

Farm dinners, new age Agri-Tourism

Rolling farm hills are a feast for the eyes and the first place that comes to mind is Tuscanny, Italy, but the strikingly beautiful vegetation that beckons, belong to Jamaica's Pedro Plains, St Elizabeth.

For years this southern St Elizabeth region has been renowned as the island's bread basket, boasting more than 200 farmers whose job is to feed the nation. Eight per cent of the country's vegetables are farmed in the plains, including carrots, tomatoes, scallion, thyme and sweet pepper.

A view from the mountain of the Pedro Plains appears to be a quilt of hundreds of tiny farms of different sizes and shapes, creating the ideal location for authentic farm dinners that are now woven into the fabric of the island's latest attraction.

Held on site, most likely in the middle of a yellow-yam bed, the monthly event, which is usually sold out long in advance, is the brainchild of Liz Solms, accomplished chef and local sustainable agriculture expert. Solms, in collaboration with Jakes, a bohemian-style boutique hotel nestled in the fishing village of Treasure Beach, introduced the monthly farm dinners in June.

The dinners feature savory organic dishes prepared and served on site at local farms, with wine pairings provided by Caribbean Producers Jamaica Limited.

Exotic setting

But, outside of the exotic setting that this new tourist attraction is having on the south, it's the encouragement of the sustainable development of the agricultural sector that caught this newspaper's attention.

"We are working very closely with Island Outpost, particularly Jakes, one of our biggest customers in terms of purchasing organic produce from the farmers," stated Solms, who is helping small subsistent farmers in the community.

Having dedicated her career to improving and celebrating the agricultural landscape of Jamaica, along with promoting the culinary bounty of fresh, farm food in the Pedro Plains, she said that cause is further enhanced through this collaboration with Jakes.

For her, the big plan is to create awareness among Jamaicans and foreigners that the Pedro Plains region is a place that is really worth visiting. "Most people feel that the tourist areas offer just sand and sea; we want Pedro Plains identified with deep culture and natural beauty."

Currently, Solms is working with two farmers who provide the produce used at the farm dinners. The dinners are held

closest to full moon and start at sunset. On arrival, guests are greeted with a cocktail whipped up using fresh fruit, grown on the farm. The table is elegantly set with white linens in the middle of a working field, with lanterns hung around the table and among the curling vineyard-like rows of yam vines. Dinner is cooked table-side and the rotating menu reflects seasonal local produce and 100 per cent organic ingredients. Mouthwatering dishes, such as penne with lime basil, goat cheese crostini, and chicken with dill yogurt sauce, are served up family-style.

For Jakes, their commitment to supporting local farmers and fishermen began when it first opened its doors in 1995 as a humble seaside restaurant. Now a vibrant and stylish resort with a compelling laid-back-chic atmosphere, the resort's partnership is to provide visitors with the opportunity to see where their food comes from, through locally guided farm tours and the introduction of the monthly dinners.

Upcoming dinner dates are September 25, and November 20, and a maximum of 35 people can be accommodated. Cost of the dinner is US\$95/person including transfers.

Guests can reserve their spot by calling Jakes at (876) 965-3000.