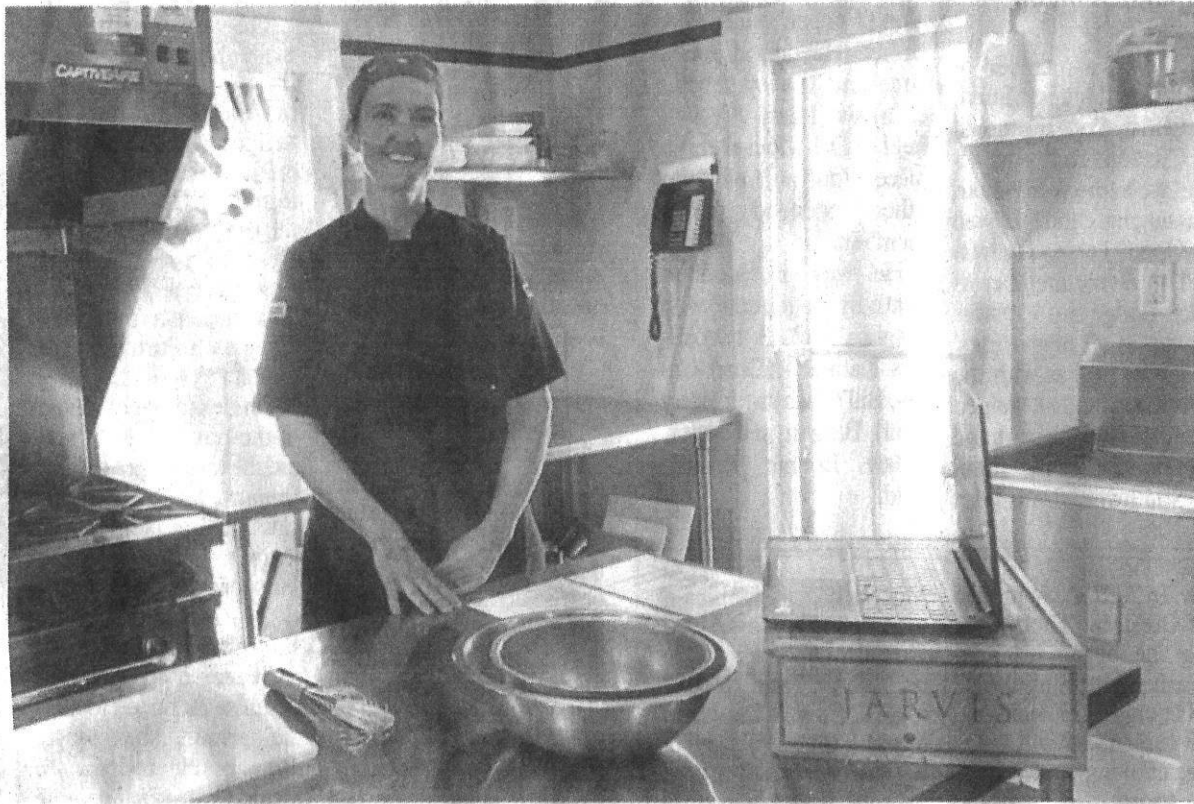


For the love of farm fresh food and community



Contributed photo

In January, Katie Porter, a Mount Ayr native who grew up very aware of the farming community around her, celebrated nine years employed by the Wallace Centers of Iowa. She's currently a chef and the food programs manager with the organization, where one of her current roles is teaching virtual cooking classes.

By CALEB NELSON
ACFP editor

Katie Porter has a good taste for connecting with people through the food she makes. She's also into connecting them with each other through the food they eat and with those who produce it.

In January, Porter celebrated nine years with the Wallace Centers of Iowa. She currently serves as their Chef and Food Programs Manager, working at the Wallace House location in Des Moines.

'Building the community up'

The Wallace Centers of Iowa provides a gamut of programs and services that build awareness of

local food, sustainable agriculture and civility. They serve urban and rural audiences with locations at the Henry A. Wallace Country Life Center near Orient in Adair County and the Wallace House in Des Moines, while paying homage to the former secretary of agriculture and vice president and his family. Wallace also is credited for his career with his family's farm journal, Wallaces' Farmer, and founded the Hi-Bred Corn Company.

