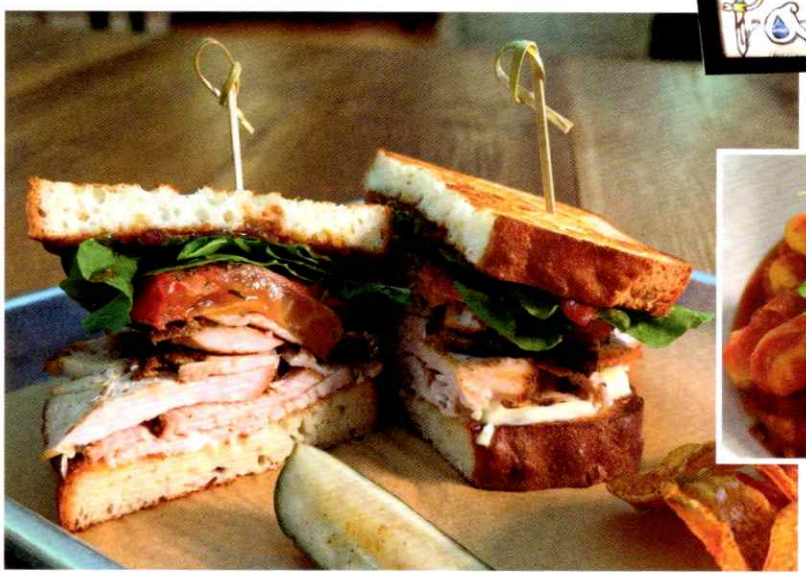
Leveling Up at Meristem Cafe: The Seed-to-Table Experience Empowering Its Neurodiverse Crew

BY LAURA I. WINN | PHOTOS PROVIDED BY MERISTEM AND CHARITO BARTLETT









A HAND-DRAWN sign hangs by the door of Meristem Cafe, listing artistically rendered words: excellence, people, culture, respect, food, passion. These six terms represent the value system of a restaurant whose purpose extends far beyond serving the best gluten-free bread and dairy-free desserts in town. The cafe's ultimate mission is to empower autistic and neurodiverse young adults with practical job skills. Every meal at Meristem supports that goal.

Tucked away off Fair Oaks Boulevard, surrounded by trees and a stone's throw away from the biodynamic garden that provides most of its produce and eggs, the cafe sits on the sprawling 13-acre Meristem campus. In this lush, green setting, autistic young adults take classes and receive targeted training or work experience to promote independent living.

Although the nonprofit campus is a learning environment, the cafe operates as a professional establishment. Under the tutelage of a classically trained chef, Josh Dellar, a staff of four interns and six employees work diligently inside. All of the interns and half of the staff are autistic.

The cafe team not only plans, prepares and serves lunch to the public three days a week, but it also makes all the meals and snacks for the staff and student body, some of whom live on campus. Everything is gluten-free, dairy-free, nut-free and prepared with only natural sugars. Nearly everything is created from scratch. Fueled by balanced nutrition from sunup to sundown, the idea is to set everyone up for success, explained Dellar, the cafe coordinator.

"My job is to help these young people get to the next level," Dellar said. "We call it leveling up."

Leveling up can mean securing employment in the outside world or promoting from cafe intern to employee. It can also mean working on understanding sarcasm or



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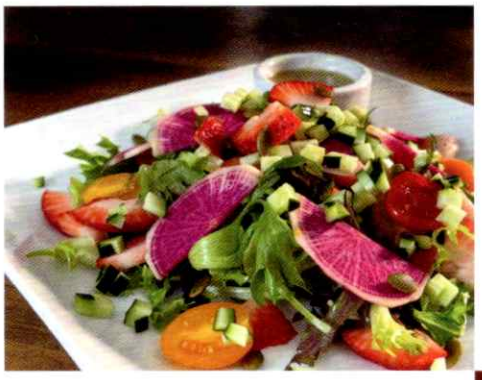

"Everything we do here benefits the students."



dealing with sudden transitions, loud noises, distractions and the challenges presented from additional neurodiverse diagnoses. As many as 50% to 70% of individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) also have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), according to the National Institutes of Health. Dellar put that percentage even higher at Meristem.

In mentoring these young adults within this neurodiverse community, which he calls underserved and misunderstood, Dellar said, "I try to strike a balance between being nurturing, kind and thoughtful, but I also push."

Drawing from his wealth of experience as an executive chef, restaurant owner, industry consultant and lead instructor at Le Cordon Bleu, Dellar guides his team through the many facets of the food business. From storyboarding the seasonal seed-to-table menu and mathematically equating baking ratios to running the point-of-sale system and maintaining the dining area, the Meristem team learns to do it all with pride.

"If you're going to sweep the floor, do it with excellence," Dellar explained. "I will know Aaron is the one who swept the floor. Or Caroline set the table with excellence."

That pursuit of excellence extends outside the cafe doors. Meristem's abundant natural resources and educational programs offer additional avenues for personal growth and leveling up. Coordinating with the woodworking program to repurpose tree shavings for the cafe smoker teaches collaboration. Creating a weekly mocktail from fruit harvested by the garden group and adapting the late tomato crop from a hot winter tomato soup to a cold summer gazpacho encourages flexibility.

These skills, combined with the work ethic he hopes to impart, are what Dellar said will serve his staff long after they leave Meristem Cafe.

"Everything we do here benefits the students," Dellar explained. "This place is magical." ■

Located at 9200 Fair Oaks Boulevard in Fair Oaks, Meristem Cafe is open for lunch from 11:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. Wednesday through Friday. Reservations are requested. For more information, visit www.meristemcafe.com.

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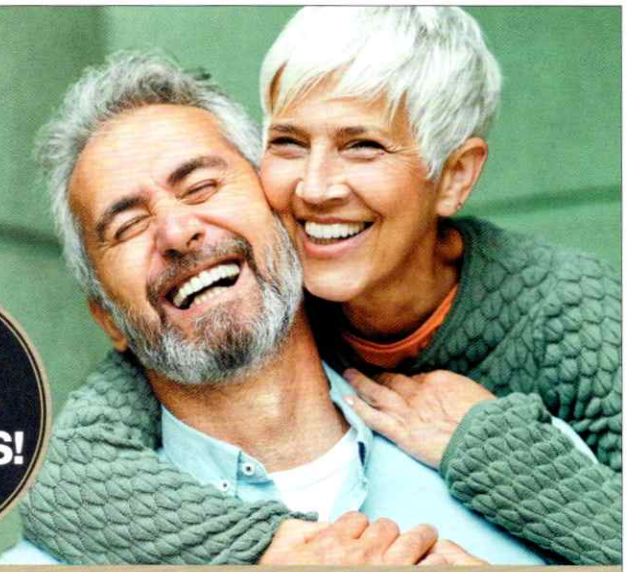

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