

Deep Seeded Passion.....by Deborah Fagan Carpenter



50 pounds of sunflower seeds and a pound of zinnia seeds set the wheels in motion for an unexpected life plan. Had someone told Jill ten years ago that she would be totally immersed in the world of organic farming, own a “farm to table” restaurant, and that Michael Pollan’s, *Omnivore’s Dilemma* would be one of her favorite books, she would have laughed. Today however, Jill and Keith Forrester own and operate a successful organic farm in Tyronza, Arkansas, **Whitton Farms**, participate in several Farmer’s Markets locally, and own and operate a thriving restaurant in Memphis, TN, **Trolley Stop Market**.

“We had so many flowers we didn’t know what to do with them, and my house looked like a funeral parlor!” At the beginning of their marriage, they had no vision of running a farm or owning a restaurant. Originally living in

Jonesboro, Arkansas, Keith’s family encouraged them to move into his grandparent’s vacant farm in Tyronza, Arkansas, and when they planted a small garden which included flowers, their lives were significantly altered.

“Everything just fell into place.” When they completely sold out of flowers at the Memphis Agricenter booth during their first trip there, the hook was in. “It wasn’t just about making money,” but was something they realized they loved and could participate in together, an important factor. Keith resigned from his teaching position, and Jill left graduate school to take a teaching job, which allowed her to help Keith on the farm in the afternoons. They became wholly absorbed in learning everything they could about organic farming and were the first to sign up for the



Memphis Farmers' Market, now number 7 in the country.



Every previous job led them to this passion and calling. Keith had grown up around farming and had spent two years with the Peace Corps in Africa as an Ag Consultant. Jill had worked in a florist operation and had also worked for a pizza business, and now creates and sells her own floral arrangements and pizzas called “*Jillbillys*” at their *Trolley Stop Market*.

“We wanted to be in the business together, but we wanted to find a way that others could benefit as well.” The couple is completely community minded and wants to give others the same opportunities they have had.



Today Keith employs four full-time workers at the farm and Jill has forty three full-time employees at *Trolley Stop*, not an insignificant fact, and something about which they are proud. Most of what is served at the restaurant each day has been harvested in the previous couple of days from their farm, and they allow their staff to develop many of the menu items and specials. All meat, fish, chicken, and brats are from local organic sources. Having been at

the local markets for six years before they opened, Jill and Keith became friends with many of the vendors and suppliers whose products they now serve and sell at the restaurant.

Locally created art serves as decoration, is available for sale and is a method by which they can help artists receive some visibility and support.



“We try to be as vertically integrated as possible. The basis of our business is our farm, we have a farm to table restaurant and a facility in which we can manufacture our own food line, and others can get their small businesses going. It’s kind of our process of economic development.” The **Trolley Stop Cannery** next door to the restaurant provides a space for baking their breads and desserts and where they are making salsas, jellies and other products in their own food line. With all the necessary certifications in place, they are able to rent it out to local caterers and chefs needing a facility to develop food products, another way the couple supports those needing a “jump-start” in the business.

An exciting CSA, (*Community Supported Agriculture* program) provides a bag of fresh produce, fresh herbs and homemade bread each week to participants. Varying subscription levels are offered, depending on family size, and pick-up locations are at the **Jonesboro Farmers’ Market**, the **Downtown Memphis Farmers’ Market**, the **Memphis Botanic Garden Farmers’ Market** and at the **Trolley Stop Market**.

Ultimate “farm to table events” have been presented at **Whitton Farms** over the years. “*Endless Feast*” produced an event on the farm in 2009, televised nationally by PBS, (endlessfeast.tv/203.php) and another national group, “*Outstanding in the Fields*” produced a similar happening at the farm in 2011. All of the “farm to table” dinners were held outside on the Forrester farm, working in conjunction with local growers and well-known regional chefs to create elegant, inventive and delicious dinners. As many as 150 diners were seated outside on the farm for unforgettable gourmet meals.



Expansion continues with the opening of a family style restaurant, **Tyboggies**, near the Forrester farm. **Tyboggies** will feature “country cooking,” barbeque, pizza, a soda fountain and live music. Transformation of a building at the farm itself will allow the couple to sell fresh produce, food products, flowers, transplants, seed, feed, dog food and chickens. The flower gardens across the street from the farm will also be open to the public.

Jill and Keith Forrester of **Whitton Farms, Trolley Stop Market** and soon **Tyboogies** are innovative, energetic and zealous in their love of organic farming and their community, and they



eagerly share their deep seeded passion, fresh products and fresh vision. Their enthusiasm for the farm to table concept is palpable, their support for the growth of local economy conspicuous and their spirit of caring and giving back hopefully contagious.

www.trolleystopmarket.com and www.whittonfarms.com