



Meadowlark at Munson Farm

# SAVORING THE SOURCE

*The farm dinner comes of age with fresh fare, posh presentation and a side of sustainability*

Thanks to a growing national interest in sustainable farming and “living local,” the American farm dinner is in the midst of a dramatic transformation. Finally, this thriving artisan industry can deliver the rustic elegance and regional flavor one might expect to find in the Tuscan or Provençal countryside—here in our very own country. **Mindy Sink** lines up our top three picks.



Setting the scene for another amazing Meadow Lark dinner

Photos by Diego Baud

## MEADOW LARK FARM DINNERS | Boulder, Colorado

What is a stinging nettle, and how does it taste? These are just two of the many questions we pondered with Chef Dakota Soifer during our sumptuous five-course dinner at Cure Organic Farm in East Boulder, Colorado—one of the many local “greentpreneurs” represented by Meadow Lark Farm Dinners. Seated at a long, linen-draped table among the colorful lettuce beds, our lively group of 36 diverse diners dug into the savory nettle frittata. To our relief, we learned that the nettle loses its sting during the cooking process, leaving behind simple, earthy flavors unlike anything I’d ever tasted.

Meadow Lark Farm Dinners is the brainchild of Veronica Volny and China Tresemer, whose very different resumes somehow reveal the same obsessions: travel, nature, education and (of course) food. “We had a desire to understand more about where our food came from, a desire to experience the taste of this place,” Veronica says. “What we really

try to do is show people how one can eat with the produce grown right here in our own backyard.” For lucky Meadow Lark patrons, this means sampling dishes not found in most supermarkets—sweet rhubarb Champagne, fresh nettle soup (or in our case, frittata), spicy greens and fried squash blossoms.

The settings are sweetly rural; the flavors simple and undeniably fresh. Volny and Tresemer work with Boulder-area farmers to gather the finest seasonal offerings—which are then lovingly prepared on-site aboard “Bella,” a retired (and eBay-acquired) Indiana school bus that Meadow Lark has converted into a portable pantry and kitchen. Each meal hosts about 40 people, seated together at a communal table set *al fresco* amid the fresh produce, with pigs and chickens providing authentic dinner music. Reservations are taken one month at a time and tend to sell out quickly. [www.farmdinners.com](http://www.farmdinners.com).

## DINNER, WHERE IS THY STING?

Stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*), while relatively new to American tables, has a long culinary and medicinal history in Europe. A natural diuretic, the plant has been used for hundreds of years to treat eczema, arthritis, anemia and gout. *Nässelsoppa*, a soup made from the young springs shoots, is a delicacy in Sweden, and the plant is used in a variety of dishes across the European Union.

Washing, drying, cooking or chopping disables the stinging hairs—but there is a small, stubborn part of the population that seems to frown upon such weakness. If you’re in this camp, don’t miss the World Stinging Nettle Eating Championship, held every summer at The Bottle Inn in Dorset, England. For pictures of the 2009 competition, visit [www.thebottleinn.co.uk](http://www.thebottleinn.co.uk).



## OUTSTANDING IN THE FIELD

### Santa Cruz, California

Jim Denevan may very well have planted the seed for gourmet farm dinners when he founded Outstanding in the Field ten years ago. His vision: to dine at the source of the bounty on one's plate, in the company of the people who made it possible. Today, Denevan's sought-after culinary events are equal parts dining experience and performance art, with their signature "endless table" seating as many as 150 people. The OITF footprint has increased as well, venturing far beyond its roots in the organic farms of Northern California to locations throughout the U.S. and Canada—and even one ambitious event in Florence, Italy.

Denevan spends the off-season traveling the country, searching for the best local farms and culinary talent. "It's not every day you get to sit next to the person who planted the beans, raised the lamb and shaped the cheese on your plate," he says. Farm-and-chef pairings are made up to a year in advance, and the perfectly choreographed evenings continue to sell out—despite prices that typically hover around \$200 per person. Perhaps that's partly because the OITF experience is specifically designed to help patrons forge a meaningful connection with the communities they're visiting. "People have found it's an incredible way to access a particular region and explore it a little more deeply," Denevan says. "They use the dinner as an anchor for other activities in the region."

