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Quality Assurance & Food Safety

September-October 2011



The Chef's Garden

Old-world techniques, advanced food safety technology, and the unique character of **Farmer Lee Jones** bring national acclaim to this small-town farm.



The Chef's Garden

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By Lisa Lupo • Photos by Vicki Jeromos-Blayney

In the 1980s, a crop-destroying hail-storm, unprecedented 23-percent interest rates, and growing competition by large-scale farms sent the 1,200-acre Jones family farm into a sheriff's sale. It left the family with only a two-room house and a small, wooden outbuilding which was loaded up on skids and hauled an eighth mile down the road to a six-acre plot that eldest son, Lee, had purchased to start over.

Thirty-some years later, the internationally renowned, direct-to-chef farm has grown in stature while preserving a small size. With 300 acres, only 100 of which are farmed at any one time, Huron, Ohio-based Chef's Garden is recognized, visited, and lauded by culinary icons, top chefs, and exclusive restaurants for its same-day, picked-to-order quality artisan vegetables and micro-greens; its nationally renowned educational programs; and its advanced food safety practices.

It is a story of being the best one can be; of America's ingenuity and fortitude at its best; of industry success based on providing only the best in food quality and safety; and, at its roots, of the age-old adage that "Father knows best."

It is a story told by the iconic Farmer Lee Jones, as he's now known. Leaning forward in his trademark bib overalls and red bowtie, eyes intent on his audience of three, "Farmer" tells the story he must have recited hundreds of times, as though it were his first...

THE VOTE. It started at a family conference around a card table. The Joneses had developed a small sideline of specialty chef items, founded when they received a request for squash blossoms from European-trained Chef Iris Bailin. But the farm's primary income, such as it was, came from farmers' markets, which, at a historic low, was a rough way to go, Farmer said. But dividing their

focus wasn't working either; so it was time for the family to make some decisions on its future and its farm.

Leading the family conference, Dad put it to vote: Do we focus on the farmers' markets, or do we try to build the direct-to-chef business?

Farmer (then just Lee) had the first vote. "The farmers' markets make up 98 percent of our business, and chefs are a real pain in the neck," he said. "I vote to abandon the chefs." The vote went around the table with each person putting in a tally agreeing with Lee's assessment. Until it came to Dad.

"As his fist banged the table," Farmer bellowed—his own fist-whack making us jump, "Dad voted for the chefs, saying, 'The direction that Iris has asked us to go is the direction that we need to go.'"

Dad won. And his foresight has become the family's—and the culinary industry's—fortune.

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COVER STORY

NATURAL AND OLD-WORLD. Since that decisive family vote, The Chef's Garden has become the go-to source for chefs from around the world seeking burgundy amaranth and cucamelons for salads; pineapple mint to season lamb dishes; Cherokee purple heirloom tomatoes to grace a plate; or the search that started it all—the mild, smooth, slightly floral flavor of the squash blossom.

"When we met Iris, she turned us on to something that didn't exist in the U.S.," Farmer said. Then slightly retracting his words, he added, "What she was looking for *had* existed in America—it was just that she was about 40 years too late."

Although Iris was the first to turn the family on to the potential of specializing in artisan, quality, heirloom varieties, once the family "decided" to focus specifically on chefs' needs, they quickly found it to be an unfulfilled niche with a great deal of potential.

Supplying top chefs with unique and flavorful delicacies means that quality must be apparent not only in the taste of the vegetables but also in the appearance. In fact, first impressions are so important with these products that The Chef's Garden employee uniforms have patches designating them to be WOW team members. That is, Farmer said, "When a chef opens a box of our produce, we want it to be like Christmas morning. When they open that box, we want them to say, 'WOW!' So this is a constant reminder of that."

To ensure wow-worthy quality, produce is hand-harvested when ripe, not before, then it is packed by hand, with delicate items such as tomatoes surrounded with foam padding.

With such produce, however, "ripe" can take on a variety of definitions. "Chefs can buy bok choy at seven different stages of growth," Farmer said. "Each stage offers a unique character and flavor." To ensure each chef gets exactly what is wanted at the exact stage requested, all Chef's Garden produce is picked only to order, and shipped within 24 hours of harvest.

To accomplish this, an electronic program is continually updated with the farm's



The Chef's Garden cauliflower varieties have been a secret ingredient on Food Network's Iron Chef America.

"growing" inventory. If a chef calls in to order produce, such as, say, dragon-tongue beans, the produce specialist can search "The Garden," (as the program is called) and immediately relate how many are available, today's stage of growth, and when the perfect bean will be ready to ship.

The Garden also includes printable product sheets with full descriptions and photos of each of its more than 600 items, along with ways that other chefs have used the produce—without giving away any proprietary recipes.

"Our produce is literally growing inventory until it is sold," Farmer said.

The data in The Garden is maintained through the use of a hand-held barcode scanner, used to scan every item in the literal garden for tracking and tracing in the electronic Garden. Thus, the system not only provides information on availability, but it is also a key factor in The Chef's Garden's food safety initiatives.

