East Coast chef gets organic lesson from UCSC Farm & Garden apprenticeship

By CHONA CANZGIRI

Posted: 09/09/2011 05:52:31 PM PDT

SANTA CRUZ - It's not in the water, it's in the soil.

"There are superior powers at work here," chef Matthew Raiford says of the UCSC Farm & Garden apprenticeship, a full-time program offering enrollees the chance to learn the ins and outs of organic food.

Raiford and a team of apprentices are preparing to unveil the literal fruits and vegetables of their labor at 3 p.m. Sunday in a special benefit dinner to be held outdoors at the on-campus farm.

Raiford, an Atlanta native who works in the nation's capital, says his family jokes that they've always farmed organic. Last year, the 44-year-old father and Desert Storm veteran split an inheritance of 25 farmable acres with his sister. The farm, which at its zenith amounted to some 476 acres, has been in the family since 1876.

"My great-great-great-grandfather Jupiter Gilliard, a farmer and sharecropper in Georgia, bought the land," he says. Raiford says the fertile acreage "never had any chemicals put into it, so that's why [they] say that [they've] always been a part of the food revolution."

Gilliard was a former slave turned freeman who came upon the coastal property soon after the Civil War. It has passed down six generations, landing currently with Raiford.

Cooking has always come natural to Raiford. For a guy who says he goes to bed at night dreaming about creating new dishes with things like "wild hog, sturgeon, lemon verbena and honey," the culinary arts were about innate ability. His father wasn't so happy with the choice, though. A professional baker himself, the elder Raiford hoped his son would put his intelligence to a different use.

Raiford overcame these obstacles and went on to graduate from New York's Culinary Institute of America. He would later work at the MGM Grand Hotel in Las Vegas before landing his current position as executive chef at Haute Catering in Washington, D.C., where he's handled meals at governmental institutions including the House of Representatives, the Pentagon, the National Archives and the Canadian Embassy.

After he received his inheritance, Raiford decided to combine his love of fresh ingredients with some actual farming skills. He plans to take the knowledge gleaned from his apprenticeship at UCSC to his Georgia farm.

The apprenticeship program allows for virtually anyone to gain first-hand experience in the world of small-scale farming and gardening. A day in the life of an apprentice is spent pulling roots, learning irrigation methods, attending lectures and participating in labor-intensive field
work. In addition, teams of two apprentices prepare breakfast, lunch, and dinner everyday.

Sunday's dinner - tickets are $125 - will see participants, elderberry spritzers in hand, treated to a tour of the grounds and given a brief overview and welcoming. The main event is a five-course meal made almost entirely of ingredients grown onsite, complete with wine pairings and live music.

Like most chefs, Raiford places a premium on fresh ingredients. And he also believes in "food justice," or the idea that great, high-quality food should be available to all. But he said that he's keenly aware of the fact that, especially in impoverished communities, items like "organic" or "locavore" still have a ways to go before they lose their exoticism.

"If you look at the lineage of great chefs, it was about sitting on your grandmother's lap, and being around cooking," he says. "Well, I was around great ingredients my whole life. And now as a farmer, there's a responsibility to make sure that things are accessible."

AT A GLANCE

The UC Santa Cruz's Farm and Garden apprenticeship program's Farm-to-Fork dinner is scheduled for 3 p.m. Sunday at the UC Santa Cruz Farm. Call 831-459-3240 or visit casfs.ucsc.edu for details.