October 2026

Community Profiles

"Any fool can make something complicated. It takes a genius to make it simple."

— *Woody Guthrie*

Where grit meets grace

Vibrant community center is an urban farm, pantry and composting center all in one

The Hillside Hub is a welcoming gathering space with colorful murals, sweeping views of the city, and lush grounds graced with greenhouses and gardens that overflow with seasonal produce. (A few chickens were added to the mix this summer.) Distribution of no-cost groceries is held here, along with cooking classes and educational activities. It continues to evolve and adapt. Executive Director Patience Kabwasa talked about the food center's model and what makes it special on the eve of the annual harvest festival in October. To get tickets go online to FoodToPower.org.

SPECIAL EVENT: The Hillside Hub will host a special farm-to-table community dinner October 9 at 6 p.m. alongside an update on the state's Healthy School Meals for All program, approved last year and now being phased in. All are welcome to attend and learn more.

TELL US ABOUT THE HILLSIDE HUB. This center is the first of its kind in town that encompasses all aspects of the food system. We do everything from composting to food distribution. Compost from food scraps helped us grow almost 10,000 pounds of food on a quarter acre in a single season. So we do more than distribute food. Our composting program is the revenue-generating arm of what we do. We have a membership-pick-up service. People pay a fee, and we turn their scraps into compost to feed our soil. We have 613 members including a few businesses. We grow food and distribute it at the hub two times a month, and we also run ten no-cost grocery programs across the city. We also participate at the Southeast Farmers Market, so a portion of our produce goes there. We also do education and advocacy, youth internships that happen during the summer, and educational workshops.

LOOK BACK ON THE LAST 10 YEARS YOU'VE BEEN INVOLVED. It's really awe-inspiring when I think back to where we started. Our organization started by spending a lot of time in the community understanding what the community wanted. It's phenomenal. Divine would even be a word for it. Beyond what I imagined at the time. And we're not done.

IS URBAN FARMING INCREASING IN THE AREA? I think it should. We all eat and it's a shame when young people don't know where fresh food comes from. We do have a challenging climate. But that didn't stop our ancestors from growing food in the desert or on the plains and in the prairies. We just have to be different stewards of water, time and sunlight.

WHAT IS YOUR IMPRESSION OF RANCH FOODS DIRECT? I would love to see more stores like Ranch Foods Direct that are culturally relevant to the neighborhoods they're in. Mike is a fierce advocate for ranchers and farmers and educating the community on why buying local is important.

Peppers and persistence

Pueblo chile supplier wraps up challenging season

Pueblo chiles are among the most iconic foods in Southern Colorado. When Ranch Foods Direct customers bite into a chile burger or a Southwestern-style prepared dish, odds are they're tasting chiles grown by Shane Milberger, owner of Milberger Farms. With the season winding down, Shane offered a recap and looked to the future of growing produce in Pueblo County.

IS IT SAFE TO SAY IT WAS A CHALLENGING YEAR? Yes. It started out with the drought situation. We knew we didn't have much water. Fortunately our ditch company did have some stored water to carry us through, and we had a few rainstorms that brought the river up here and there. It was a struggle, but we knew it from the beginning. We did some different planning and some different management practices. Now we're glad we did it all, because we were able to plant our entire farm.

WHAT SPECIFICALLY DID YOU DO DIFFRENTLY THIS YEAR? We farm within about a ten-mile radius, and we have 25 fields within that ten-mile radius. We were able to plant a few items in each field that took water at different times. The work and the management was a lot more than normal, but we dispersed our water coverage by scattering our peppers around. Most of our pepper fields were two or three acres this year, where typically they would have been 10-, 12- or 15-acre fields. We planted chiles on every farm. Some may have had an acre, some may have had a half-acre, some had up to six or seven acres. When those peppers didn't need water, we had something else growing there, pumpkins, tomatoes or corn, that would take water in a different timeframe.

DID YOU HAVE WATER ALL SEASON? They cut us off on September 10. We'd been on a 48-hour rotation all year, so we had water until then. But after that we had to run on the river, and the river was down to 30 feet, and that wasn't much water.