"Technology is one of the few things that continues to become more and more affordable," said Bob "Bobby" Jones, Jr., who manages production. "And the only way we're going to survive is through technology, particularly as a small farm."

ADVANCED FOOD SAFETY. Even as small farms across the U.S. clamor for



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exceptions to the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA), food safety is an essential part of every process at The Chef's Garden, as is evidenced by its practices and technologies—superior to those of many mid-size processors.

Jones sees food safety as a critical element of its business as well as a key differentiator for it. "In the U.S. specifically, there is a huge difference between agriculture and food," Jones said. "Most farms don't look at food safety like restaurants do." But as a direct-to-chef distributor, with renowned chefs and facilities such as Disney World, Ritz Carlton, and Food Network's "Iron Chef" TV show depending on its products, The Chef's Garden makes food safety a top priority and prevention a primary tenet of its programs.

Food safety, Jones said, "is a true social responsibility. We grow food and people eat that food. We have a responsibility to do that so it is safe."

As such, food safety has become a part of the farm's culture, with "literally hundreds of programs" from GAP to HACCP; temperature monitoring and foreign material control to hygiene

management; and every employee educated on its importance and practices.

"Total traceability and total transparency is a differentiating factor for us," Jones said, adding that it is essential in protecting the chefs' customers; those who dine in their restaurants.

However, Jones added, "We certainly don't feel that we have 'arrived,' and we are improving every day. But we look at everything out there,



Production Manager Bob Jones, Jr., sees food safety as a social responsibility. We grow food and people eat that food. We have a responsibility to do that so it is safe."

learn and gather ideas, then employ the best of those." Every time the farm has an audit, Jones said he asks the inspectors what they have seen in other facilities and how they could be applied at The Chef's Garden.

As such, FSMA holds no fear for The Chef's Garden, as it does for many small growers, some of whom have chosen to sell off their farms rather than face stricter regulations. "We are interested and anxious to see what comes out of FSMA, but we're not afraid," Jones said.

Jones also commended FDA officials for visiting and talking with small farmers prior to detailing regulation specifics. "They are collaborating with the industry which is the only way it will work," he said.

TRADITION MEETS TECHNOLOGY.

Although The Chef's Garden implements advanced technologies, it focuses its sustainable farming on old-world techniques.

"God designed a system that is far superior to what we can develop chemically

or synthetically," Farmer said. Thus, farming is done through natural techniques of days past. "A lot of our direction comes from books that were written 100 to 150 years ago," he said.

Much of The Chef's Garden variety is

also a factor of researching and reintroducing old-world varieties, Farmer said. Initially, its offerings were based on chef requests, but today the farm offers fare with which even renowned chefs may be unfamiliar. There are literally thousands of varieties of greens, Farmer said, and The Chef's Garden employs researchers to continue finding new old varieties of produce of all sorts.

Traditional techniques include rotation practices for the natural development of soil fertility and quality. A typical 75-acre farm of the old world would have 25 acres actively growing crops, 25 acres as pasture, and 25 acres sitting fallow. The Chef's Garden follows the same techniques, with 100 of its 300 acres actively farmed at any one time.

While maintaining such traditional techniques, however, the farm's advanced technologies come back into play in its state-of-the-art laboratory, in which soils, seeds, and produce are continually tested. "We do all our own soil sampling in order to get instant results," said Lab Manager Jessie Henning. During our visit, a lab technician was testing humus, with the goal of ensuring the greatest maintenance

“THERE CAN BE AS MUCH AS 300-PERCENT DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SEED WEIGHT, FARMER SAID, WITH THAT DIFFERENCE IMPACTING QUALITY.”

of nutrients and "beneficial little critters, so we don't have to apply fertilizers," Henning said.

The farm's seeds also undergo germ testing to ensure quality and sprouting, she said. Included with its lab equipment is a gravity table to sort seeds by weight. Seed size impacts not only harvest size, but also product quality, Henning explained. "Heavier seed has more endosperm which produces higher quality."

There can be as much as 300-percent difference between seed weight, Farmer said, with that difference impacting qual-

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ity. In addition, the seed-testing equipment enables the farm to plant like seed with like seed so that, come harvest, each area holds plants of equal size and quality.

In-house soil testing also provides analysis of deficiencies, enabling The Chef's Garden to plant vegetation that will build up those deficiencies, Farmer said. "It's unbelievable how well it works and how simple it is if you allow it to work naturally."

Although the lab sends out its microbiological testing, it does conduct onsite tests for *Salmonella* and *E. coli*, and is switching to PCR technology to reduce result time from 24-48 hours down to an hour and a half, Henning said.

"PCR is the next frontier," Jones said. And because of its quick results, it is being conducted at the farm level, with



As executive chef and director of the Culinary Vegetable Institute, Michael Lyons' goal is to take the quality and uniqueness of the farm into similar quality and creativity in the kitchen.

Judging the Iron Chefs



In his iconic overalls and red bowtie, Farmer Lee Jones has not only created ties to famed chefs around the world, he has established a fame all his own.

