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Cindy Landrum

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Clockwise from top: Lori Nelsen at work at Oak Hill Café, which she and chef David Porras opened in 2019. Spices and seasoning are carefully organized. Legumes and pork pastor.

Opposite page: A veggie burger with side garden salad. Andrew Olin makes a huckleberry tartlet with Porras pictured in the background.



A FARM OUT BACK, A 'SPACE LAB' UPSTAIRS

OAK HILL CAFÉ & FARM

By Cindy Landrum

To Lori Nelsen, there's a lot of similarity between a science lab and a kitchen.

"It's pretty easy to translate chemistry into the kitchen, especially if you're a baker, because there's so much precision in baking," says Nelsen, an analytical chemist.

Nelsen managed the biogeochemistry lab in Furman's earth and environmental science department for about a dozen years before exploring the restaurant venture. Her husband, Brent Nelsen, is a professor of politics and international affairs at Furman.

Eventually, Lori Nelsen, who cooked most evenings and baked when she could, decided to open a sustainable restaurant.

"At that time, there weren't any farm-to-table restaurants with a farm close by," she says.

She found an old house on a 2.4-acre plot on Poinsett Highway, just 3 miles south of the Furman campus.

"The Realtor thought I was crazy," she recalls.

But she needed a chef. And she found one at a most unexpected place – a 2016 party to welcome new Furman faculty members. Costa Rican chef David Porras, who had studied at the renowned Basque Culinary School in San Sebastian, Spain,

was there. Porras's wife, Karen Allen, had taken a one-year position in the earth and environmental science department.

"We talked for two hours," Nelsen says. "We had similar ideas about food. A lot of chefs don't care about sustainability, but David did. And we were both chemistry geeks about food."

But Porras wasn't sure he was ready to enter a new venture on the heels of a restaurant project in Costa Rica that had soured. But after he saw the property, he changed his mind and became a partner in Oak Hill Café and Farm.

Oak Hill Café opened in June of 2019, five years after Nelsen conceived the idea, and a year and a half after Porras agreed to come aboard. It serves breakfast, lunch and dinner, with most of the ingredients coming from the organic garden behind the restaurant. Furman employees and students receive a 10% discount for breakfast and lunch.

The restaurant's second floor contains a "space lab" with a freeze-dryer, a pressure cooker and a rotary evaporator. There, Nelsen, Porras and the rest of Oak Hill's kitchen staff experiment with different ingredients and what they can do with them.

oakhillcafe.com

Editor's note: At press time, all three restaurants had closed their dining spaces after South Carolina restaurants were ordered to halt in-house service during the COVID-19 pandemic. They were all offering pick-up orders, and Old Europe Desserts was also delivering orders and shipping them as far away as Washington, D.C., Orlando, Florida, and Charlotte, North Carolina. ♦