computer screen. They’re yanking carrots from the ground and putting them into their face,” Ossman said.

Arcadia plans to expand by planting Woodlawn’s historic terraces with vegetables—and then spreading on to another 80 acres across Route 1. It will cultivate half the land and divide the remainder amongst young farmer wannabes, who will learn the craft without having to risk the investment in land and equipment. The training will also help qualify the freshly minted farmers for low-interest federal loans which require a minimum of three years of farming. The program will be called The Farm Incubator.

This site has a long history of cultivating food, farmers, and—as the concept of Arcadia suggests—harmony. Quakers bought 1,950 acres from Wood-



lawn Plantation in the 1850s and sold small lots to both white and freed black farmers—some of whom were descendants of slaves who toiled at Mount Vernon. It was an experiment to show the two could live and work together. It was a success; Woodlawn became a lone outpost of racial integration in the slave-holding South, said Ossman.

The Farm Incubator will be a full circle not just for Woodlawn but for Moodie, who apprenticed at Radix Farm in Upper Marlboro, Md., learning to grow food “by trial and error.”

“I got lucky someone gave me a chance, to teach me,” said Moodie. “It seems like the most natural thing I could be doing.” ♦

Arcadia at Woodlawn

9000 Richmond Highway
Alexandria, VA 22309

arcadiafood.org

Pamela Hess is the editor of *Flavor*



MOODIE AT THE GATE THAT SEPARATES THE FARM AND HERB GARDEN FROM WOODLAWN'S FORMAL YARD.

GREN NURSERY

Offering high caliber teams and leadership to successfully accomplish all of your landscaping needs

15111 Yager Road, Somerset, VA | 540-672-5462 | www.GrenNursery.com

the Wine Kitchen
eat. drink. simply.

www.thewinekitchen.com

7 South King Street
Leesburg, VA 20175
703.777.WINE