Photo courtesy of Outstanding in the Field



Denevan also takes great pains to ensure that each meal is uniquely local in some way, that it's tied to the whole area rather than just one farm. At one recent California dinner, the chef happened upon a grove of Douglas fir trees and added the fragrant needle tips to his dessert; in Massachusetts, diners were joined by local oystermen for shucking and lively pre-dinner conversation. Last year, Denevan's first book, *Outstanding in the Field: A Farm to Table Cookbook*, reached 2008 best-of lists in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. So, if you don't happen to score a reservation this year, you'll have 100 original recipes to tide you over until 2010. [www.outstandinginthefield.com](http://www.outstandinginthefield.com).

## 5 EASY WAYS TO MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR MEAL

- 1 Farm dinners begin in the late afternoon—bring a sun hat for the starters and a jacket for later.
- 2 Bugs love fresh produce as much as you do! Bring your own insect repellent in case it's not provided.
- 3 If there's no moon, a small flashlight can be handy for trips to the restroom or walking back to the car.
- 4 Farm dinners can be dusty or muddy, depending upon the season. Practical footwear is encouraged!
- 5 Dinners can sell out within hours, so it's smart to sign up for your favorite farm dinner's mailing list.

## PLATE & PITCHFORK Portland, Oregon

Emily Crowley was only planning to spend a few weeks in Italy. After all, she had a lucrative job as a financial planner—why on Earth would she leave that? “What can I say?” she says, “It must have been the wine.” Her “visit” lasted two years, and sometime between working in the olive groves and learning the secrets of perfect risotto from a 70-year-old countess, she decided to leave her big-money job for a life of far greater riches. Upon return to the States, Emily paired up with Erika Polmar—a fellow foodie with a head for business—and Plate & Pitchfork was born.

Now in their sixth season, Plate & Pitchfork hosts more than a dozen dinners per year at Portland-area farms. Each evening begins with a tour of the farm—part of the founders’ commitment to increasing awareness about the many benefits of eating local food. The area is rich in viticulture as well, so local winemakers play an important role. And this year, the popular small business is continuing to branch out: “To keep things fresh, we are adding a vineyard dinner and going to a cattle ranch,” says Crowley. “So people can learn about other parts of their dinner—not just the produce.”

But truthfully, produce *can* be pretty interesting. Crowley recalls a recent dinner at Viridian Farm, when a head



Chefs Scott Dolich (foreground) of Park Kitchen and Leather Storrs of Noble Rot cooking at Zenger Farm

of unique lettuce, *fiçoide glaciale*, was passed around the table as people enjoyed a dish containing the funky-looking greens. “It looks frozen and people were so fascinated by it,” she says with a laugh. Part of Plate & Pitchfork’s considerable appeal is that all the players—including the chefs—get into the collaborative spirit. “We had Rodney Muirhead of Podnah’s Pit, a local barbeque joint, roast a whole pig for us,” says Crowley. “His wife owns the local chocolate shop and she topped

some of her delicious chocolates with fried pork rind for dessert. It was quite a hit!” [www.plateandpitchfork.com](http://www.plateandpitchfork.com). 📍

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**Mindy Sink** is the author of the guidebook *Moon Denver*, a co-author of *Colorado Organic: Cooking Seasonally, Eating Locally* and has written extensively for *The New York Times*. Learn more about Mindy at [www.mindysink.com](http://www.mindysink.com).

# Fried Squash Blossoms

## *Meadow Lark Farm Dinners*

16–20 summer or winter squash blossoms

Olive, safflower or canola oil for frying

### BEER BATTER

3 egg whites

1/4 cup flour

Light, fizzy beer

Salt & pepper

Squash blossoms

Poppy seeds (optional)

### GOAT CHEESE FILLING

6 tablespoons plain chèvre

3 tablespoons plain yogurt

1 tablespoon fresh chopped herbs  
(basil, thyme or chives)

Salt and pepper

Using a fork, combine egg whites and flour—the mixture will form a thick paste. Add a pinch of salt and a pinch of ground black peppercorns. Then thin with beer, stirring with a fork until the batter is loose and runny, resembling a thin pancake batter. Mix in the poppy seeds.

Mix the goat cheese and yogurt. Add the chopped herbs, plus salt and pepper to taste. Using a pastry bag, pipe the goat cheese filling into the blossoms.

Fill a vessel appropriate for deep-frying with at least 1 1/2 inches of oil. When a drop of batter sizzles as soon as it's added to the oil, you're ready to go.

Carefully dip each blossom into the batter, coating all sides, and fry until golden. Do not crowd the pan. Drain on paper towels and serve hot, sprinkled with salt.