

# Farm-to-Table Dinner at Chattooga Belle Farm

By Mamie Morgan / Photography By Brian Kelley | September 01, 2014  
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## About the Author Mamie Morgan

Mamie Morgan teaches poetry at The Governor's School, manages The Nose Dive, and routinely wins staring contests with...



My first order of business at Chattooga Belle's farm-to-table dinner (aside from, obviously, grabbing a glass of wine) is to locate my partner for the evening, our photographer Brian Kelley. We've been invited to the elaborate, thoughtfully sourced event that the farm's owners, Kitty and Ed Land, host the first Sunday of October. Dinner maxes out at 200 guests and has been a sellout since 2011. Brian's not in the muscadine vines. Or by the Palmetto Moonshine tasting table. He's not sitting in one of the property's reclining chairs listening to Dawn Jackson sing. When I spot him, he's staring out over the

138 acres that seem to stretch into the mountainous skyline itself. And when I reach him, he's speechless. "I mean, wow," one of us finally says. "My God."

Chattooga Belle Farm, located in Oconee County's Long Creek, rests on the same land known in the 1950s as the largest apple producing area east of the Mississippi. In those days, the farm was owned by one Groucho Marx. Ed Land, who purchased the property in 2005, carries under his belt a long, various list of titles: from Boy Scout to brick mason, Army Ranger to builder. So I was surprised when, in answer to the question, "What is your farming background?" Ed quipped, "Zero."



"Farming," he says, "is such a vital part of what we do every day. We don't need to buy new cars or clothes, but we do have to eat." In many ways, Land would lead you to think the whole farming business is pretty simple: "We grow fruit. We grow beef. And we grow relationships."

Chattooga Belle harvests everything from persimmons to pawpaws, brown turkey figs to juju fruit, arctic kiwi, goji berries, muscadines and scuppernongs, blackberries/raspberries/blueberries, peaches and—of course—apples. They raise Black Angus beef. 22 of the acres house a lake that irrigates the fruit, and the Lands practice other sustainable ways of growing. The chicken litter they use as fertilizer, for example, comes from a neighboring farm.

While the farm began and continues to be U-pick where passersby can collect what they want, the Lands also run a retail store and a restaurant wherein they serve lunch each day from May through October. They produce eight kinds

of wine and hope to even open a distillery this year. Oh, and did I mention? Chattooga Belle puts on over 60 weddings per year. It's virtually impossible to imagine how the Lands and their team manage it all, especially with Ed's wife Kitty working full-time as a nurse anesthetist at Oconee Medical Center.



But of all the events that take place on the farm, Kitty looks most forward to the annual farm-to-table dinner. “It’s an ideal location to celebrate the bounty of our land, pay honor to the local farmers, and appreciate the culinary skill of the fabulous chefs in our region.” Virtually everything on the menu is sourced from not farther than 50 miles away (with an exception being saltwater seafood). This includes the chefs themselves. For a third year, Clayton, Georgia’s Jamie Allred will be in attendance, who, just this year, was named one of the 2013-2014 Best Chefs America. Chef Jamie owns Fortify Kitchen & Bar and recently published *Field Kitchen*, a cookbook that features recipes from nine different Georgia farms. Other chefs will include Mark Winters from Lighthouse Lake Keowee in Seneca, and Gayle and David Darugh of Beechwood Inn in Clayton, GA, also named to Best Chefs America.

Before dinner, Ed leads a group of us on a winding tour of the various produce. Eventually, as the sun sets and weather still seems to be deciding whether or not to hold, guests meander to the long table—pocked with vases of flowers, mason jars of iced water, and the colorful shawls thrown over the backs of chairs—overlooking the orchard. Brian and I feast on blue cheese stuffed fig, fennel sausage crostini, apple and butternut squash bisque, herb-roasted grass-fed beef tenderloin with kale and roasted autumn vegetables in a garlic sauce. We’re attended to by a troop

of regional Future Farmers of America, along with Farm-to-School Student Ambassadors. The Lands supply apples to the latter foundation, and much of the dinner's proceeds are used to fund college scholarships for FFA students.

No one goes without wine or extras of what they need; any flaw in execution goes unnoticed. First the sun dips low behind the mountains while we chat with surrounding guests—photographers, teachers, insurance salesmen—and eventually night falls totally on. We sit in the dark, laughing, finishing the evening's *pièce de résistance* (an apple crisp topped with vanilla bean whipped cream), finding it very hard to leave.

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