PUEBLO ALSO HAD A SEWAGE SPILL LATE IN THE SEASON. DID THAT AFFECT YOU? The spill happened in Pueblo but we get our water 10 miles west of the farm from a headgate on the Pueblo reservoir. So it's uphill from where the spill happened. So the farms in Pueblo County weren't affected by that. It's definitely not good for anybody, but it didn't have any consequence for any of the produce grown on the St. Charles Mesa or in Vineland or Avondale.

THERE WAS A NOTABLE WILDFIRE WEST OF PUEBLO TOO. SO WERE THERE ANY BRIGHT SPOTS THIS SEASON? It was definitely a reminder of what we can do with minimal water. Sometimes we do have an abundance of water, and we forget our crops really don't need that much water. In a year like this it was a re-set. With all that we did, I can tell you this was one of the best chile crops I've had in ten years

WHAT DO YOU CREDIT THAT TO? A little more hard work, more management and possibly even the lack of water. Meaning we didn't give them as much water as we thought they wanted, but we trained them to use water wisely, and then when they started setting on, that's when we poured the water to them, and they really reacted to that. It's like anything else — if you work hard at it and stay on top of it, it will work. I have a friend that has a large farm. He planted the whole farm and he stayed out every night making more "sets" than normal (6- or 8-hour durations of flood irrigation) because to change the water between rows, you have to be there. But he managed his water. He was worn out, tired, but his entire farm, close to 700 acres, had a crop this year. Some crops like cantaloupes got hailed out or heavy rains came at the wrong time. Mother Nature does her own thing. She helps us, but everything has to be at the right time. Which is pretty hard to count on. You can't bank on that.

IS THERE MORE OPTIMISM FOR NEXT YEAR, WITH A SUPER EL NINO PREDICTED TO POSSIBLY BRING A WETTER WINTER? That's what we want is the snow. The snow stays in the mountains until June of the following year. Then we get the runoff from that. What saved us this year is every time it rained or snowed during the winter, it came down the river (due to mild temps) and when it did, as Bessemer Ditch shareholders we have water rights to capture and store it in the reservoir from November 15 to March 15. But we would rather have it come later in the year as snowmelt.

SPEAKING OF THE SNOWPACK, THERE'S A LOT OF CONCERN ABOUT WATER SHORTAGES IN THE COLORADO RIVER AND WHAT WILL HAPPEN. We do have some trans-mountain diversion water, which means it comes from the Western Slope. If we can't get things corrected with the Colorado River situation, and everything that happens over there, then possibly we could lose some of our trans-mountain water. I don't believe the ditch had to pull any of that this past year though.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN DOING THIS NOW? I've been farming for 40 years.

DOES IT FEEL LIKE 40 YEARS? Sometimes it feels like it was just yesterday when I started. It seems like every year is a new year to learn something. You're always learning so it doesn't seem like it's been that long. It seems like I just started in some ways because I still don't know everything I need to know. Every day is a new chance to learn. The weather, the crops, the varieties, markets. Everything. Do I feel it physically? Yes, it feels like I've been working for 40 years. But it's all good. We've been blessed by what we've done. Both of my boys are involved in what we've created. My oldest, Dalton, is involved in the farm 100 percent and he loves it. Drew takes care of our retail stand. It's a family deal. What more can you ask for?

HAS YOUR CROP MIX CHANGED MUCH? We still do asparagus, radish, and different early-season crops. Radish is out of the field by mid-May so we can utilize that water for the next crop. We grow 10 to 15 different chiles. We've diversified crops for water reasons and for land reasons.

HAS WHAT THE CONSUMER IS DEMANDING CHANGED OVER TIME? The main thing that's changed is it's a longer season now. Our customers want chiles earlier and they're also getting them later in the year. We needed to create an eight-week season versus a four-week season. We do that with transplants. It allows us to extend the season from the first of August through mid-October.

