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## FARM AID

*Moved by their stomachs (and hearts), D.C. - area foodies help an Eastern Shore farmer transplant his precious crop.*

Inside an Eastern Shore greenhouse the size of a football field, a chop saw shrieks discordantly as it slices miles of metal guttering into portable lengths.

All 50,000 feet of the metal trough is being moved, truckload by truckload, to a new home, so that innovative farmer David Lankford can continue to grow the lush herbs, fruits and vegetables he supplies to numerous choice restaurants.

The crews that have spent the last several weekends doing this dirty work at Lankford's Hurlock farm might be called a Save the Baby Peas Corps. **Washington-area foodies, they were roused by an online alert from Lankford's friend and patron, Alexandria chef Cathal Armstrong. Their mission: to dismantle Lankford's farm in order to save it.**

Patricia Dillman, director of litigation support for a Washington law firm and a leader of the effort, has returned to the Dorchester County farm weekly since the call for help went out in late summer.

"I can't drive to Louisiana and Mississippi to help [hurricane victims]," she says, "but why not help someone in your own backyard?"

Especially when the gastronomical future may be at stake.

The response has been gratifying to both Lankford and Armstrong. A ruddy man with a white beard and flashing blue eyes, Lankford, 56, is an agricultural visionary who, due to business troubles, has been forced to relocate. Armstrong, a boyish 36, is the dexterous proprietor of Restaurant Eve, a combination bistro and formal "tasting room" that has received plaudits galore since opening last year.

The two men's expertise may lie at the far ends of the food chain, but in the past year and a half, they have come to depend on one another for sustenance and success. Now, they are working to salvage the farm so that Lankford can continue to provision Armstrong's and other restaurants. Without the joint effort, Lankford would lose his livelihood. And the arugula Armstrong serves in simple, lovely salads and other dishes would simply not measure up.

### **Back to his roots**

Lankford met Armstrong shortly after the chef opened Restaurant Eve. Under the name Shore Phresh & Phancee, Lankford had been delivering produce since 2000 to area restaurants to offset debt acquired when he expanded his strawberry transplant business. "I developed a unique way of growing strawberries very cleanly, virus free," he says. But the strawberry enterprise was costly; Lankford built it too quickly and became overextended.

"So we went back to our roots, which are vegetables," Lankford says. Cultivated with the same methods used to raise strawberries, the vegetables flourished on what was then known as Davon Crest Farm. Because Lankford farmed year round in greenhouses and provided a profusion of herb and produce varieties, he had a lot to offer fine restaurants.

Lankford was also willing to cater to particular needs, allowing his fennel to bolt, for example, to harvest the plants' delicate blossoms for garnish. The same precise skills were employed to collect the chive blossoms, cucumber blossoms and tiny Johnny jump-ups prized by culinary customers.

Lankford's produce was consistently pristine, Armstrong says. But, "I didn't even realize the scope of what David was doing until I went out there myself. He wasn't just some hillbilly farmer growing vegetables. He had a very sophisticated, very innovative farm."

Over the years, Lankford has developed a self-sustaining growing system in which plant refuse is ground up and recycled into the soil. He then grows his produce in long rows of guttering, the kind used in housing construction, irrigated with miles of PVC piping. With the aid of his wife, Sharon, crop consultant John Hochmuth and a handful of day laborers, Lankford works the farm, actually a sprawling network of 17 greenhouses so densely cultivated that an acre's worth of guttering yields 8 acres worth of produce.

Although he used the same seeds as other farmers, Lankford's ingenious approach became widely known for exceptional produce - ideal for chefs like Armstrong, who emphasize "simple preparation to highlight the quality of the ingredients."

"One of the best examples of things he grows is arugula," the Dublin-born chef says. "Most people are growing it hydroponically. ... David grows it in soil and controls the diet much more carefully." The arugula is "full of intense flavor, full of pepper," Armstrong says. "It doesn't taste anything like the watery stuff you get from anybody else."

## **Growing friendship**

As they collaborated, the friendship between chef and farmer grew. "The more I got to know him, the more I got to like him," Armstrong says. "They are very, very, very nice, down-to-earth people. It just killed me to see them in such trouble. I would do anything I could to help them out."

