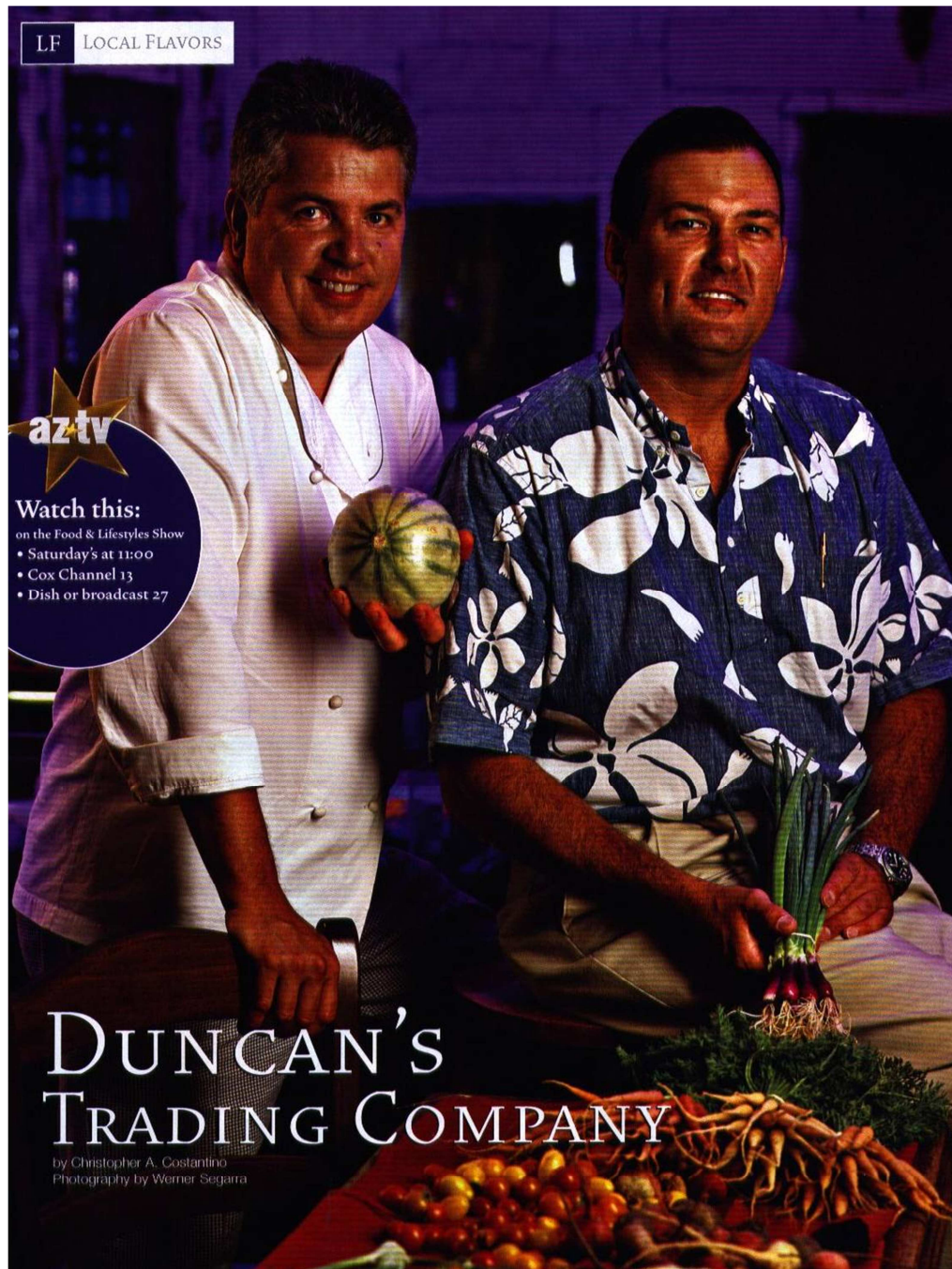


DUNCAN'S TRADING COMPANY

By Christopher A. Costantino

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DUNCAN'S
TRADING COMPANY

by Christopher A. Costantino
Photography by Werner Segarra

In the United States, commercial produce is grown for size, appearance and durability, with taste bringing up a seemingly distant fourth. It's no wonder that the demand for locally grown organic produce is on the rise - organic food tastes better. While the full extent of the health benefits are still being debated, the agreed upon bottom line is: nutrients are present in organic foods that are not found in commercial foods (such as antioxidants – the substances thought to prevent cancer) and toxins (non-existent in organic foods) are present in commercial foods.

