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TODAY'S
Health & Wellness

Tra di Noi Ristorante, Malibu

The Thorne Family Farm



Farmer Larry Thorne walks through his strawberry fields in Malibu at least twice a day when they're in season, checking on their progress. Strawberries ripen over a period of hours, not days, so he likes to be on top of them. "One thing you learn from farming," muses Thorne, "is that there's a time for everything and then after that, it's too late." A misty marine layer keeps the temperatures cool for his strawberries, which they like. As he passes the rows of winter squash Thorne notes, "The squash grew two inches today."

This month Thorne Family Farm is growing wild arugula, beefsteak tomatoes, golden beets, winter peas, rapini, mustard greens, lettuces, fava beans, Mars onions (a sweet, red onion with a flavor like the Walla Walla), string beans and butter chard. Of the butter chard which he grows in a variety of colors like red, white, green, purple and yellow, Thorne beams, "You don't have to stem it. We pick it real young." He's also growing organic oranges, Meyer lemons, blueberries and even Turkish figs on the seven-acre farm nestled in Zuma Canyon near Zuma Beach.

Some of the equipment Thorne uses to till his ground was his father's. Thorne's dad farmed hundreds of acres in Culver City and Malibu 60 years ago. Howard Hughes and William Randolph Hearst used to buy sweet corn from him. When Larry had children of his own, he

set up a small farm stand for them along the roadside where they could sell fruit, vegetables and sunflowers so that they could learn the family business.

Today, Thorne's son Grant, daughter Olivia and wife Laurel all still help out on the farm when Larry needs them. "We spent a lot of the summer planting strawberries," fifteen-year-old Olivia recalls, laughing. "Olivia planted thousands of strawberry plants," admits Larry. "That's why I call it Thorne Family Farm. It's a happy moment when all four of us are out here working together. It makes me feel that life is the way it's supposed to be. I don't care how rich you are, you need to be in the garden with your kids."

Because it's such a labor of love for Thorne, he keeps his following small. "I want to try to create a clientele who appreciate exactly what I'm growing. I'm trying to match what I grow with my customer base," says Thorne. "I try to set up a conversation between me and the people who buy from me. I want feedback." Thorne is working on setting up family box programs patterned after CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) programs. But with the box programs, families only pay for 1 or 2 months' worth of produce at a time versus 6 or 12 months' worth. And parents can bring their children to the farm to help pick their own food. (Call Larry Thorne at 310-663-2107 for more information.)

Of his farm, Thorne says, "I want to stay small and get people who appreciate eating just-picked produce." Thorne Family Farm dedicates 20-30% of its

farmland to growing produce exclusively for Tra Di Noi Ristorante in Malibu. A few months back, Thorne sat down with Tra Di Noi's chef Francesco Velasco and together they worked their way through an Italian seed catalog. Because of that, says Thorne, "I'm growing things now that I would never have heard of otherwise. Velasco, too, is grateful for this farmer-chef relationship: "We saw this great opportunity to grow whatever we want for our customers. Our customers can go to the farm and buy the same produce that I serve here at the restaurant. I always say, 'If we start with really great ingredients, we can expect to end with really great dishes'."

"One of the best things he grows for us are the strawberries," says Velasco, "also the fava beans, and the zucchini flowers." Velasco thinly slices those beautifully ripe strawberries and lays them on a blanket of pastry cream which is spread over a thin crostata crust. Thorne and his wife tasted that strawberry crostata for dessert one evening. "It is so good, it makes me want to grow more strawberries," enthuses Thorne, "and that's hard work!" Every time Thorne visits the restaurant with his family, he's amazed at the masterpieces Velasco creates with Thorne Family Farm's produce. "He fixes sweet corn in ways I've never heard of. I don't know what he puts on the tomatoes, but God they're good. He's incredible."



"I want to stay small and get people who appreciate eating just-picked produce."

- Larry Thorne



Tra Di Noi Ristorante brings local farm-fresh produce to the dining table.



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"One of Malibu's Best!"

- Zagat Restaurant Guide