DID YOU KNOW? Imports now account for more than 80 percent of all chile consumed in the U.S.

WHAT DO YOU WISH CONSUMERS KNEW ABOUT WHAT YOU DO? It would be nice if they understood what the farmer goes through to give them a one-dollar cucumber on the shelf or $20 bushel of chile. People don't realize what it takes to get that. I wish people understood the stress level that growers go through, the expense. It's easy to lose everything I've worked for over 40 years with a couple of bad years. I could lose it all. People don't comprehend it. They think we just get a paycheck. Well, we don't. Our paycheck comes from Mother Nature, and she isn't very nice to us sometimes.

It would be nice to have more education on where food comes from. There's been some food safety outbreaks this summer in different commodities, and strangely enough they all came from one country, which has no food safety regulations. Mexico supplies a lot of our produce now, because they can produce it cheaper. The consumer is getting stretched, so they are looking to get a deal.

We would like to raise our prices because our input prices have gone up. But when you get out on the open market and try to compete with these other countries, they can ship it 2,000 miles for cheaper than I can grow it. Therefore, unless the consumer demands a local or domestic product, we can't compete.

IN YOUR EXPERIENCE, IS THAT SOMETHING CONSUMERS ARE DEMANDING RIGHT NOW? They were at one time, a few years ago, but now I think it's transitioning over to they just want more for their money. I think it's about budgets and people having too much debt and not always having the funds to purchase a high-quality product.

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THE FUTURE IN LIGHT OF THAT? If you had talked to me 40 years ago, I would have probably brought up the same stuff. (Grins.) But I went forward and I did what I did. And we became successful. You take your bumps and your hits and your hiccups and go on. So when it comes to the future, I'm going to do the same thing I've been doing. And if I get knocked down, I'm going to stand up and go again. That's what farmers do. Until you plant me in the ground, I'll be doing this.

A bacon jalapeno cheddar burger is one way to capture some of that iconic Southern Colorado pepper flavor.

Reviving the Fillmore corridor's agrarian roots

Matt Jones is an avid history buff who serves as the unofficial resident historian for the Papeton neighborhood which includes Ranch Foods Direct's Fillmore store. He can talk at length about the rich heritage of food production and mining that shaped the neighborhood and about future improvements that are intended to enhance it going forward. "I think there's a lot of really cool stuff happening in Colorado Springs that people just haven't had the chance to learn about or hear about yet," he says. Here's more from Matt.

TELL US ABOUT THE COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION YOU'RE INVOLVED WITH.

It's the Papeton Neighborhood Association. You can find us on Facebook. We're a nonprofit neighborhood organization focused on connecting neighbors, organizing events, and advocating for improvements.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT HAVING RANCH FOODS DIRECT IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD?

It's a big source of pride for us. For the most part, Fillmore is littered with gas stations and fast food, and a lot of people don't appreciate that. They recognize it's not healthy food. So it's nice to have a really well-respected established local business that offers better food options.

AT ONE TIME, PROSPECT FARM WAS LOCATED IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD. DO YOU ANTICIPATE THE RETURN OF MORE URBAN FARMING IN THE AREA?

What's been really exciting as we've organized is we've found there's a lot of people in the neighborhood who have their own home gardens. So even though we don't have large spaces available for a larger farm, I think we can create an interconnected group of neighbors who are strategically planting and growing certain foods so that throughout the year we could share or disperse or do something cool like that. The association's been around for two years, so those connections and conversations are still developing. Fun fact, one of the gardeners for the city's greenhouse also lives in our neighborhood. They helped start a native garden bed. So now we have neighbors not just excited about growing food but about growing native plants. We've talked about having seed swaps and stuff like that. Getting our hands dirty is going to be a common theme in our neighborhood over the next few years I think.

DID YOU KNOW? ... Charles Darwin first calculated that earthworms consume, loosen, and mix as much as ten tons of soil in an acre of land in just one year, enough dirt to outweigh an elephant.

SO IT'S THE KIND OF HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOOD WHERE PEOPLE STILL GROW A LOT OF THEIR OWN FOOD?

