

New chef at Wallace Centers serves up fresh plates and plans

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Cake, ravioli and lamb chops starred in chef Saralyn Smith's farm-to-table dinner Tuesday night at the Wallace House. (Photo: Michael Morain)

By Michael Morain

Let's start with dessert: a slice of vanilla chiffon cake topped with a swirl of pink rhubarb mousse. Cou anything taste more like spring?



chop with fresh asparagus. (Full disclosure: I was a guest of the Wallace Centers of Iowa and sat at a table with the new chef.)

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Smith explained where many of the ingredients came from — nine local producers, plus the Wallace Farm an hour west in Orient — and outlined her plans to amplify the Wallace Centers' mission to “connect Iowa's land and people.”

She previewed the “Hearts & Homes Luncheons” inspired by recipes Na Cantwell Wallace tucked into her “women's column” for Wallace's Farm around the turn of the 20th century, plus various meals where guests can meet the farmers and producers that supplied the ingredients. She also set up dinners that focus on single ingredients from the Wallace Farm, like rhubarb (June 5), tomatoes (Sept. 18) and garlic (Oct. 19). There's a whole slate of new options in Orient, too, where you can enjoy wood-fired pizza topped with local meats and straight-from-the-garden produce.

Smith was the first Iowa chef to be accepted into the James Beard Foundation Boot Camp for Policy and Change, in 2019. Her big-picture thinking about sustainable food and agriculture is informed by her projects at the Convivium Urban Farmstead in Dubuque, where she led a zero-waste initiative, and Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids, where she taught baking classes. She was also a pastry chef at the University of Iowa.

The new role “really matches where my heart is in terms of cooking and making connections with people, farmers and producers,” she said. “I'm excited to have a creative outlet to help folks make some real progress.”

I don't know what the Wallace family would have eaten on an ordinary Tuesday night when they lived in their old house, but I have a hunch Smith has raised the bar.