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## FARM TO DINER

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BY SARA CROCKER

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It's a bluebird day in Eastmark, the massive suburban enclave 35 miles southeast of downtown Phoenix. A palm-lined path from the neighborhood's entrance leads in one direction to some expected perks of suburbia – a community center, a pool. In the other, the fin of a candy cane-red Valentine diner peeks out.

Erich and Yvonne Schultz opened Steadfast Diner on Jan. 10. The couple are farmers who live nearby. They have grown vegetables and flowers on the one-acre Steadfast Farm since 2018. To helm the kitchen, they've tapped their friend Derek Christensen, a James Beard Award-nominated chef who was also, at one time, the Schultzes' farm hand.

The executive chef exudes nonchalance behind yellow-tinted glasses, a knit beanie, and a thick beard with a softly curled mustache. Christensen moves deftly through the small kitchen space built onto the back of the diner as he plates double smash burgers at double speed. In this quiet fringe of Phoenix's wide sprawl, he may be the fastest thing on two feet right now.

"In the kitchen," he says, "there's very little time to think."

He's spent years cooking at places around Arizona and the country, including at chef Rene Andrade's celebrated Sonoran eateries Bacanora and Huarachis Taqueria. Last year his calm under pressure — and his date clafoutis accented with mesquite — helped him win the Food Network culinary cook-off "Chopped," along with the \$10,000 grand prize.

Also last year, he stepped away from full-time kitchen work. It was a time to slow down.

"The stress and adrenaline of the kitchen is fun, but you also need to be able to walk around in the dirt," he says.

He spent months focused on painting and more flexible cooking gigs. He launched a European-inspired pop-up called Nordborg at Sauvage Wine Bar and Shop and crafted the menu for Wren Südhalde.

Then came along this opportunity at Steadfast. Part of the promise: he could get his feet back onto dirt. Which is how you can find one of the most famed, in-demand

chefs in the state buzzing over a hot flame in a twee diner in east Mesa. Christensen wanted the chance to work with the Schultzes once again. But even more alluring was the chance to work a kitchen firmly planted in a small farm.

He wants to show people where their food starts its journey. As he explains his latest move, walking outside the diner with the Schultzes, his Birkenstocks scuff the top layer of dirt along a path that connects the diner's patio to the farm's entrance.

"No matter what you're cooking, no matter what you're doing, if you have the resources of a farm 100 feet from your kitchen, that's wild, that's huge," he says, motioning to tight rows of greens. "What people are eating, literally, is right here."

On this afternoon, many of Steadfast's crops are covered by protective nets, to protect against wind and frost. Erich and Yvonne point out the nursery and prep areas. The whirl of what Erich calls a giant salad spinner, which they use to pull water from washed salad greens before packaging, can be heard humming from the farm path. People are trimming flowers for immaculate bouquets wrapped in brown paper.

It feels downright idyllic, even romantic. A working farm sustaining a restaurant amidst suburban sprawl. That's what the trio hopes will draw customers to the diner.

It also may be a change of pace for guests. People visit restaurants for their consistency, the knowledge that what's on the menu one day is generally there the next. Yet farms have to respond to weather, to seasons, to pests. Implicit in the entire venture here is a faith — far from assured — that guests will embrace this unpredictability.

"That's part of the whole ethos," Christensen says. "Nature is flexible, nature is weird, nature doesn't promise you anything."

To create a menu that reflects the farm, Christensen says he's built in flexibility without cutting corners. Capital Farms beef and Noble Bread will be available each day. But what's in the grain bowls and salads could change. And, that's the point.

"That's kind of the beauty of it," Christensen says. "We're not supposed to have everything all the time."



The menu draws from diner classics and infuses ingredients from the Schultzes' neighboring Steadfast Farm.



The Farro Bowl is one of the diner's farm-fresh dishes.



Steadfast Diner's Crispy Chicken Sandwich is topped with a hot honey aioli.





About half of what Steadfast Farm grows is salad greens, which briefly air dry before being packaged.



Chef Derek Christensen, a one time farm hand at Steadfast, has returned to launch the diner in what he calls a "full circle" moment with the Schultzes.



Burgers and sandwiches are made with beef from Wickenburg's Capital Farms and Phoenix's Noble Bread.

### The growth of 'agrihoods'

Residents of Eastmark, a development that hosts an urban farm inside the community, may be more primed for that reality.

Dubbed "agrihoods," these communities are also known as farm-to-table living or developer-assisted agriculture. Here, locally raised, often organic produce is the selling point, in place of a staid golf course or tennis court.

Along with the farm and diner, Steadfast includes a farm store where customers can buy coffee, fresh produce and cut flowers.