He is a four-time judge on Food Network's *Iron Chef America*. He has provided the "secret ingredient" for the show and worked with or hosted such famed chefs as Bobby Flay, Michael Symon, Aaron

Sanchez, and Robert Irvine. He has been featured on Martha Stewart, CNN, and ABC World News; and he was recently inducted into the culinary industry's James Beard Foundation Who's Who of Food & Beverage in America, for "significant and lasting achievements and contributions."

Farmer's appearances on Iron Chef started with his supplying of product to the show, which led to the use of his cauliflower varieties as the secret ingredient, then an invitation to judge the chefs' creations.

Though bound to confidentiality on much of the show, Farmer was able to talk a bit about his first invitation and appearance. "It was amazing," he said, but at the same time, "I got very anxious." On the show, a guest chef challenges an Iron Chef on creation of dishes involving a secret ingredient. Three judges watch the cooking, then critique the dishes and judge each on taste, plating, and originality.

Halfway through the judging, Farmer said, "I started thinking, 'What am I doing? I'm a farmer not a food critic.' I got tight and quit talking." But a producer told Farmer to relax and just give his opinions on the foods, "We wanted you to give a farmer's interpretation," he said.

"When it was put in that perspective, it became a lot easier," Farmer said. But his silence came back to haunt him when he was then told, "Since you didn't make any comments during that part, you have to do the wrap up."

Upon the show's airing, Farmer warned family and friends that it wasn't going to be good. But, he said, "It didn't come out too bad. All I can say is 'Thank God for editing!'"

While some have derided Farmer's bow-tied appearance as cliché and schtick, it takes only a few minutes into a visit with Farmer to see that, if schtick, his humble, down-home, old-country representation is truly indicative of the character and ethics of not only Farmer, but of the Jones family and The Chef's Garden as a whole.



everything tested prior to harvest. "Testing is conducted to validate the growing process," he said. "You can't clean dirty produce in a rinse system; you have to put clean produce in."

Jones noted that some PCR opponents don't like the test because, while it validates the presence or absence of the organism, it doesn't tell if a pathogen is alive or dead. "I don't care if it is alive or dead; I care about its presence or absence," Jones

said. And if it is found—dead or alive—the block of produce is destroyed.

Implementing continually advancing technologies for food safety, however, does not come without costs—for any farm or processor. And because of that, Jones said, "U.S. consumers have a decision to make: Do you want safe food or do you want the cheapest food? We have the safest food in the world, but it is not the cheapest. What

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Veggie U students participate in a Veggie: Possible challenge with visiting Food Network star Robert Irvine. (For information on the program and sponsorship opportunities, visit www.veggie.u.org.)

The Culinary Vegetable Institute

As modern as the farm is old-world, The Chef's Garden's Culinary Vegetable Institute (CVI) sits on an additional 100 acres and includes a two-story kitchen, dining room, executive suite, team accommodations, culinary library, root cellar, and wine cellar, along with experimental vegetable, forest, and herb gardens.

The institute was created "for chefs to come and play and experiment with products and with food," said Farmer Lee Jones. Such creativity is what brought them to their craft, but it is generally the least of which they get to do in their day-to-day jobs, he said.

In addition to its own renowned executive chef and director Michael Lyons, the CVI has played host to chefs such as Iron Chef Michael Symon and Bobby Flay, Chef Charlie Trotter and his culinary team, and the teams of chefs who participate in the annual Veggie U Food & Wine Celebration. Menus range from filleted fish caught in the abutting river, to the lemon butter braised bronze fennel served recently at one of the farm's monthly Earth-to-Table dinners, to the purple carrots that come in a tasting box for students of the Veggie U children's education program.

The day after our visit, in fact, Veggie U students were part of a Veggie: Possible challenge with visiting Food Network chefs Robert Irvine and Marc Summers. Irvine has used The Chef's Garden produce for years, and has become friends with Farmer, so he took the opportunity to visit the farm when in the area for taping of his current TV program, *Restaurant Impossible*.

In addition to his culinary creations for the CVI, Chef Lyons hosts similar challenges himself for corporate events and visiting chefs. Having graduated top in his class at Le Cordon Bleu, achieved a masters in accounting and finance, and attained experience in business consulting, Lyons makes the ideal liaison and educator for the many facets of the facility.

As executive chef and director, Lyons said his goal is to take the quality and uniqueness of the farm into similar quality and creativity in the kitchen. "I try to connect the dots with what Farmer starts in the field with these chefs in the kitchen."

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do we really want?"

Jones, himself, does not see it as a decision but as an intrinsic responsibility, and for The Chef's Garden, he said, "It is about knowing where the seed came from and where the product is going—and everything in between."

As intrinsic to The Chef's Garden as the metal detector through which every item passes is the placard under which each flows: "Through this opening passes the pride, success, and future of the entire Chef's Garden team." **QA**

The author is Editor of QA magazine. She can be reached at llupo@gie.net.

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