Organic farming avoids the use of synthetically compounded fertilizers, pesticides and growth regulators. Instead, they use crop rotation, animal manures and biological pest control to eliminate weeds, insects and other pests. According to the USDA, sales of organic produce are expected to top \$20 billion by 2005. Retailers of organic produce have also felt the demand; Whole Foods Market – the world's largest organic foods supermarket – has grown from one store in 1980 to 160 stores currently.

Residents of the Valley are lucky enough to have an organic producer right in their backyard. On fewer than 100 acres in Litchfield Park, Patrick Duncan has created an oasis in the desert. With up to 10 staff members, this fourth generation farmer grows 100 percent organic specialty vegetables. Not to be confused with the highly publicized “Duncan Family Farm,” which was forced to close due to its proximity to Luke Air Force Base, this is Duncan's Trading Company. Duncan supplies produce to many of the valley's best restaurants, including Vincent's on Camelback, LON's at the Hermosa, MOSAIC, and elements at Sanctuary on Camelback.

As demonstrated in the “Finer Elements” department of F&L's July/August issue, ingredients make a big difference to the quality of a restaurant – “...even the most skilled chef can't disguise low quality products.” Chef/owner Vincent Guerithault, who receives 60 to 70 percent of his produce from Duncan, states that the specialty produce is “just the best - the freshest and the most unusual things.” Guerithault has been purchasing Duncan's produce for five years now and observes that the growth of high quality restaurants in the Phoenix area has made the demand and availability of fresh produce much greater.

For those who want to cook with high quality produce at home, Vincent's hosts a Farmer's Market every Saturday from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. (from September 18th until the end of May). The highlight is beautiful, fresh produce, but other products are offered as well, such as locally produced mustards, honey, breads and pastries. Several tables are set up where customers can enjoy their purchases: a delicious sandwich, Vincent's signature duck tamales, buttery croissants, crepes, pizzas and many other delicacies. Vincent is joined by his wife and three sons, making a big, fun event out of the entire experience. For more information, visit their website at www.vincentsoncamelback.com.

Born and raised in the Valley, Patrick Duncan has been farming since he was six. He started out in the traditional Central Arizona crops of cotton, alfalfa, and grains, but didn't find it very rewarding. Seven years ago, he started Duncan's Trading Company, which he clearly loves. With heartfelt sincerity, he admits, “Growing specialty produce is a lot more fulfilling than growing large scale crops.”

After a well-earned summer vacation (spent surfing in Newport Beach), Duncan will begin

planting for the season in mid-September. Two to three weeks later, Duncan will reap his first harvest.

The size and varieties set Duncan apart from many other growers. For example, carrots, fennel, eggplant, tomatoes and beets all come in “baby” varieties. These Lilliputian vegetables are far more tender and sweet than their adult counterparts. I was lucky enough to see some of these tasty looking treasures during the photo shoot and, dare I say it...they’re cute!

In the area of variety, Duncan grows eight to 10 different kinds of squash, several types of melons (including charentais, which Guerithault claims are the only ones grown in Arizona), twenty types of lettuce (including mache, mizuna, tat soi and rainbow chard), six types of radishes and a variety of exotic beans (such as haricot verts and dragontongue). He also offers squash blossoms that include a baby zucchini squash, something that most farmers do not offer. Chef suggested varieties; such as D'Avignon radishes and Red Amaranth are also available. Duncan states, “In the course of a year, I'll grow more than a hundred different things.”

Having such a bounty of produce can be a boon to a culinary hobby. I know I'd be in seventh heaven if I had the kind of produce that Duncan provides - just imagine the Pasta Primavera that could be made with those tomatoes, eggplants and squash alone. While Duncan claims that his cooking talent pales in comparison to the quality of ingredients, I'm sure with friends like Guerithault, he's learned a few tricks over the years.

With this caliber of specialty vegetables, Chefs can build their menu around the produce, rather than purchasing the produce to fit the menu. It is obvious that Guerithault, as well as Chef Charles Wiley (elements) and Chef Fernando Divina (LON's) work wonders with such great ingredients. All three restaurants are award winners, from Guerithault's James Beard award to Wiley's Food and Wine “Best Chefs” award to LON's being named “Most Popular restaurant in Phoenix/Scottsdale” by the Zagat Survey. Duncan's produce is no doubt partially responsible for these great honors.

For seven years, Patrick Duncan has been growing superb quality produce for diners in the valley. He is justifiably proud of his produce. “There are few things more enjoyable than a creative and talented chef appearing tableside with a dish enhanced by vegetables harvested from my fields the previous day.” Guerithault is equally happy with the arrangement. “At last, the freshest [produce] in Arizona.”