

## ART AND COMMUNITY

## Cast-Iron Soul

Many people view food and cookery as an art. I believe cooking is a craft and the final result of good cooking can be art. Whichever side of the fence you are on – art or craft – standing between you and the finished masterpiece are the tools to get you there.



Phillip McDonald

Simple, Local & Seasonal by Chef Phillip

Chef & Owner of Table Five

I do a lot of cooking in the public eye and one piece of equipment in my arsenal that always seems to be the focal point of conversation is my cast iron skillet. Sometimes I will get a snicker or a comment such as, "Did you get that from your grandmother's house?"

All jokes aside, the cast-iron skillet is serious business. I cook just about everything in this multi-purpose little gem. In addition to being non-toxic, cast iron retains heat evenly so it is the best utensil for getting a good sear on proteins as well as cooking vegetables and baking.

The cast-iron skillet takes on a life of its own through usage. The more it is used the better it functions. The porous metal becomes naturally non-stick after it is seasoned, and thus no need for Teflon pans. Your pan is ready for use once you do the three-step process in seasoning.

First, clean your new pan to release the protective coating (or wax) and expose the bare metal. Then apply a thin layer of animal fat or vegetable oil around the dry pan and heat in a 400-degree oven for about 20-30 minutes. This facilitates a reaction between the oil and iron, essentially cooking the seasoning into the pan. Once you season your pan in the oven, it officially becomes yours and will take on the character and flavor of your cooking.

If you're looking to get beautiful color on your scallops, the cast-iron skillet is the way to go. Heat your pan with canola oil or clarified butter until it's smoking. Place seasoned scallops in pan and don't touch for about one minute.

"If you don't have one, go pick one up tomorrow"

Phillip McDonald

Turn your scallops to reveal a golden brown caramelization and, depending on how big they are, the versatility of the skillet allows you to move from the stovetop to the oven to finish cooking. Just watch that handle - it's hot!

I love cooking hamburgers in my cast-iron skillet, as well as baking. It is the ultimate for cornbread, as it is for pineapple upside-down cake. It also serves as a great one-pot cooker. For example, after you have seared pork chops and roasted them in your skillet, you can use the residual heat in the pan to wilt a little spinach or quickly heat some asparagus in the roasting juices.

Cleaning your pan is easy with just a little mild soap and warm water. Never

soak your skillet as this will break up the oils that are sealed in your pan and eventually cause it to rust. Remember always to dry your pan before storing it.

As you can see I can go on forever about the infinite benefits of this centuries-old cookware. I have semi-retired my expensive, stainless sauté pans in favor of cast iron. The best part is that the average skillet will not break the bank nor will it even break the piggy bank. If you don't have one, go pick one up tomorrow, give it a try and you will notice the new pride you will take in your cooking. Cast iron is a no-frills precision cooking tool that will make your food better through texture and flavor. If you don't believe me, just ask your grandmother.

#### Seasonal foods to look out for now:

Watermelon  
Corn (late)  
Tomatoes  
Bell peppers  
Okra  
Peaches  
Cucumbers  
Pears (early)  
Eggplant  
Squashes (zucchini and crookneck)  
Flounder  
King mackerel  
Port St. Joe Bay scallops  
Figs  
Speckled trout.

Phillip McDonald is the chef/owner of Table Five, a personal chef service that specializes in dinner parties and private home events along the Emerald Coast. He can be reached at [info@tablefivechef.com](mailto:info@tablefivechef.com) or (850) 496-5066.

## Seaside Architect Hosts Table Five Dinner with Dragonfly Fields Farm

By Madra McDonald  
Contributing Writer

On a balmy summer evening on June 26, 20 guests were invited to dine together for an impromptu meal around a communal table at the Seaside home of Braulio and Tara Casas. What may have been easily disguised as just another unassuming dinner party was actually a "food" dinner to celebrate farmers Charles Bush and Shueh-Mei Pong, the husband-and-wife team behind Dragonfly Fields.

A 17-acre farm located north of the

For the Health of It, Table Five, Smiling Fish Café and Great Southern Café.

Serving as the inaugural dinner for Table Five's underground harvest dinner project, the family-style dinner was inspired by the wonderful bounty that hails from the boutique farm located 30 miles from South Walton. Bush, formerly the Gulf Coast territory manager of Augustan Wine Imports, and Pong, most widely known as the original founder and talented chef of Basmati's, are long-standing South Walton residents who were at one time merchants in Seaside.

"We had such a great time," said Tara Casas. "It was a wonderful mix



Harvest dinners feature locally grown produce and simple preparation.

bay in DeFuniak Springs, Dragonfly Fields has been the go-to source for fresh, beautiful produce for a roster of select area restaurants and chefs along the Emerald Coast. Some of Dragonfly Fields' devout patrons include: Vin'tij, Stinky's Fish Camp, Fish Out of Water,

of people, and the food was incredible both in taste and presentation."

Taking inspiration from Dragonfly Fields' weekly harvest, the local and seasonal menu created by Chef Phillip McDonald included a simple preparation of: Homegrown tomatoes with sea salt, olive oil and basil; chilled Alligator Point clams with local garlic and parsley; grilled Florida hopper shrimp with lemon, garlic and smoked paprika; grilled whole Gulf snapper; roasted "fresh-from-the-ground" potatoes; grilled cocozelle zucchini and scalloppini squash; and "the best" banana pudding.

"I have great respect for what Charles and Shueh-Mei have created with Dragonfly Fields, and we were honored to have them as our featured guest for our first harvest dinner," said McDonald, owner of Table Five, a per-

"It's really all about celebrating the labor and love of prideful farmers like Charles and Shueh-Mei"

Madra McDonald


sonal chef service that primarily serves clients in South Walton.

"This is a new project for us and it continues to be a work in progress. We hope to create an informal, alternative dining concept that allows food lovers the unique pleasure of dining with the farmer who grew the food for that particular evening."

Not unlike other similar harvest dinner concepts that have been launched by other chefs around the country, McDonald wants to provide an outlet for such a venue to take place locally, showcasing a different farmer or artisan each time.


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