

## A Collective Labor Of Love At Prescott's Raven Café

Fifteen years ago, Ty Fitzmorris, owner of Prescott's Raven Café, declined a dreamjob as a Smithsonian researcher to move to Prescott and pursue his dream: to incorporate a passion for the natural world into an enjoyable means of community-building.

In 1995, Fitzmorris and fellow visionary Newt Lynn spotted an old building in the North side of downtown they thought had a lot of community potential. Today, they have pulled together one of the most unique and dedicated staffs, invested in addressing not one or two, but six different components of what they feel makes a well-balanced, community-positive and environmentally-sound restaurant.

The first thing one notices when walking into The Raven is the amazing line of beer taps and equally mind-boggling variety of bottled beer cases along the wall. There are, in fact, 35 beers on tap between the upstairs and downstairs bars (20 regular and 10 rotating) and another 350 beers in bottles, from near and far. Max Kamen, who is in charge of developing the beer list, explains that they try to buy small cases, thus supporting the practice of small-batch brewing, where ingredients can be bought locally, and beer crafted more uniquely and individually.

The rooftop terrace, newly opened, is another observable example of community-building; all tables and roofing materials were made by local artisans from local materials (which Fitzmorris will tell you at first opportunity), the wall mosaic was put together over a summer by a variety of community members from mayorial candidates to school-kids, and the herb garden is what the kitchen uses to spice the food—no packaged basil here. Both bars (upstairs and down) were made locally from scrap woods (though they could have fooled me!), and local artists hang their work and play music on a regular basis reminding patrons that they live in a thriving and creative small town.

But it's not only the beer and the art that are based in a community-building philosophy: look deeper and you'll find the wine and the food, as well as teas and coffees, work right along the premise of localization. Everything the Raven uses is brought in from as close as possible, both to support local farmers and businesses and use as little petroleum as possible in transportation; coffee and tea, for instance, come from Prescott Coffee Roasters, and bread products (besides the pastries baked on-site) come from Pangea Bakery, another small local business.

The wine room, which customers can peek into from the back hallway, houses approximately 250 types of wine, all of which are small-batch. This means the vintners only produced 2000 cases (or less) of each wine, so the methods used to make these wines can be more careful and the land better cared for throughout the growing seasons than with conventional methods. Although some of the wines are imported from France and other European hotspots, many wines are also brought in from around Arizona, as close as Jerome and Sedona. Coleen Fitzpatrick tries to ensure the wines purchased are as chemically free as possible (some are even biodynamic) and here, like Max with his beer, tastings are held once a month to get the community trying new wines and

spreading the word about buying from small, craft-oriented brewers and vintners. Good products, Max and Coleen emphasize, are made carefully in environmentally-sensitive ways, and you can't focus on either of those things if you're making huge batches of a product. Creativity license follows this community focus into the bar, with upcoming wine-based Margaritas and Bloody Marys, and flights of wine soon to be offered with dinner specials—just a few other ways to get people excited about what can be done in a place with a collaborative and experimental, rather than a corporate focus.

Perhaps the part of the Raven that is most heavily grounded in Fitzmorris's idealism is found in the kitchen, with Head Chef Tony Burris. The menu, for instance, is created from approximately 70% locally sourced and organic foods (with nightly specials utilizing up to 85%), including Whipstone Farms, the Prescott College CSA Program, and the Raven Farm, an unique project created in concert with the Prescott Food Revolution to grow food specifically for the Raven. Nick Mahmood, founder of the PFR and manager of the farm, explained the benefits of this system, ranging from the emphasis on creating good soil to allowing for a natural seasonal variety in the crops. Patrons of the Raven, therefore, eat produce that will come from much more nutrient-rich soil (therefore containing more nutrients) than food produced by conventional growing methods, and have access to a wider array of nutrients (as the menu changes naturally by season). Mahmood also relates how the Raven Farm is good for community; the waste materials used to enrich the soil, such as woodchips, straw, manure, and vegetable waste (including compost material from The Raven itself) comes from local sources that might otherwise might go to a landfill. The soil is tilled by hand, rather than with machinery (another method of keeping soil nutrients intact) and food is delivered by bike rather than car, which means less gas used.

Mahmood suggests that if more restaurants focused on sustainable farming and built their own small farms, more jobs would appear within communities at these local farms, where people could see a real difference in the work they do, build real community cooperation around it, and learn a lot more about where their food comes from and what it means to make it healthy.

“Closed system agriculture, like what we have going here, is true sustainable agriculture,” he says, “It's better than ‘organic,’ which has corporations still growing crops in large quantities (which is hard on the soil), using lots of gas to deliver it to far-off places, and paying lots of money to get the organic ‘title’.”

Bringing gardens and farms back into the centers of communities means people learn the right ways to take care of themselves and each other. “Community-building events don't make community by themselves,” Mahmood says, “You have to have interdependence.”

Which is exactly what The Raven is going for.

