

Food for Thought

People · Products · Purpose

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“Nation after nation has decayed, fallen and vanished from the scene of greatness because it permitted agriculture to be robbed of its rightful place in the scheme of things.”

— Carl Wilken



Legacy apples



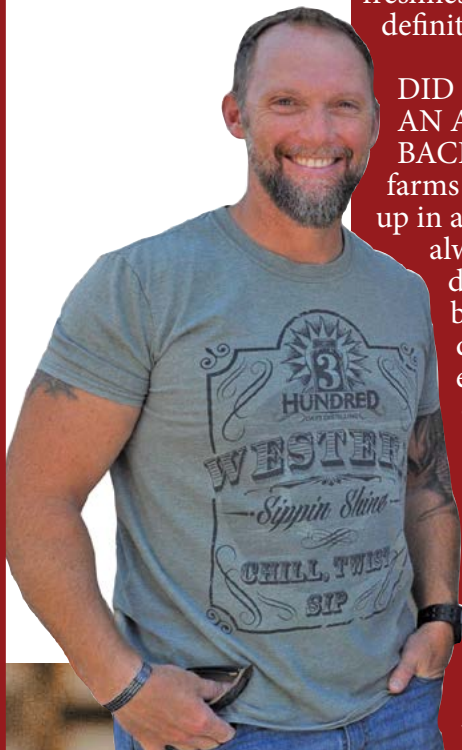
Steve Ela is shown at left with Ranch Foods Direct owner Mike Callicrate, who is never without a jar of Ela applesauce in the fridge, on the premise that nothing in the world goes better with a smoked Callicrate pork chop.

Ela Family Farms was among 25 Centennial farms statewide to receive special honors and recognition at this year's Colorado State Fair. The orchard grows 32 types of apples, including galas and ginger golds, along with pears, plums, peaches and more. By using on-farm commercial kitchen, the farm is able to extend the season and eliminate food waste, turning bruised or leftover fruit into sauce, jam, butters, leathers and ciders, most of which can be found at Ranch Foods Direct depending on the season. Unfortunately, some items were in limited supply last year due to a devastating freeze that hit the orchard in late 2020, killing off at least 20 acres of trees. An adopt-a-tree program helped owner Steve Ela replant, while a few unexpectedly resilient trees managed to recover on their own. This year's favorable weather offered another boost. Although Steve's mother Shirley passed away last winter at age 98, the family legacy is firmly rooted and still going strong.

HOW TO MAKE CHEDDAR APPLES WITH BUTTER BEER DRIZZLE: Butter a baking dish and heat oven to 400 degrees. Cut six apples in half from top to bottom, core and remove seeds leaving a small crater in center. Place cut side down in single layer in baking dish and bake until just tender, 10 to 15 minutes. Meanwhile, combine one 12-ounce bottle of a flavorful beer such as a stout with ¼ cup honey in a small saucepan over medium high heat until it comes to a boil. Lower the heat to allow for a steady bubble. Cook, stirring occasionally, until it reduces by half, about 8 to 12 minutes. When it lightly coats the back of a spoon, remove pan from heat and add 2 tablespoons butter, stirring until melted. Turn apples over and pour beer glaze over them. Top the apples with 6 ounces of grated cheddar and ½ cup chopped pecans. Return to oven and bake until bubbly, 8 to 12 minutes. Serve warm with a dash of salt and pepper.

Mason jar magic

A local entrepreneur turned his hobby into a career by creating flavors that really shine



NAME: Michael Thomas Girard, owner-operator of 3 Hundred Days of Shine Distillery in Monument

FAVORITE RFD PRODUCTS? Brisket, tri-tip... pretty much all of the beef! I'm a huge fan of it. It's the kind of meat I grew up eating in Northwest Montana. Most of the meat there was extremely fresh because there were ranchers everywhere. My family would go in on a cow and split it three ways. Once it was all butchered out, we would fill our freezers, so we always had fresh Montana beef whenever we needed it. You can't beat the freshness of farm-to-table. You can definitely tell the difference.

DID YOU GROW UP WITH AN AGRICULTURAL BACKGROUND? I worked on farms when I was a kid. Growing up in a small town like I did, you always helped the farmers out during branding season. We'd be snipping, tagging and drinking lots of beer. And eating fresh Rocky Mountain oysters every night.

HOW DID YOU GO FROM THAT TO MAKING MOONSHINE? I joined the Army straight out of high school and did 23 years in the Army, including nine years in the infantry. The Army took me all over the place.

I landed at Ft. Carson in 2010. Shortly after I got here, I was deployed to Afghanistan. On that deployment, as first sergeant, I heard some of my guys talking about making moonshine. I did a little research. I figured if I could do it safely, they could do it safely. I made an experimental batch using A&W Root Beer and a pressure cooker that was once an IED disposal device, which we were using as a training aid.

