



VEGGIE TALES Fields to Plate sells its vegetables to local restaurants and grocers and at farmers' markets.

TASTE

The Beet Kings

By getting back to the roots, Max Fields and James Plate of Durango's Fields to Plate have found an untapped market in southern Colorado

BY ALISON GWINN

You have to be a bit cussed to fall in love with root vegetables. Thick-skinned, dirty and wrinkled, beets, carrots, yams and the like may be good for you (growing underground makes them super-nutrient dense) but they're often a bit too gnarly to get invited to the dance.

But root vegetables are a perfect match for city boys-turned-young farmers Max Fields and James Plate of Durango's Fields to Plate. After growing up in Denver's Washington Park neighborhood, both took off for Fort Lewis College in Durango, where they came under the tutelage of

professor Beth LaShell ("our unofficial mother figure," Plate says), the driving force behind an agricultural incubator program at the Old Fort at Hesperus.

Learning the ropes by working with farmers and ranchers in the region, and then growing crops on their own small plot at the Old Fort, Fields and Plate found their calling. The key was discovering, and refurbishing, an old unused root cellar, a perfect complement to Colorado's short 90-day growing season.

Today, Fields to Plate produces enough vegetables to sell wholesale to many local restaurants and grocers, as well as at farm-

ers' markets and through a small CFA, and Fields and Plate are about to move onto a much larger plot of land north of Durango. We talked to the appropriately named duo about the challenges of being first-generation farmers in Colorado.

What made you realize you wanted to be farmers? "For me, growing up in the big city, I didn't really have a lot of access to fresh, local food or even know where my food was coming from," Plate says. "So going into college, I knew I wanted to pursue crops and agriculture. I didn't really know what that would look like, but obviously it came to life."

FIELDS TO PLATE

Adds Fields: “I was an environmental studies major, which meant a lot of education surrounding social and environmental justice issues. But I thought there was a lot of talk and not a lot of walk. I wanted to know what I could do about the problems in our food system, and I think farming filled the gap for me. I knew I could make a difference.”

And why the Durango area? “We have such a thriving community in southwest Colorado, with folks interested in sourcing their food locally,” Plate says. “We’re not off any major highway, and we’re blocked in by mountain passes, so there’s no reason for food trucks to come here. We looked for ways to create food security in the region, and that meant producing food on a large scale. We started with a half acre between us through the incubator program and have doubled every year since. In 2016, we produced on three and a half acres.”

Tell us about the root cellar. It sounds so old-fashioned. “Our sole focus has been utilizing traditional farming techniques that are less reliant on fossil fuels and using a method of crop farming that has gone by the wayside,” Plate says. “Realizing the constraints in our region given its short growing season, we knew that a root cellar was one way to supply food to the region during months we were unable to produce. There were a ton of old structures on the Fort Lewis property, including a root cellar built in the 1920s to store food for the school; we were able to do minimal work to get it working.”

What crops do you grow? “It varies from year to year, but usually around 10 crops, including potatoes, rutabagas, Brussels sprouts and cabbage. But the main thing we’re known for is non-certified organic beets and carrots. And we have a superior-tasting product,” Fields says. “Even organic out of California doesn’t compare to what we produce because of the cold nights and the high-clay soils here. California has a lot of sandy soils, so producers there have to supplement nutrients into their soil just to get the crops to grow. Once people try our raw beets, their eyes light up. It’s like, ‘So this is what a beet is supposed to taste like?’”

You guys are moving your operation off the Fort Lewis property. Where are you going to farm next? “We’re going to be leasing a 35-acre property right on the river in the Animas Valley 10 miles north of Durango. It’s at about 6,500 feet, and in the past we were at 7,600 feet,” says Fields. “Farmable land with water is expensive to buy, a minimum of \$5,000 an acre, which is particularly hard for first-generation farmers like us. We also use very old equipment; we have to be aware of every dollar spent, and we really can’t afford any tractor built after 1950.”



LEARNING THE ROPES BY WORKING WITH FARMERS AND RANCHERS IN THE REGION, AND THEN GROWING CROPS ON THEIR OWN SMALL PLOT AT THE OLD FORT AT HESPERUS, FIELDS AND PLATE FOUND THEIR CALLING.

Are you happy you went into farming?

“I think I can speak for both of us and say there are definitely no regrets,” Fields says. “It’s tough, and there are a lot of obstacles to overcome, but that’s part of the challenge and the fun. As our professor Beth LaShell says: ‘Welcome to agriculture.’” **DLM**



NEED-TO-KNOW INFO
FIELDS TO PLATE

fieldstoplasteproduce.com
Growing vegetables at 7,600 feet, the farmers use a root cellar to store produce.



ORGANIC FRIED BEETS WITH LEMON MINT AIOLI

Courtesy Paul Gelose, owner of the Palace Restaurant, Durango

INGREDIENTS

- 2 pounds organic fresh beets with tops removed**
- ½ cup cornstarch**
- ½ cup rice flour***
- ⅓ teaspoon cayenne pepper**
- ¼ teaspoon coarse sea salt**

DIRECTIONS

Clean and boil the whole beets in salted water until tender. Cool and peel. Slice beets in ¼-inch-thick wedges. Pre-mix the cornstarch, rice flour and cayenne in a mixing bowl and toss beets until coated. Shake excess flour from beets and fry in a deep fryer at 400 F until crisp and browned lightly. Toss with sea salt.

* Note: 100 percent cornstarch can be used if no rice flour is available.

LEMON MINT AIOLI

- ½ cup mayonnaise, homemade or store-bought organic**
- ⅓ cup olive oil, extra virgin**
- 1 tablespoon fresh mint, chopped medium**
- 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice**
- 2 pinches salt**

DIRECTIONS

Combine all ingredients in a small mixing bowl. Adjust ingredients as desired.

Serve the beets hot out of the fryer on a bed of greens, with the cool lemon mint aioli on the side as a dipping sauce. Garnish with lemon wedge and freshly chopped parsley.



GETTING BEETER ALL THE TIME

Did you know beets are high in fiber, antioxidants, anti-inflammatories, heart-healthy nitrates, vitamins A and K and toxin-fighting betalin?