Porter incorporates the oversight of farm to table meals at the Wallace House, seasonal cooking classes, summer camps for teens and more into her role at the centers.

More than 40 varieties

of fruits and vegetables are grown on about 10 acres of gardens and orchard at the Country Life Center. That produce is then used by Porter, and the center's other chef, Hans Walsh, in their cooking. The produce is also distributed to wholesale markets and is distributed to food-insecure Iowans through a project called Garden for Good, which yielded 2,300 pounds of sweet potatoes in 2020 that were donated to area food banks.

"It's not just a restaurant day in and day out, we're building the community up," Porter said. "The role I'm in here is amazing, and I love it. I love that I'm not only cooking food in a restaurant setting, I'm

also teaching about food, teaching cooking classes and doing other programming. We're trying to get the word out about eating more vegetables and eating locally.

An early love for produce

Growing up in the shadows of silos and corn fields in Ringgold County's seat of Mount Ayr, where her grandfather and uncle farmed nearby, Porter was used to her mother and grandmother often having fresh vegetables from their garden on hand all year round.

Porter first went to college for dietetics, but quickly switched trajectory when she became intrigued by a food prep

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course and officially changed her major to culinary arts at a school in Keystone, Colorado.

"Working in a restaurant was really where I discovered that this was fun," Porter said. "There are so many fun things you can do with food and it kind of started something in me. I just thought it would be really fun to go to culinary school."

Of all of her goals she has at the Wallace Centers of Iowa, one of Porter's biggest is to help people from all backgrounds make a meaningful connection with where their food comes from. In her case, all of the vegetables she cooks with — common ones like green beans and less common ones like beets — have all been tended to by caring staff members or volunteers either at the Wallace Centers or a select few other local farms they draw from, and Porter feels it's important to honor their hard work.

"It's nice to put a face to where you're getting your food from to really honor the hard work that goes into farming," she said. "Growing up around it, I was aware of the hard work that goes into farming, visiting my grandparents and picking vegetables."

Porter said that inspiring her love for canning was her grandmother, Shirley Sweeney, who handed down to her a canner that she used up until a few years ago.

"Then it scared me, so I don't use hers anymore," Porter said. "My grandma always had tomatoes, green beans and things like that."

Virtual classes

When the pandemic took hold last March, some programming at the Wallace Centers was been put on hold while others have been allowed to continue with slight modifications. Porter assists Walsh during the summer and autumn at the Country Life Center with the weekly "Pizza on the Prairie" event, which allows visitors to dine outdoors on fresh brick oven pizza made with toppings fresh off the farm, experience live music, the re-

birthplace farmhouse, historic barn replica, organic produce gardens, an orchard, prairie paths and outdoor sculptures.

"Pizza on the Prairie is a great way to showcase our vegetables on the farm," Porter said. "People can tour the gardens and our educational plots. It's a great way for people to check out a vegetable farm."

This time of year is normally reserved for cooking classes. They've been modified to an online, virtual format, and Porter has enjoyed the results as the instructor. It has allowed those who live farm from Des Moines a chance to experience new recipes in their kitchen as they follow along with Porter on their screen.

One example of an out-of-the-box class Porter taught was a series utilizing rhubarb last year. In the class, participants could learn to make a rhubarb barbecue sauce or a rhubarb vinaigrette. While Porter said rhubarb is typically seen used in pie with lots of sugar added to mask the tartness, she enjoyed some of the recipes she taught last year because of how they highlight that tartness. Porter also remembers teaching how to make a beet burger that was met with a positive reaction.

"One of the biggest comments people have given to me is that they really enjoy cooking in their own home," Porter said. "They enjoy cooking alongside me because they're more comfortable making the recipe, and they're then more apt to make it again. As they're cooking they can ask questions on whether this looks right or whether something's supposed to look like that or not. It's neat to be able to answer those questions as they're doing it. It really gives me as ense that they'll recreate these recipes again."

For Porter, her love for food and joy of educating others on its origin has come full circle.

"I just love feeding people," Porter said. "I love honoring the food and making it simply taste the best that it can."

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