

Saluting Our Local Farm-to-Restaurant Connection: Coon Rock Farm and Zely & Ritz

by Barbara Carr

Famous restaurants across the country are enriching their menus with a delightful, earth-friendly innovation--they're growing their own organic produce, either on site or in partnership with local organic farmers. Happily, the Triangle can brag about being part of this trend via the vision of the dedicated owners of Zely & Ritz, an award-winning all-organic restaurant in Raleigh's popular Glenwood South.

Zely & Ritz (the name is a derivation of family names) is owned by Master Chef Sarig Agasi, his wife and wine expert, Nancy, and Richard Holcomb, software developer, organic gardener and owner of Coon Rock Farm in Hillsborough. The three owners connected when Richard was a frequent diner at Sarig's previous Raleigh restaurant, Butterflies. Coon Rock Farm supplies vegetables, meat, eggs, and honey for Zely & Ritz and completes the cycle by composting the restaurant's discarded food to feed the next season of crops.

The trio's combined effort produces a daily-changing, intensely flavorful menu comprised of carefully selected local produce and hormone/antibiotic free meats, plus exotic extras like baby octopus stew, roasted emu and grilled quail. The beautifully-presented selections are served tapas style, giving a choice from over 50 selections of small portions that can be easily shared among friends. This "small plates" style of eating is the perfect way to enjoy several of Chef Sarig's amazing dishes without having to order a traditional meat/vegetable/starch plate. Nancy superbly pairs the menu with the perfect wines to make for the tastiest and

healthiest possible meals. Her talent brought Zely & Ritz the Award of Excellence from Wine Spectator magazine only months after the restaurant opened in December of 2004.

Both Chef Sarig and Richard grew up farming and cooking (Richard on a farm in Eastern North Carolina and Sarig on a Kibbutz along the Mediterranean Sea in Israel). Farming has been



a long-time hobby of Richard's, and when he purchased Coon Rock Farm in 2004 he had the master plan in mind to make it a working organic farm. Today he has 45 acres, 3-4 acres of which will be devoted to garden crops. Squash, zucchini, hot and bell peppers, turnips, kale, mustard greens, asparagus, pole beans, cucumbers, potatoes, sweet corn and multiple varieties of tomatoes are currently harvested according to season, and more exotic vegetables will be added as the garden size increases.

Coon Rock Farm borders the Eno River, and takes its name from a rock formation there. "Cleaning up has really been a challenge," says Richard, "When I bought the property it was badly overgrown, with lots of trees down from

hurricanes. We now have about half the property cleaned up."

The farm uses only natural manures which it combines with the restaurant-waste compost, and Coon Rock's livestock are entirely grass fed. "I originally planned to raise heritage turkeys, but the coyotes, bobcats and raccoons wiped them out," Richard explains. "I'm going to build a new barn to be used as a processing facility for harvesting chickens. My long-term goal is to process 10 to 20,000 chickens per year. And I'll be adding a greenhouse and two manmade ponds for irrigation."

When the fresh-daily selection of organic ingredients arrives at Zely & Ritz, from Coon Rock and other local sources, Sarig creates the day's culinary works of art, applying Mediterranean and Middle Eastern spices in unexpected ways.

Frequently-returning customers will attest that the farm-to-dining connection is working exceedingly well at Zely & Ritz. When you go there (they're open evenings Monday through Saturday) be sure to ask your wait-person to tell you about the Coon Rock Specials. There is a wide selection of vegetarian dishes, and Chef Sarig, himself an avid runner, offers several dishes that are perfectly balanced for athletes in

training. Dessert lovers never fear, you'll also find some of the best desserts in Raleigh! Check their website for daily specials, and for information on large party options.

Sarig, Nancy, and Richard, we salute your heart-and-soul effort that has brought national attention to the Triangle and surely inspired further nationwide interest in sustainable organic farming and its intelligently delicious connection to a truly enlightened way of dining!

Zely & Ritz is located at 301 Glenwood Avenue, Suite 100, in the Glenwood South area of Raleigh. Contact Richard Holcomb or Sarig Agassi at 919-828-0018 or at richard@zelyandritz.com. Their web site is www.zelyandritz.com.

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