Tiffany Chandler lives in Eastmark. She estimates she shops at the Steadfast Farm store once or twice a week.

"To be right there, knowing that your food is being raised right there is incredible," she says, pointing to the farm from her seat on the Steadfast Diner patio. "Since COVID's happened, buying locally and supporting small businesses is such a big thing on a lot of people's radars."

The Urban Land Institute counts more than 200 agrihoods located in at least 30 states, according to Civil Eats. Erich is an innovator in the space, first managing the 11-acre farm at Gilbert's Agritopia.

A landscape designer by trade, Erich planned Agritopia's community garden and parts of the neighboring development Epicenter. His farming experience before jumping into that role was minimal — working on a family plot in a community garden.

"I like challenges," Erich says. His start, he says, was "very trial by fire."

It was at Agritopia that Steadfast was born. As the farm grew, they moved their

operations to Schnepf Farms in Queen Creek before settling at Eastmark.

Erich describes the farm as biointensive, meaning they plant crops several times during the year. Crews turn over a bed of recently harvested lettuce while other seeds germinate, the quicker to fill that space after a harvest.

"Our style of farming — a lot of people think it's cutting edge to do this small-scale but high-production model," he says. "But it's really getting back to the old way of doing things."

Along with the farm store, the Schultzes launched Steadfast Coffee to serve drinks and breakfast tacos. The coffee shop has grown from a trailer to two locations: inside their farm store and at Air Guitar, an upscale convenience store in Gilbert.

Steadfast is poised for more growth. Its owners are also working on an educational urban farm for downtown Mesa and more land in the East Valley to focus on flowers. With each opportunity, the owners say they won't lose sight of their north star.

"The farm has been the foundation of everything and we always want to make sure that the farm is authentic and sustainable," Erich says. "It's not just a showpiece for the other things. Farming has become a vehicle for creating community."

The Schultzes know that even with planning and diligence, their crops — and thus their very business — are subject to nature.

Yvonne recalls the "tomato apocalypse of 2018," when the farm's tomato plants sat underneath tunnels meant to protect them. Instead, the structures created a fatal heat dome for the crops.

"We got there probably an hour late and it was already 130 degrees in there and cooked all of the tomato plants right when they were starting to produce," Erich says.

"It was a devastating loss for us," Yvonne adds.

### Scorching summers, serious planning

Arizona's scorching summers present a huge challenge for the patio-reliant restaurant and the farm.

Before the start of each year, the Schultzes spend a day or two designing a growing plan. That includes microgreens, salad greens, cucumbers, tomatoes, and a selection of root vegetables such as carrots, radishes, turnips and beets. The farm sells produce to chefs and individual customers alike.

In the punishing heat of summer, farm production slows. During those hot months the Schultzes grow enough to sustain the diner and farmers markets, to keep a year-round connection with market regulars.

Steadfast also produces honey and eggs that are in high demand. Last year, Erich says, they learned about a secondary "black market" of people reselling their eggs. They started limiting the number people could buy.

Microgreens grow indoors year-round. The team uses shade cloth and micro-sprinklers on its lettuces "to trick the plants into thinking it's cooler than it really is," he says.

The team hopes to add service to the nearby community pool and to build a

structure on the "beer garden," a section of the patio that looks at the farm. The Schultzes say a climate-controlled space, which will keep the farm view with a large wall of windows, will be key to the restaurant surviving harsher summer months.

"Having that contingency is always good," Erich says. "Nine seats in here isn't quite enough to do what we want to do."

### A new chapter for Mesa's Valentine diner

The history of Valentine diners such as Steadfast goes back to the dawn of Interstate Highways after World War II. These portable, prefabricated restaurants popped up along highways, named after their manufacturer, Arthur Valentine, and known as dining cars because they resembled railroad cars. These eight-to-10-seat diners arrived on-site fully equipped. Some of these restaurants have survived over the decades, while others have been repurposed into other businesses or fallen into disrepair. They remain highly portable. The diner at Eastmark was previously on a roadside in Colorado.

It initially opened as HandleBar in 2017, led by chef Adam Allison. Chasie Womack took the restaurant over in 2023. The diner abruptly closed in July — a move that "came as quite a surprise" to its operator. At the time, Eastmark's developer said it closed the eatery "to focus on restructuring operations to restore our vision and upgrade your dining experience."

In November, the Steadfast team announced they would take over the diner. With their experience running a

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(Photos by Jacob Tyler Dunn)

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small farm, the challenge fit Steadfast's approach of "bootstrapping and making a lot out of a little," Erich says.

Inside, the diner has undergone a light refresh. Gone is its metal countertop, replaced by a warmer butcher block.

