

HEIDI HEILBRUNN/STAFF
Kurt Weiner, assistant farm manager, picks peppers at the Cliffs Organic Farm

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THE CLIFFS comes back to the farm

Company returns to organic operation

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Standing on the land in Marietta, in the northern part of Greenville County, you can hear the birds and the crickets. The mountains are clearly outlined in the distance and the city feels years away. That's what attracted Craig Weiner to the Cliffs Organic Farm eight years ago, when he started as an intern at the farm, and that's what's kept the 38-year old farmer on the farm when the Cliffs divested of the property in 2011.



HEIDI HEILBRUNN/STAFF
Craig Weiner, left, shows edamame to Ken Perry, center, and David Sawyer, right, as they walk through the fields of the Cliffs Organic Farm.

And today, it's also what's keeping Weiner on the farm, now that the Cliffs has re-established the property as part of its company.

"I knew I wanted to be a farmer. This is my passion, my calling, my lifestyle," Weiner says, surveying the lush fields around him. "My heart and soul is in this ground here."

Now, after three years, the Cliffs is coming back to the farm. The luxury real estate company with seven properties in North and South Carolina is re-establishing its five-acre organic farm. The move comes at the end of a tenuous time for the Cliffs, when the company's assets were divided among several entities, the farm property among them. The decision to re-establish the farm is driven by both

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pleasure and business.

"Today, 52 percent of all our prospective buyers list health and wellness as their number one decision point when it comes to purchasing a second home, a family home or a retirement home," says David Sawyer, managing partner of the Cliffs Clubs. "That's a change from 10 years ago when golf was number one."

The farm initially came to be in 2006 at the height of the organic craze. Then, Sawyer says, Cliffs owner, Jim Anthony was in to juicing and raw food, and he saw opportunity to play off the growing interest in health and wellness.

Weiner came on as farm manager in 2006, so when the Cliffs assets were being reconfigured in 2011, Weiner optioned to keep the farm going, renaming it Broken Oak Organics. Weiner expand the farm's offerings and started a weekly on-farm market.

But the biggest change Weiner made was connecting with local restaurants. For the past several years, Broken Oak has supplied all of the Table 301 restaurants, the Purple Onion in Saluda and Stella's Southern Bistro, among others.

Those relationships will continue, and even grow under the renewed backing from the Cliffs.

"Craig has created a strong business model so he needs to maintain his presence at farmers markets and maintain his relationship with local restaurants," Sawyer says. "The big difference will be the Cliffs chefs will be here more."

In the future, that relationship might translate programming for both Cliffs members and the public, says Ken Perry, general manager of the Cliffs at Mountain Park. He foresees everything from classes on how to grow microgreens to on-farm dinners.

The Cliffs has plans to roll out a new website in the spring that for the first time will allow nonmembers a look into what's going on at the Cliffs, including on the farm.

For his part, Weiner plans to expand his production too. The added financial backing will allow him to grow his staff and in turn his products. Weiner has plans to grow goji berries, more blueberries and blackberries. "There's only so much we can do with two people," Weiner says. "So we'll now get extra help and double our production."

The USDA has strict standards for organic produce. To be classified as organic, overall operations must demonstrate that they are protecting natural resources, conserving biodiversity, and using only approved substances. Thus Weiner uses no pesticides or chemicals to grow anything on the farm. He utilizes careful crop rotation and companion planting to minimize the need for outside agents.

"I see us more as soil farmers than a plant farmers," Weiner says. "Our job is to protect the environment using sustainable inputs and growing a soil to be healthy. If you have a healthy soil you have healthy plants and we have healthier food with more vitamins and minerals."

The farm is bucolic on a day in early October. It reflects the midway point between seasons with bountiful rows of edamame and turnips and empty rows where summer crops stood just a few weeks before.

In one crop row are ninja turnips, a Japanese varietal and in another is purple romanesco cauliflower, a chef request. That level of variety will only expand as Weiner grows the farm and his relationships with local chefs. The whole cycle pushes forth the local food culture. Case in point, kale.

"It's amazing how far we've come in eight years," Weiner says. "Then, I couldn't sell kale five years ago and now I can't grow enough."



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Craig Weiner, left, of the Cliff Organic Farm in Marietta, walks through the fields with Ken Perry, center, and David Sawyer.