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Lamorinda Slow Food Event at Moraga Herb Farm

By Sophie Braccini



Hollie Lucas-Alcalay picking herbs in her garden farm. Photo Sophie Braccini

The multiple fragrances of the herbs that grow in Hollie Lucas-Alcalay's garden drift in the warm summer air; 10 different species of mints, five varieties of basil, lemon verbena, calendula, lavender, rosa rugosa, lavender balm, lemon balm, tulsi tea (tulsi krishna basil), to name a few, are beautifully lined up in 3,000 square feet of flat land, tight as a drum.

The Moraga mom has turned part of her garden into an herb farm and profitable business. Slow Food East Bay chose that safe haven for plants to hold its very first Lamorinda event July 20, when the garden will be open to people interested in learning more about growing, savoring, and cooking herbs.

Slow Food started in Italy in the 1980s as a response to the fast food invasion of an ancient culture. It has spread slowly (of course) to the rest of the planet and now counts chapters in some 100 countries. "The motto of our group is 'good, clean and fair,'" says Slow Food East Bay's Willow Blish. "We want to know what we are putting in our mouth, savor it and respect those who grew it for us."

Blish, who is a fitness instructor and nutritionist, considers food to be more than just fuel for the body, but an experience to be shared and an opportunity to support a whole community.

"Our chapter organizes events where we introduce people who grow the food, and how to savor it," she says. "Our spices and herbs series is about discovering new tastes and using these substances from all over the world with whatever is in season."

Blish met Lucas-Alcalay at a similar event in Walnut Creek, and the two decided to bring Slow Food to Lamorinda.

"I was instantly interested in this young woman who is literally growing a business out of her garden," says Blish. The Moraga herb farmer will share her expertise with the group at the event - first with a tour of the gardens, discussing the best herbs to grow in the area, harvesting and storing techniques, and then cooking tips. She'll have participants taste a variety of teas and herbs in different forms, both fresh and cooked, to learn more about flavor differences and how to highlight them.

"Making food takes time," says Lucas-Alcalay, "and it's turned into a burden for a lot of us. But it can be fun, and when you grow your own food you get more inspired to cook it, and it tastes so much better than what you find at the store."

Lucas-Alcalay says that she involves her children and that as they taste what is being prepared their palates develop. "That's why I like herbs so much," she says. "You can take the same roasted chicken, but if you switch the herbs you have a completely different dish, it's not complicated, but it takes time."

The mother of two school age children comes from a family of growers; her parents are viticulturists in the Santa Barbara area. She's chosen to grow in her own garden to be able to integrate family and business life. As far as distribution is concerned, she sells at events, on the web (hollieshomegrown.com) and in local farmers' markets, meaning that Lucas-Alcalay gets up very early during summer months to harvest and sell herbs of the day at the market.

Besides teas, dried aromatics and flowers, she makes herbal culinary salts, herb infused olive oil, herbal bath salts, healing salves, lip balm and candles. She is working on a new concept to pair her family wine and herbs.

The Slow Food event will be held from 11a.m. to 1 p.m. July 20 at Hollie's Homegrown in Moraga and is a potluck. Participants are asked to bring one dish for six to seven people featuring one of their favorite herbs. The cost of the event is \$10; children under 10 are free. To register, visit slowfoodeastbay.com.

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[back](#)

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