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NNB News : 2013 : 06 : 18 : Refining Food For Tampa Bay

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Greg Baker takes a swig of his beer and pulls a drag from an e-cigarette.


Baker is the head chef and co-owner of The Refinery, a restaurant in Seminole Heights. In just a few years, Baker has launched full force into the Tampa Bay dining scene. His approach has earned appearances on television shows, myriad print articles from Southern Living to the Tampa Bay Times and a number of James Beard Foundation Award nominations.

The Refinery offers sustainable, locally sourced food for low prices in a casual, communal atmosphere.

“When it comes down to it, I try to figure out ways I can stretch the ingredient. Get the flavor, get the experience so people can try it and not have to spend much more than they’re going to at TGI Friday’s,” Baker said.

The Refinery’s menu changes every Thursday based on what has sold well, any new ideas the staff may have and what is available through the Suncoast Food Alliance, a network of farms within 100 miles of Sarasota.

On Saturdays, Baker gets a list of what is available then decides what is in the budget and what they can sell before it spoils. He then place his order on Mondays. On Tuesdays, the farmer picks up the products and they are delivered by Tuesday night.

Those Tuesday night deliveries can lead to challenging but exciting Wednesdays, the day the following week’s menu is decided. In dealing with local farms, issues can arise between placing and receiving an order. However, this doesn’t faze Baker.

Sustainability is a philosophy that Baker has carried with him since family dinners were decided by what was available in his family’s garden that day.

“We didn’t have a name for it. That’s just how we did things,” Baker said.

They began using local ingredients because they were easily available and tasted better. From there, a movement started to grow where local farmers sought to use the best products as well as support small businesses.

Often, companies overuse and eliminate the nutrients in the soil by growing too much food. Sustainable farming preserves the land and natural benefits it has to offer while keeping the land viable for generations to come, Baker said.

Baker grew up in the 1980s and was a fan and participant of the punk rock scene with its do-it-yourself ethos and constant questioning of the powers that be. Baker says those principles influenced his decision to challenge the culinary status quo and follow through on a dream that others turned away from.
As he sits back in his chair outside The Independent (a local competitor supported by Baker), says he chooses not to focus on the awards and accolades, but what he can do for his community. He just wants to provide a positive, affordable and conscious dining experience.

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