

Little Fleet, Loma Farm Owners Partner To Open Farm Club

By Beth Milligan | July 4, 2020

The owners of The Little Fleet and Loma Farm are partnering together to open Farm Club this month – a farm, restaurant, brewery, and marketplace designed to immerse patrons in an agricultural experience on 35 acres in Leelanau County.

Farm Club will open in mid-July at 10051 South Lake Leelanau Drive just off the TART Trail seven miles from downtown Traverse City. Gary and Allison Jonas of The Little Fleet and Sara and Nic Theisen of Loma Farm have been planning the project for three years, planting cover crops to coax two acres of land into farm production and building a 4,500 square-foot restaurant, brewery, and marketplace space overlooking the fields. The Jonases built their personal residence on the property, and Loma Farm is located just down the road – an intentional overlap designed to highlight the communal aspect of the project.

“We’re all neighbors, we all live in this community,” says Allison Jonas. “Everything we’re doing, we’re doing with intention to not be overly disruptive of the beautiful quiet countryside and to honor the agricultural nature of the area. It’s a farm first, a restaurant second, and a brewery and marketplace third. We really want to put the emphasis on the farm.”

During a tour of the property, the partners pointed to leeks, garlic, potatoes, and 170 heirloom apple trees growing in the fields, the latter of which will be used to produce a specialty hard cider in a few years’ time. The two acres of crops will combine with Loma Farm’s five acres, where more than 70 different products are grown, to populate the restaurant’s seasonally rotating menu. A handful of bar snacks and starters – such as smoked whitefish dip and a farm board featuring Loma pickled vegetables and cheese from Boss Mouse Cheese – will supplement a variety of fresh salads, sandwiches, pizza, rotating specials, and homemade desserts. Nic Theisen is leading the preservation program, designed to highlight as many ingredients from the farm as possible – such as recycling spent grains from the brewery into naturally leavened bread loaves and harvesting wild yeast for beer.

“This is not a farm-to-table restaurant,” he says. “It’s a restaurant on a farm. What’s coming down the pipe in the garden will really drive the menu. The cooking inspiration comes from the fields.” Farm Club has hired Guy Sidey as its head chef, who has experience in several West Coast kitchens including Alice Waters’ Chez Panisse restaurant.

Farm Club's 10-barrel brewery system will produce enough beer for on-site sales, taps at The Little Fleet, and limited distribution. The brewery will focus primarily on light, drinkable beers, according to Gary Jonas, with a pilsner, dark lager, and low-ABV "table" beer on the menu to start. Farm ingredients will be used to subtly infuse some varietals that the partners call "field beers," with Corey Valdez – a former organic chemistry professor and brewer at Jolly Pumpkin – overseeing the brewing program. Left Foot Charley and Tandem Ciders will contribute ciders, with wine featured from Shady Lane Cellars, MAWBY, and Brengman Brothers. Farm Club will also have kombucha and cold-brew coffee on tap, as well as mocktails (the bar doesn't have a full Class C license, so hard liquor will not be sold).

The marketplace will stock grab-and-go prepared foods, cold beverages, cookies, and staples like eggs, pancake mix, maple syrup, and flour. A variety of local makers and products will be featured, including pottery from nearby Benjamin Maier Ceramics, soaps and body scrubs, candles, wooden boards and spoons, cookbooks, kids' items, and souvenirs and gifts. The store will also serve as a CSA pickup spot for Loma Farm. Sara Theisen says the goal is to offer a "small, safe shopping experience" for locals who want to grab essentials on the way home and don't want to venture into a large grocery store, as well as to serve as a fueling stop for people headed to the beach or bikers riding the TART Trail. In partnership with SEEDS, Farm Club is building a boardwalk spur off the TART Trail leading directly up to the building, offering both bike and ski parking on-site.

Encouraging visitors to explore the property is a priority for the partners, who plan to eventually build hiking trails throughout the surrounding wooded site. While farm crops are fenced to keep out deer, the fields will be open to patrons during operating hours to explore. The large, airy building interior – which features light wood and ceiling-to-floor windows, plus a fireplace to warm skiers and snowshoers during winter months – spills out onto a large outdoor patio and sprawling lawn, currently seeded with newly budding grass. The partners hope to offer educational programming, such as preservation and garden classes, on the property in the future. All of the estimated 30 staff members – including front-of-house employees – will be required to work at least one shift a week in the fields to build firsthand knowledge of the farm.

The partners acknowledge that opening a new hospitality business during a pandemic is challenging: Construction was delayed during the shutdown, meaning Farm Club is now opening in the peak of Loma Farm's harvest season and The Little Fleet's operating season downtown. But Allison Jonas says there are also silver linings to the timing, including being able to adjust the business model to reflect pandemic realities. Farm Club will use a counter service model that allows customers to order online and have food/drinks delivered to their table, with floating servers supplementing service. "We also keep feeling very thankful for the amount of space we have," she says, with expansive outdoor capacity for guests.

The partners have also observed a growing interest in local food and farming during the pandemic, as people become more cautious of their food sources and seek to reconnect with nature. The four co-owners hope Farm Club can serve as a source of inspiration and connection between residents and the region's agricultural land. "We do this because it's in our DNA to provide the community with the kind of space we would want to come to and enjoy," says Allison Jonas. "We want this to be a showcase for local agriculture."