

Food & Dining

At Epiphany Farms, owning both farm and table

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At Epiphany Farms Restaurant in Bloomington, owning both farm and table

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Fame can be as alluring as lights for a moth. If you're an aspiring chef, the spotlight shines no brighter than in a big city like Las Vegas.

Sin City was where Ken Myszka cooked six years ago, working for superstar chefs Guy Savoy and Thomas Keller in restaurants charging \$200-plus per diner.

As fast paced as those kitchens ran, there was a monotony to his job. The tedium allowed Myszka to think about how the restaurant industry operated. Peeling carrots one day, he asked a question that would later lead to his epiphany: "How do we know no pesticides were used? Why can't the person who bagged the carrots at the farm also open it in the kitchen?"

Myszka sought a more holistic way to bring food from farms to diners. To do this, he convinced two chef colleagues and his girlfriend to leave Las Vegas and move to Myszka's childhood home — central Illinois — and together invent a system from the dirt up. He'd call their new venture [Epiphany Farms](#).

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Back in 2010, their payroll only had four names, and [they all slept under the same roof](#). Their dream restaurant was still a bare concrete slab, and they earned income by cooking at private parties. Here's a tally of their operations today: Two restaurants, 60 employees, a 20-acre farm, a weekend farmers market stall and supplier to Chicago restaurants including Next, The Aviary and Eataly.

"It's very hard for farmers to make it. It's very hard for independent restaurants to make it. And to combine the two, sometimes I think the world is against us to make it," Myszka said. "But the fact

we are making it, and by us just being in existence, it's moving the food culture to somewhere we need to be — more local and sustainable.”

The centerpiece of their growth is housed on two floors of a former fire station at 220 E. Front St. in Bloomington. On the bottom floor is Epiphany Farms Restaurant, a formal dining space that opened in mid-July after a DIY renovation. Reclaimed wood plays a dominant role, with portraits of pastoral farm scenes on walls. Myszka's dishes (with chef Stu Hummel) reflect the farm's production, with vegetables, pork, chicken and eggs anchoring the French-influenced menu.

Upstairs, the vibe swings a couple of decades younger, with kung fu movies projected on screens. It's called Anju Above, with much of the menu inspired by Myszka's Korean-born wife Nanam Yoon. There are Korean fried wings and mandoo dumplings, but it also expands to sushi and pizza, a something-for-everyone philosophy needed for a nascent dining town like Bloomington.

Both menus attempt to solve the question Myszka poses: Can the farm — 4.2 miles down the road — supply the bulk of ingredients for two restaurants? Some staples like sea salt or flour, will always need to be brought in, but Myszka thinks eventually 50 percent of ingredients can be grown at his farm.

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The biggest surprise is how Bloomington-Normal — the birthplace of Steak ‘N Shake — has bought in. The restaurants are averaging 1,000-plus customers a week, a figure many Chicago chefs could only dream of attaining.

“The driving goal is to inspire more growers, farmers and chefs to see the value in this,” Myszka said. “We're always asking ourselves: 'How do we make sure food is as healthy as possible?' Everyday we operate and exist, we're influencing and making a difference.”

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Epiphany Farms Restaurant and Anju Above

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