



Megan Strom, the farmer, and her husband Juan Gonzalez, the chef of Mesa Agricola.



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Megan Strom, the farmer, and her husband Juan Gonzalez, the chef.

Husband and wife, chef and farmer duo bring farm-to-table goodness to Solana Beach's Vino Carta

BY KAREN BILLING

The husband-and-wife, farmer-and-chef team behind Mesa Agricola now has a weekly kitchen residency at Solana Beach's Vino Carta wine shop and bar.

Megan Strom, the farmer, and her husband Juan Gonzalez, the chef, take over the kitchen every Monday and Tuesday night from 5-9 p.m., serving up a soulful menu of farm-to-table cuisine. The couple's concept fits perfectly with Vino Carta, which sells only natural wines made through organic and sustainable farming practices from small, family-run producers.

Reservations are strongly recommended as the space can only hold 30 people at a time. Tuesdays have been filling up and Megan and Juan have been satisfyingly slammed.

"It's going really well so far, we're really happy to be working with Vino Carta," Strom said.

Vino Carta is a part of the Bottlecrafter family, which has craft beer shops in North Park, Liberty Public Market and Oceanside. The first Vino Carta opened in Little Italy and last year Solana Beach's Bottlecrafter in the Beach Walk Shopping Center made the conversion from beer to wine, becoming the second Vino Carta location.

The wine shop offers food seven nights a week—Long Story Short, another husband and wife team, takes over the kitchen Wednesdays through Sundays.

A Minnesota native, some might assume Strom grew up on the farm but she was a self-described "city girl" who worked in restaurants since she was 14. She moved to San Francisco to attend Le Cordon Bleu culinary school and study the front-of-the-house side but eventually moved to the Coachella Valley, where she found and fell in love with farming. She loved being outside and cultivating the valued produce that makes its way into restaurant kitchens.

"It's hard work but very, very rewarding," said Strom.

For the last 13 years, Strom farmed 120 acres in the Coachella Valley. She met and married Gonzalez, a chef from Baja, Mexico and their goal was always a farm-to-table experience that they could run together. The pair launched Mesa Agricola last year doing private farm-to-table dinners—every meal was an adventure and a celebration of the culture of rustic food preparation, lettuce harvested less than 24 hours before it was served for their first course.

Megan and Juan made the move to San Diego when they got an amazing opportunity from Mike Reeske, a bean farmer in Valley Center, to farm a small plot of land. She went from a 120-acre farm to just a quarter acre: "It is very humbling and I touch every seed and leaf by

hand," she said.

With Mesa Agricola they had been hosting farm-to-table dinners in the San Diego area and heard of Vino Carta through friends. They started out doing the occasional pop-ups at the Little Italy location before landing the residency in Solana Beach.

On the farm, Strom grows mostly specialty greens, standard vegetables but the most unique varieties: "I'm a big seed catalog nerd." She also grows whatever Gonzalez is interested in experimenting with.

She has grown really cool Spanish hanging tomatoes and varieties of chicories, radicchio and mustard greens. She's grown bronze fennel, purple peacock broccoli (a crossbreed of kale and broccoli) and has 10 types of garlic in the ground that will be harvested soon.

Gonzalez's culinary style is Baja-Mediterranean cuisine, using whatever is ripe for the picking. Working in restaurants in Los Angeles, he learned a lot about global spices and techniques which he blends with his Baja inspiration. The menu changes every week depending on what's fresh but a lot of fan favorites stay on the menu like the chicory salad with chicories, pickled red onions, shaved farm apples and Pecorino Romano with a drizzle of kefir milk dressing.

A sample menu last week included roasted

mushrooms with crispy leeks; pan-roasted Japanese sweet potatoes with hazelnut crema, serrano chile and fermented honey kaffir lime dressing; and a beet salad with kumquats, mint and pistachios.

Many of their dishes are vegan and gluten-free, but they also do a tuna tlayuda (a traditional Mexican street food made with a large crispy tortilla) and a New York strip steak with black garlic aioli and fresh Mesa Agricola arugula.

Dessert options included a chocolate olive oil cake or basque cheesecake with raspberry rhubarb jam.

In addition to the kitchen residency, the Carlsbad couple is still doing private farm-to-table dinners (called the San Diego Supper Club) and hope to do more—they hosted one recently at Coastal Roots Farm in Encinitas.

At Vino Carta, Megan and Juan are enjoying their passion project and sharing their bounty with a true farm-to-table experience. The space is cozy, the vegetables are fresh and the plates shareable: "It's really something special," Strom said.

Learn more about Mesa Agricola at mesaagricola.com. Vino Carta is located at 437 N. Highway 101, Solana Beach. For reservations visit vinocartasd.com

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