With Armstrong as a reference, Lankford gained accounts from a slew of impressive Washington restaurants, including Maestro, Galileo, Palena, Cashion's Eat Place and Vidalia. Including restaurant clients in Rehoboth, the Eastern Shore and Annapolis, his accounts now number almost 30.

Five evenings a week, Lankford makes deliveries to Washington, stopping late on Thursdays to visit awhile at Restaurant Eve. Armstrong "gives me pep talks and free food, which cheers me up," Lankford says. Often, he returns to his Hurlock home at 2 a.m.

But Lankford's increasing renown wasn't enough to reverse his financial straits, which resulted in bankruptcy.

"We were too late to save the farm," Lankford says. Last year, it was sold and leased back to him for one more season. But Lankford would have to be off the property by early October and had no plans to resume farming anywhere else.

Early this past summer, he went to Armstrong and told him he was ready to quit. "His immediate response was, 'No, you're not quitting,'" Lankford says.

Armstrong didn't want to see his friend abandon the work he loved. Nor could he do without Lankford's produce. In a gesture of enlightened self-interest, Armstrong assured the farmer that he would help him relocate his greenhouses and promised financial support during the transition.

Lankford took the chef up on his offer. He found a field to lease in Trappe in nearby Talbot County and began the arduous process of moving the entire operation. Piece by piece, he and the volunteers are hauling the guttering to a field in Trappe, 40 minutes away. There, the gutters are being reassembled, remounted on long wooden platforms and replanted with herbs, vegetables and baby greens.

Even as he plotted the move, Lankford aimed to be harvesting at both farm sites, seeding new crops and making deliveries. His goal was to have one greenhouse up and running on the new site by this weekend, when, tradition has it, the Eastern Shore has its first frost.

Armstrong saw to it that the farmer had the help he needed. He "has been with me all through this rocky road," Lankford says. "He has always figured out how to keep us moving."

One day in September, the kitchen staff from the Washington restaurant Maestro assisted with the move. The next weekend, Armstrong and his own staff uprooted the contents of Lankford's basil house and hauled it to Trappe in a caravan that included a flatbed truck rented by the chef.

Also in September, Armstrong's wife, Meshelle, provided an emotional appeal for help that her husband posted on donrockwell .com, a message board for Washington foodies: "Without David Lankford, the basil you eat would not be so green, the carrots not so rich and the corn not so sweet. He is a pioneer, an innovator and the first to grow the sweetest of strawberries in winter."

The request brought city folks to the farm where, every weekend for the past two months, they have been pulling the long rows of herbs and plants from the endless guttering, cutting the guttering and breaking down the greenhouse frames. The epicureans are also learning more about the food that appears on their plates - that "micro greens" are actually baby lettuce, for example.

On an early October weekend, the volunteer crew toils away in the large greenhouse, still home to masses of chocolate mint, lavender and chard. The moving effort is behind schedule but progressing. Emily Shrift, an Annapolis resident and attorney practicing in Baltimore, rhapsodizes as she helps out for the second Saturday in a row.

"Last week, we literally had our faces in thyme," she says. "We were pulling it [out of the gutter], lifting long snakes of rich loam and wonderful, aromatic thyme."

## **Beyond food**

Cash donations have come in, too. Of his farm team of volunteers and backers, Lankford says it is distressing to realize that "I'll never be able to pay them back."

But for Shrift, Dillman and others who have come to the Eastern Shore to work with him, the opportunity to make the connection between the delicious fresh food they love and the farm where it's grown is payment enough.

For Armstrong, who became an American citizen this month, it is an opportunity that transcends his restaurant's needs. There is something in Lankford's experience - his love of farming and his financial misfortune - that carries him back to his childhood.

"When we were growing up in Ireland, my dad had a little garden in back that the family relied on," Armstrong says. When his father was forced to go out of business, he says, "We depended more on the garden at that point than we had in the past."

And yet, Armstrong remembers, "We were eating the best things we could despite the poverty."

After becoming a chef and leaving Ireland, Armstrong was reminded of his good fortune on a visit home. "I remember going home and the potatoes were just ready [to harvest]. I put a pot of water to boil, dug a

potato and ate it with butter and salt. It was probably the best thing I ever ate in my life."

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