

# ROOTED IN CONNECTION

WRITTEN BY: Christina Nifong | PHOTOS BY: House of Amsel Photography

A new nonprofit nurtures our local food system by offering chefs, farmers, and eaters a chance to share culinary experiences.



Chef Ricardo "Pete" Smith



Chef/Owner John Loeffler of Grist Mill Square

Founder of Root to Table Nancy Craun



The fairy lights cast a magical sparkle across the patio high in the Virginia mountains. Seated around the fire rings are chefs Travis Milton, Wells Selbe, and Marcus Repp. Less than an hour earlier, they'd pulled off a six-course meal for 57, and now they are mingling among their guests, sharing their favorite ingredients (pawpaws, spicebush) and tales of bringing local food to the table.

Over three days last June, participants in Savor: Chefs, Farmers, & Friends sampled heirloom recipes from Mae Hey, a Blacksburg-based Native American chef, grilled local trout over an open flame with the farmer who raised them, and chatted with dairy farmers who raised their herds in a closed-system environment to create four varieties of buttery cheeses with hints of hay.

Zombie mushrooms and lavender-infused local honey were set out for sampling. A mocktail swirled together pine needles, strawberries, local ginger, and Virginia-tapped maple syrup. Star-shaped fire-pink flowers Selbe had foraged from Mountain Lake Lodge's fields that very afternoon decorated the tables. At breakfast on the final day, chefs dreamed up a savory mousse with trout roe and avocados.

The event was immersive. It took six months of planning. It never could have happened without Root to Table, a young nonprofit whose mission is "strengthening our regional food system through shared meals, shared stories, and shared values."

The organization is most visible as the creative energy behind upscale food experiences like Savor. But its real work is forging relationships through the planning and staging of these memorable meals, Root to Table's leadership says.

"There hasn't been an opportunity, aside from Root to Table, where people who have this connection of being passionate about locally grown food coming together in the same place," says Kat Zajac, owner of Villacaro Farms, a cattle ranch in the Shenandoah Valley, and a Root to Table board member. "I think that's what's unique about what Root to Table is trying to do."

## Giving Chefs a Voice

The seeds of Root to Table were planted in 2016 when founder Nancy Craun realized how central food experiences were to tourism. "As I was looking at brochures... whether it was cruise ships or land tours, the front of the brochure was always a chef," she says.

Craun has a background in marketing and event planning. What if, she wondered, she could organize experiences that would give chefs more of a voice to tell their stories and teach their craft?

To do that, she created an event company called Taste of the Blue Ridge. Over seven years, Craun estimates her business hosted 45 events, involving some 3,000 people as vendors, attendees, or producers, across West Virginia and western Virginia. In 2019 alone, Taste of the Blue Ridge staged 10 happenings. "My staff told me, 'Don't you ever do that again!'" she laughs.

Building back after Covid, Craun decided switching to a nonprofit model could enable her organization to worry less about the bottom line and focus more on its mission of creating community among chefs, farmers, winemakers, hoteliers, and eaters.

These connections are what draw participants to the nonprofit, which would come to be known as Root to Table.

For chefs, Root to Table dinners offer a rare chance to cook with peers. "The main thing I want to tell other chefs," says Clem Tamasang, executive chef at the Bavarian Inn in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, "is to take time to learn from other chefs." Tamasang will be a featured participant in Root to Table's Field & Flame event in Loudon County, Virginia, this May.

For farmers, networking events—like the organization's four pot-lucks a year—provide a chance to collaborate.

"Root to Table presents a really nice opportunity for farmers—small scale and large scale—to come together," says Zajac. "For me, that was a big piece that was missing from my life."

"One thing I have found is that when you and your peers work together, the impact is huge," says Adriana Lucca, general manager for Barrel Oak Winery & Brewery in Delaplane, Virginia.

## Creating Community

In 2025, Root to Table hosted Salute to Women, a two-day event in Winchester, Virginia; Savor, in Pembroke, Virginia; and a seven-course meal at Field & Main in Marshall, Virginia, with participating guest chef Ian Boden.

2026 promises even more. New chefs and farmers have come aboard with fresh ideas, while an email newsletter for local food fans is offering additional ways for enthusiasts to get involved. This year's slate of events begins May 17 at venues including Barrel Oak Winery & Brewery in Delaplane; Riverside on the Potomac in Leesburg; and Hope Flower Farm in Waterford. (See below.)

Every event aims not only to entertain but to leave a deeper understanding of those working to make local food a viable part of their communities.

"It's an entire experience, from the food, to listening to the chefs and farmers talk, to then enjoying the atmosphere that we put them in," says Craun. "The culinary series is our way of getting in front of people and letting them experience what our community values." ✕

## ROOT TO TABLE EVENTS

### Field & Flame

May 17, 2026

Riverside on the Potomac, Leesburg, VA

### The Summer Table, Rooted at Barrel Oak

June 20, 2026

Barrel Oak Winery and Brewery, Delaplane, VA

### Ember & Earth

July 19, 2026

Fieldstone at Hillbrook Inn, Charles Town, WV

### Salute to Women in Culinary and Agriculture

Aug. 23, 2026

Hope Flower Farm and Winery, Waterford, VA

Find more information and purchase tickets at [roottotable.org](https://roottotable.org).