That heritage is in our soil, with the Venetucci family coming here originally as miners and starting their farm (before it moved to its current location south of town along Fountain Creek.) I think our neighborhood is a good reference point for what Colorado Springs traditionally looked like in terms of being self-sufficient, self-supported and interconnected. There's still a lot of multigenerational families living here.

From Cragmore up to UCCS is where the coal mines were, which is part of the reason our neighborhood pool was closed. Portal Park, the site of the pool, got its name because it was the portal to the mines. So probably not the smartest idea to put a pool on top of it. Allegedly, from what we've heard, the story goes that the pool was built in the '60s or 70s along with the neighborhood. Over time the weight of the water in the pool started to collapse into an old mine shaft, which caused foundational issues. The neighborhood association is working together with the city and state to determine what the future of that pool facility could be, whether it should be filled in or othe options. That's one of the improvement projects we're working on.

YOU MENTIONED THE CITY GREENHOUSE. WHAT IS THAT EXACTLY?

When you drive around the Old North End in particular, you'll see flower beds on the street corners. All of those plants are grown by the city in a greenhouse that was started by General Palmer. Over time, our neighbors who work there realized, hey, why are we planting annuals that need more water and don't do well in this climate? What if we collected native seeds from plants already established? So this past year, they grew like 30,000 native plants from seed. They partner with CSU utilities on its water-wise department and recently did a program where people could get a box or tray of native-plant species to put around their homes.

DID YOU KNOW? State law-makers passed a bill this year to expand Colorado's Cottage Foods Act to allow for the sale of homemade foods that require time and temperature control, including meat and meat products. The change will take effect in January. All cottage food producers must take a food safety course on proper food handling and maintain proof of course completion. They'll also need to register with the state health department.

Featured Recipe

Cottage Pie

Recipe by Chef Phil Griffin
Co-owner of The Brit Pub

A delicious one-pot meal made with simple easily attainable ingredients and savory beef filling.

SIDE DISH SCHNIPER

This recipe series is a collaboration with SideDishSchniper.com

TO MAKE THE FILLING:

2 lbs. Callicrate ground beef
1 large yellow onion, peeled & diced
2 large carrots, peeled & diced
2 C. frozen peas
1 Tbsp. olive oil
2 tsp. kosher salt
1 tsp .black pepper
1 Tbsp. tomato paste
2 bay leaves
2 oz. butter
1 Callicrate broth bomb
1 qt. brown gravy
¼ C. Worcestershire sauce
4 oz. sharp cheddar cheese, grated

FOR THE MASH:

2 lbs. peeled russet potatoes, quartered
salt and pepper to taste
3 oz. butter, diced
½ C. heavy cream

PREPARATION: Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Put the potatoes into a saucepan with a pinch of salt. Cover with water and bring to a boil. Turn down the heat and simmer for 15 to 20 minutes until soft. Drain well in a colander, return back to the pan, then add the butter and cream and mash until smooth. Finish it off by seasoning with salt and pepper to taste.

Warm a large frying pan or skillet, add the olive oil and onions. Cook for 5 minutes until soft. Turn up the heat and add the ground beef. With a spatula break up any lumps. When browned, add the tomato paste, mix well and cook for 3 minutes. Add the rest of the ingredients and mix well. Bring to a boil and simmer 10 minutes. Pour the beef mixture into an oven-proof dish. Using a spoon and a fork spread the mashed potatoes evenly over the top. Sprinkle the cheese over the mash. Place in the middle of the oven and bake 35 to 40 minutes until golden brown on top.

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Distributed by:

Two retail locations in Colorado Springs
Flagship store: 1228 E. Fillmore
719-623-2980
Food hub: 4635 Town Center Drive
719-559-0873
Retail hours at both locations:
Monday through Saturday 8 a.m. - 6 p.m.
Or shop online. Shipping available.

Building community around local food

Store updates posted on Facebook

PEAK TO PLAINS FOOD HUB

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