

Ingrid and Scott Maher chose to open their restaurant in Fredericksburg because it brought them closer to family and to farmers.





Poppy Hill Tuscan Kitchen

Poppy Hill Tuscan Kitchen is the star of Fredericksburg's farm-to-table revival.

Gayle Price

Photos by Molly McDonald Peterson

Poppy Hill Tuscan Kitchen can be hard to find. It's nestled off to the side of Fredericksburg's William Street and down some stairs. But although it is understated both inside and out, it has a strong local presence and has even garnered national attention.

After distinguished restaurant careers in large cities, Ingrid and Scott Maher moved to this historic Virginia city in 2005 to focus on family and start their own business. The move brought them closer to relatives and to local farms and helped them realize their farm-to-table vision. They chose the location because it reminded them of the basement restaurants found in bigger cities like New York. But Poppy Hill, hidden away in a historic downtown area, has anything but a big-city feel.

THE BEST INGREDIENTS

In the beginning, they did a lot of sourcing for their foods online, says Ingrid, who runs the front of the house and selects the wines. Some favorite local farms include nearby Sneads Farm for vegetables, and Croftburn Farm in Culpeper and Mount Vernon Farm in Sperryville for meats; special purveyors also include Ryan Mooney, "the mushroom guy." Now that Poppy Hill's reputation has grown, farmers often come to them. While the Mahers have their customary sources for products, they point out that farmers will often show up with just-picked items for Scott, who is the chef. New dishes are often inspired by these items.

"Sometimes," jokes Ingrid, "the universe just aligns properly," and the items they want or need materialize. But not everything



Mini Mushroom Galettes

1 package puff pastry, thawed
 Olive oil
 1 pound mushrooms, brushed clean and quartered
 ¼ red onion, sliced
 Salt and freshly cracked pepper
 1 cup balsamic vinegar
 ¼ cup sugar
 1 package of Boursin cheese
 A couple sprigs of fresh parsley, chopped

Lay thawed pastry out on a flat floured surface and cut out biscuit-size rounds. Bake rounds according to package directions. Set aside.

Over medium heat, coat a sauté pan with olive oil. Add mushrooms and sauté for 2 minutes. Add onion and cook for another 2 minutes. Add salt and pepper to taste. Set aside.

In a sauce pan over medium-high heat, reduce balsamic vinegar by half and then add sugar. Bring mixture back up to a boil and then take off heat. Let cool slightly.

Place baked pastry rounds on a serving dish. Scoop mushroom mixture onto each shell. Top with a dollop of Boursin cheese; drizzle with balsamic reduction and finish with chopped parsley garnish. Serve immediately.

is always available to them, so what then? It's not just about local ingredients, but also about offering the best ingredients available at the time. For example, Scott makes a house sausage so he has control of the ingredients, flavors, and quality. He has also worked on the house charcuterie creating pâté and duck confit.

SEASONAL INSPIRATION

Offering seasonal items keeps prices at market value and new items on the menu. Patrons flock to the restaurant when pumpkin ravioli in a brown butter sauce with sage makes an appearance in the fall. A popular dish with locals, it is now available frozen for carry-out. Sunday-night gravy (which, for the uninitiated, is tomato sauce) made from fresh tomatoes and basil, short ribs, house-made Italian sausage, and meatballs served over Scott's house-made pasta is also a menu staple. "Farm-to-table is a great match for Italian food," Scott says.

What's on the menu this winter? "Root vegetable purgatory," Ingrid teases. In the cold months, Scott creates some warming, savory dishes: veal chops with espresso rub, osso bucco, polenta, and roasted root vegetable lasagna with pumpkin filling are just some of the things you can anticipate seeing on the menu.

CELEBRITY & COMMITMENT

In 2008, the restaurant gained national attention when the Epicurious website (associated with *Bon Appétit* and *Gourmet*) included Poppy Hill in its top 10 list of farm-to-table restaurants—an honor that, according to Ingrid, "brought more awareness of farm-to-table and sustainable foods" in and around Fredericksburg. It helps customers understand why Poppy Hill's menu is the way it is and that, in turn, helps the core of their business continue to expand.

This commitment has been tested during the recent economic downturn, but the couple resolved to stay true to their philosophy

Poppy Hill's intimate dining room is in the basement of a historical building in downtown Fredericksburg.



of doing business. Scott and Ingrid believe that “sticking to their cause” is the way to go. Their return customers understand quality food can be more expensive and have helped them reach the restaurant’s five-year anniversary.

So what does the future hold? “Creative growth,” answers Scott: continuing to branch out creatively, more focus on growing the charcuterie at the restaurant, and more product and selection available to local chefs on the whole. They believe in the next five years more will be understood about the link between a fit, healthy lifestyle and local foods—and they predict that their mission will become more the norm than the exception.

Scott shares stories about his grandmother, who made vinaigrette in her home kitchen long before it was in vogue to do so. Now the couple is sharing this family tradition with the future of their family and the locals in Fredericksburg. “Family is still the driver in our decision-making process,” adds the couple, who have small children. ♦

Poppy Hill Tuscan Kitchen

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Gayle Price is an avid cook, eater and food critic. When she’s not out eating, she can be found at home with her daughter, her boyfriend, a house full of pets, and a strong cocktail.



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