

romero farms

dixon, nm



proprietors: matt and emily romero
certified organic? : yes
<https://mattromerofarms.com/>

what does izanami serve from romero farms?

shishito peppers

daikon radish

bok choy

black radish

carrots

celery root

japanese turnips

watermelon radish

about matt romero

matt romero, founder of romero farms, spent many years as an executive chef before making the change from the table to the farm 13 years ago. he started out caretaking a ten-acre farm before gaining access to his uncle's 3-acre plot, tractor and tools. matt's family and friends 'lent' him their follow tracts consisting of 4 ½ acres in dixon and 6 acres in alcalde, new mexico. in return for that loan, matt improves the land by farming and keeping it productive.

“ In 2017, Romero Farms was chosen as Best Farmer in the Edible Santa Fe “Local Hero Awards,” created to recognize amazing individuals and organizations for their work to create healthy, sustainable food systems in New Mexico. “

Q & A with matt romero

how did you get into farming?

Accidentally. My wife and I became caretakers of her mother's estate. Once I got a taste of farming, I gave up my career as an executive chef.

how long have you been farming?

18 years – the year my daughter was born

what is a signature item that you sell?

Year-round variety of vegetables. The chile is just one part of what we provide.

Romero Farms

written by local flavor magazine, 2017



Matt is one of the most popular, colorful vendors at the market, offering samples, recipe ideas, growing tips and answers to just about any question a shopper may have. He is what you might call “a farmer’s farmer”—skilled at his craft, devoted to his labor and happy to share what he’s learned with others. Yet Matt didn’t grow up on a farm and he didn’t harbor a lifelong desire to connect to the land through growing things. He worked as a chef, instead, honing a creative sense of flavor and an instinct for what people like to eat.

“I know I’m doing the planet a favor, but that’s not why I’m doing it,” Matt says, taking a break from mowing on a recent spring morning at the farm. “I’ve always loved producing good food for people, whether it was at a restaurant and I bought and cooked it, or here on the farm, where I grow it. I still feel pride over what I do and the knowledge that I share with people. For example, someone will say ‘I don’t like radishes.’ If you don’t like them, and then you try them, then you’re a perfect test case. Every year, I see people try things they don’t like and then they taste it and they change their mind.” (Case in point: when I arrive at the farm for our interview, Matt hands me a warm breakfast burrito, stuffed with his red chile and homemade elk sausage sourced from an animal he and his daughter brought home from a hunting trip. Although I normally don’t eat elk, this was one of the best burritos I’ve ever had.)

Matt’s journey from chef to grower began almost by happenstance. Born in Oklahoma, he was an army brat who moved around until he reached high school and his father retired.

His parents then moved the family back to their native Northern New Mexico. After graduating from Española High School, Matt got a job as a dishwasher at Jeremiah's in Crested Butte, Colo., and became kitchen manager within the year. A decade later, he left to work with businessman and restaurant developer Jeff Hermanson, a ski buddy, who opened Artichoke in Crested Butte and Denver's Mexicali, Champion Brewing Company and Cadillac.

When plans to open his own restaurant fell through, Matt returned to Española to relax, go fishing and enjoy the summer visiting his family. But he met his wife, Emily, at Reds Bar in Española, where she was working as a supervisor at Cities of Gold Casino, and plans changed. Soon, Matt was back in the kitchen, as assistant food and beverage director at the casino. Other stints followed, at Coyote Cafe and Ohkay Hotel Casino.

When Emily Romero's grandmother passed away, life took a new course. "My wife's grandparents had a farm in Velarde and we were asked by her family to become caretakers," Matt says. "So we moved onto

that farm and I fell in love. I was watering and pruning grapes, irrigating and mowing. I planted a garden. I was so into it that I asked my wife if I could quit my job. She said 'Sure, honey, what are you going to do?' I said, 'I don't know, I just can't do this anymore.'"



Matt leased a small orchard from friends of his wife's family near the Velarde farm. "I had a very small garden, too, but it yielded very little," he says. "I never went to the Santa Fe Farmers Market; I only went to the Los Alamos market. I mostly raised apples and I couldn't sell them at the Santa Fe market because everyone sold them there. So I went to Colorado and sold them all. Then my uncle offered me 2.5 acres in Alcalde and he offered to teach me. So here I go, neck deep

into green chile, sweet corn, squash. Boy did I have something to learn.

“When I started farming that spring, I weighed 310 pounds. By the time I got to late July, I weighed 220. I worked from 6 a.m. to 5:30 in the evening every day. Sometimes, I’d skip lunch. My first year was brutal, but I learned a lot. I made very little money, just enough to start the next year but not enough to capitalize. I had to borrow money from my mom.”

Any doubts Matt had about being a farmer were cast aside when crisis struck. “People ask me, ‘Why do you farm?’ ” he says. “In the beginning, I didn’t know. But the first year I farmed, I had an epiphany, and that moment came after our daughter Lily was born. She had craniosynostosis, a fusing of the skull plates at a young age. It should happen around age 5. She had major surgery when she was three months old. I was in the middle of my big apple harvest in the first year I had leased the orchard. We set up this big basket of apples in the nurse’s station at the hospital and all the nurses got together and bought my whole crop. I didn’t have a

bushel left. In those days, we needed the money real bad. On the way home, I realized what they were doing and that they did it because I was a farmer. I saw the way that it affected people, that I was a farmer and they wanted to help us. It was one of those moments when you’re not sure if you’re doing the right thing and you need a sign. And when those people were so generous, it was a sign.”



The family recovered and moved to Dixon, where they built their flourishing farm, but Matt still passes along the same kind of generosity that inspired him, offering young people the opportunity to live and work on Romero Farms through Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms. “We start them off with a stipend to offset their living expenses,” Matt says. “They live in camper

trailers on the property. And a lot of the good employees start off as interns.”

Valerie Lovasz is one such employee, though she didn’t start as a “woofer” (farm intern). “I literally walked up to every single farmer at the market and asked them for work,” she says, taking a break from prepping starts and plants for the market. “Matt said ‘Come back in an hour,’ and I did. I stayed to help close down the market. Then I started working at the farm.”

The employee package at Romero Farms includes room and board, meals Romero cooks for his staff three times a day using ingredients straight from the field. “I really like my potatoes more than anything,” he says. “We grow six varieties including German Butterball, Yukon Gold and Red Thumb. I like to make a purée out of parsnips and German Butterballs with butter and salt. The Butterballs are a really tasty potato and they cook down well in hash browns. Out of the chile, poblanos are my favorite. I like to make them filled with cheese—goat and cheddar or ricotta, basil and roasted red pepper.”

At market, potatoes are Matt’s most popular item, along with carrots, green chile and shishito peppers, which hold the record for biggest sales, \$5,000 in one day. The biggest market flop? Artichokes. “No one wanted to buy them,” he says. Bok choy was a big surprise—a decade ago, Matt couldn’t sell it anywhere because it was considered an Asian ingredient. “Within the last 10 years, though, I have sold bok choy to Italian restaurants, Spanish restaurants; all sorts of restaurants now have it on their menus because they look at it as a food that people love.”

People love Matt’s food, too, whether they cook with it in their kitchens at home or savor it in local restaurant dishes. And this may be the main ingredient of his passion for his job. “I like to see the joy, I like to see the smiles,” Matt says. “I like to feel like I’ve done something well and people are appreciative. It makes me feel good about myself.” And then, with a big grin, he chuckles and adds... “Takes about the same time to cook a bad pot of beans as a good one.”