On a recent afternoon, students released from neighborhood schools gathered on the expansive patio's picnic tables, shaded by a canopy of red umbrellas. They ordered ice creams and chicken tenders from the walk-up window. The idyllic scene is exactly what owner Yvonne had hoped for.

"This is a great spot for families," she says. "We have young families as well, so we're trying to create a place they all enjoy." Neighbor Tiffany Chandler says she felt

the absence of the diner while it was closed.

"It's all what Eastmark is about - it's about meeting your neighbors out for lunch and coffee," she says. "It's a staple."

**Diner shows 'what an urban farm can do'**

Whether a single nine-seat prefab '50s-era diner set on a single green acre can help to make Phoenix a hub of sustainable foodways has yet to be seen. That's a tall order, of course, but Steadfast does have a chance to "really showcase what an urban farm can do to a community and bring to the table," general manager David Stevens says.

You don't have to think about any of that over lunch, though. You are perfectly welcome to simply order a sandwich, bowl or salad.

Dishes include pastrami piled on rye bread with Swiss cheese, griddle onions, house pickles and mustard as well as a grilled chicken sandwich topped with Swiss, bacon, avocado, garlic aioli, lettuce and tomato. Grain bowls are made with a rotation of seasonal Steadfast produce, served with a base of White Sonoran Wheat berries or brown rice. Among salad selections are classic Cobb and Caesar, as well as the autumnal Steadfast Salad, featuring little gem lettuce, Gorgonzola, dried cranberries, green apples, candied pecans and an apple cider-honey vinaigrette.

The diner will also serve coffee, craft beer and wine from makers such as Arizona Wilderness Brewing Co. and Dos Cabezas WineWorks, plus seven signature cocktails developed by Iconic Cocktail Co. owner Matt Farrow. Tipples include an espresso martini and a Gold Rush, a riff on a whiskey sour made with the farm's raw honey syrup in place of sugar.

There are also cones, floats and milkshakes made with Thrifty's Ice Cream.

The diner will offer lunch and dinner daily. In time, the team hopes to serve breakfast, starting with weekend service before moving to seven days a week. There is counter service at the nine stools inside the diner's cozy L-shaped bar, where guests can watch their cocktails being made.

Looking forward, Erich says they would also like to host monthly chef's dinners, featuring Christensen and others from around the Valley to showcase a tasting

menu format. It's another way the trio hopes to display and celebrate how the farm and restaurant work together.

"It's not any old farm to any old table," Christensen says as he stands in the farm's rich soil. He points to the diner. "It's this farm to that table. And that's great."

**Steadfast Diner**

5149 Inspirian Pkwy., Mesa



On the biointensive farm, vegetables are planted and harvested several times a year.



Steadfast Diner has an expansive patio. There, guests can order through a server or at the diner's window.

**THE ADVENTURES OF CLUTCH McFLY**

**2025 MAZDA CX-90: BIG STYLE, BIGGER EFFICIENCY**

The 2025 Mazda CX-90 is proof that you really can have it all: luxury, efficiency, and a little bit of swagger. At \$60,000, this three-row SUV offers serious bang for your buck, especially with its PHEV powertrain delivering an impressive 56 MPG when running as a hybrid and a respectable 25 MPG on gas alone. It's perfect for those who want to save the planet and look good doing it. Behind the wheel, the CX-90 feels like it's punching way above its weight class.

The hybrid system combines smooth, quiet electric driving with enough gas-powered oomph to make highway merges and steep inclines a breeze. Handling is sharp and responsive—Mazda didn't forget their sporty roots here—and every drive feels like a little adventure, whether you're hitting the road for a family trip or just popping out for groceries (and taking the scenic route). Step inside, and you're greeted by an interior that could easily be mistaken

for a luxury car. From the soft leather seats to the real wood accents and expansive tech features, it's clear Mazda wanted to wow you. There's plenty of room for seven, premium finishes everywhere, and a touchscreen so nice you'll want to swipe through menus just for fun. If you're in the market for a stylish, efficient, and powerful SUV, the 2025 Mazda CX-90 is in a league of its own.

**RATING (out of 5 McFly's)**

Looks: 🐔🐔🐔🐔🐔	The Drive: 🐔🐔🐔🐔🐔
Comfort: 🐔🐔🐔🐔🐔	Safety & Security: 🐔🐔🐔🐔🐔
Value: 🐔🐔🐔🐔🐔	Sound System: 🐔🐔🐔🐔🐔
Fuel Economy: 🐔🐔🐔🐔🐔	Bells & Whistles: 🐔🐔🐔🐔🐔
Overall: 🐔🐔🐔🐔🐔	

2025 MAZDA CX90

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