That was my first still. With some cooper line from the HVAC, a hot plate and distiller's yeast, it only took about a week to go from sweet soda to something bitter and sour. I put a vial of it into the laser scan and it came up as ethanol. So I knew it was feasible, I knew it could be done. When I got home from that deployment, distilling became a passion — some people make beer and wine, I was making liquor. My wife was just ecstatic that I had another hobby that was stinking up her basement. (Laughs) But it got popular enough, and ended up in the right hands at a Broncos tailgate party, to land me my initial investors. When I retired from the Army, I put together a business plan... I really loved homegrown, homemade, Colorado Proud products. That was a big thing to me. I wanted to make a traditional Colorado moonshine using sugar, not corn.



Beet sugar was a big cash crop in Colorado during the 1920s Prohibition. We use Western Sugar, which is made in Colorado at Ft. Morgan. Our products are now available in 400 liquor stores across Colorado and 100 restaurants and bars, as well as in California and Illinois so far.

DESCRIBE YOUR FLAVORS: I wanted to make flavors with all-natural ingredients that tasted like something that came out of your grandmother's kitchen.

I wanted my apple pie to taste like grandma's apple pie, because that's small-town America in a Mason jar. Or the peach cobbler that we'd make in a Dutch oven over the campfire when I was in the Boy Scouts. I remember those flavors. That's what I was going for. What I learned when I did my research is that

a lot of the peach flavored spirits on the market taste soapy and manufactured. It wasn't natural. We boil our peaches until they turn brown and add real cinnamon sticks, so you get a natural cinnamon flavor. And then we sweeten it with brown sugar. Every sip tastes like you're biting into a fresh peach cobbler.

WHAT'S NEXT? We need a bigger space, and I'm looking at how we can collaborate with Ranch Foods to bring a venue to Colorado Springs that will draw tourism from around the country.

COOKING WITH SHINE: Girard uses Lime-n-Shine to make chicken wing glaze, while his wife uses the firebomb for holiday cupcakes topped with firebomb frosting. In October, the Firebird food truck will be at 3 Hundred Days tasting room offering shine-inspired creations. Find the schedule at FirebirdEats.com or at 3hundreddays.com



Partnering for progress

Collaboration among food hubs is making farm-direct products more accessible to more people across the state. Valley Roots Food Hub in Mosca, run by general manager Nick Chambers, supplies Ranch Foods Direct with produce and artisan food items from more than 100 San Luis Valley area producers. This summer, Chambers opened his own retail outlet, the Root Cellar Market, located inside the newly renovated Mosca Community Gymnasium that dates back to the 1930s. It's co-located alongside his personal passion project, Dune Valley Distillery, which makes vodka from San Luis Valley potatoes and other creative craft beverages. (Chambers is also bottling Colorado wine in homage to his Italian great-grandfather on his mother's side, Anthony Carbone, a well-known food and beverage merchant in Denver who originally set up shop in 1903. Following prohibition, he was granted the state's first official wine and liquor license.) Both Valley Roots and Ranch Foods' Peak to Plains Food Hub have been strengthened by a federal program that incentivizes schools and food banks to purchase local food. Though it's not clear how long the program will last, it's a step toward rebuilding the local-regional food system.



The Root Cellar Market is a work in progress, with remnants of the old school gymnasium, including the basketball court and goals, lending it nostalgic charm. Valley Roots will host its annual end-of-season farm-to-table "shindig" at the new market and distillery on October 28.

Support locally owned restaurants. It makes a difference.

Marina La Riva, chef and owner of La Rosa Southwestern Dining in Palmer Lake, closed for good at the end of the summer. At a going-away party punctuated by hugs and best wishes, she took a few minutes to reflect on her decade-plus run, which included sourcing beef from Ranch Foods Direct to make her authentic New Mexican-style dishes.

"We were ground beef customers from the beginning," she recalled. "But then when Covid happened, literally there was no beef on the shelves anywhere. At first, I panicked. And then I thought, okay, I'm sure Ranch Foods will have it, because they're not dealing with the big processing plants. Sure enough, they did. That's part of why I stuck with them. Also, because people noticed the difference! The hamburgers, the shredded beef, they loved it. They noticed."

Though she couldn't give a good recommendation for where to get authentic Mexican food now since most of it is so Americanized, she did offer this: "Support local."

Running an independent restaurant is challenging, she said. "I had great employees helping me. But for the most part, I did everything, the books, the shopping for food, the employee management, all of that kind of stuff. It was a lot of hours," she said. "But having the community supporting me was awesome. I'm going to miss it."



PLAN NOW to reserve your Thanksgiving meats! Orders taken in store Nov. 1 through Nov. 16

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