



BIG FEAST FROM A TINY FARM

Indonesian couple harvest abundance in College Park

Words and photos by Victoria Milko

Tucked between a concrete barrier of the bustling Capital Beltway and a quiet, College Park neighborhood lies a plot of land that is raising the standards of suburban farming to new heights. Bearing produce ranging from exotic Southeast Asian vegetables to swelling Sungold tomatoes, the suburban farm has become one of the most thriving of its kind in the region.

And it's less than a quarter of an acre.

Meet Roy and Arti Caspari, the green thumbs behind the thriving farm plot. Years ago Roy and Arti met in their home country of Indonesia; Roy's friend had gotten married and he too had decided it was time he settled down. Soon after, a friend introduced Roy to Arti—and the two were married within a year. Shortly after, Roy moved to Washington, DC, and worked in restaurants and bars in the city, while Arti stayed in Indonesia. In 2004, after nearly 15 years



The Caspari children proudly show off their first pumpkin of the season.



of working and living in the city, Roy bought the house in College Park, MD.

“It was all grass when I moved here,” Roy says, with a coy smile. “There were no plants at all.” In 2006, Arti received her green card and moved to College Park, reuniting the couple once more.

A few years later Roy began interning at ECO City Farms, a Prince George’s County, MD, nonprofit dedicated to promoting and educating the public about food access, nutrition and sustainable food practices. Enrolling in the organization’s New Farmer Training Program, Roy learned the ins and outs of sustainable farming practices in a suburban setting, enabling him to start growing produce for his own food vendor business.

For Arti, it’s always been a labor of love. “I like gardening. Back home in Indonesia I learned from my grandma,” she says. But like most loves, the farm hasn’t come without its trials and tribulations. “I’m still learning,” she sighs as she thumbs leaves pillaged by some unknown insect. Later, Roy mentions that Arti will most likely spend the evening reading to find out what the insect was. “She loves to read,” says Roy. “She learns so much from her books.”

The couple began selling cuisine influenced by their home country at local farm markets in Greenbelt, Riverdale, Takoma Park and College Park, expanding their operation as business grew. As they grew more produce, their menu options at the market grew too. What started as simple fresh greens salads and hot sauces evolved into more intricate dishes like spicy curries and vegetable platters.

While many easily recognizable foods make their way into the Casparis’ robust rows of produce, there are some more unusual suspects nestled within the rows. “Indonesia has very different food,” says Arti. “I am always trying to grow healthy new things.”

Thai eggplants, red beans, lemongrass and stevia thrive along with more familiar characters. Peppers and chilies of all sizes, colors

and origins cling to their vines, leaving the faintest hint of capsaicin in the air. Arti points to a pumpkin nearly the size of a beach ball.

“This volunteered itself. We didn’t plan it. That happens a lot here.” *Volunteer* is the term gardeners use for plants that show up without having been planted or planned. Nothing is planted without purpose or reason: Even the flowers that grow are used for a range of things from recipe ingredients to natural bug repellants.

But with so many “volunteers” appearing, how does the couple keep everything organized? “Every plant for me has a different shape, a different smell,” says Arti. “I’ve learned to recognize them that way.”

While the Casparis are currently generating a majority of their business from sales at markets, they’re looking to shift their focus. “We love the markets, and about 90% of our revenue comes from them,” says Roy. “But what we are really hoping for is to become full-time farmers.” Walking through the farm Roy points to a stack of recycled window frames; the family is working towards building a greenhouse so that they may continue to grow their produce in the winter.

At the other end of the yard a shed houses a duck and her ducklings while a neighborhood cat (lovingly named Tiger) leisurely rests on the roof of the shed, napping before spending the night protecting the produce from hungry rodents. Rabbits gently nibble on fresh lemongrass, their droppings becoming fertilizer for the farm.

“We have a happy life here,” says Arti. “We work hard and we stay happy.”

Follow the Casparis on Facebook at Roy & R’s Kitchen & Garden.



It's 10am on a blistering hot Saturday at the farmers market located in the corner of a parking lot of a major outdoor store in College Park. There you find the Casparis, doling out their cuisine to cheery customers admiring the freshly crisped fritters and black rice coconut pudding. Nearly every person who walks by their stand is greeted by first name, with extra fresh vegetables or cups of fresh pickles being sneakily placed into customers' bags by Roy.

An older gentlemen walks up, and Arti greets him with a smile and handful of produce freshly plucked from the garden.

"How often do you come here?" I ask him. "I always have, and always will," he responds.



Roy, Arti and their children in their College Park farm.



Roy and RT's Indonesian cuisine has developed a loyal following at the farm markets.