

FROM THE HEARTH

The city's most unique dining experience isn't in a restaurant; it's at **Regina's Farm**, a low-key spot offering more than just Brazilian cuisine.

BY NILA DO SIMON PHOTOGRAPHY BY EDUARDO SCHNEIDER



On any given Saturday, Regina Katia's kitchen in Sailboat Bend smells of warm cheese bread—Brazilian *pão de queijo*, to be precise—trays of which continue to emerge from the oven late into the night. No problem, though. For Katia, the bread and the ensuing Brazilian feast is a welcomed opportunity to bring a part of her home country to Fort Lauderdale.

For the past 10 years, Katia has hosted semimonthly dinners in her backyard. What started as casual get-togethers of 30 friends has ballooned into an unofficial underground restaurant welcoming up to 120 guests (not including a waitlist), mostly a mix of Brazilian transplants who miss the taste of their homeland and Americans curious about the cuisine. They come from as far away as Miami and Delray Beach to savor Katia's rustic dishes, which are a blend of Brazilian, African, European and indigenous tribal flavors.

And Katia is happy to deliver. She calls her establishment Regina's Farm, translated to "Fazendinha da Regina" in Portuguese, and it is a nonprofit entity that benefits the Las Olas Worship Center, which is located across the street. Overall, she's raised close to \$10,000 for the church, most of which has gone into renovations and funding missionary trips.

Regina's Farm is a replica of how Katia grew up in Brazil, where "family and friends got together, and nobody ever had an empty stomach." Its casual approach to dining stands in stark contrast to the high-end restaurants located a mile east on the ritzy Las Olas Boulevard. At Regina's Farm, chickens roam freely, and children sway from swings and ride the homemade mini-train around the fenced-in yard.

With no formal training in cooking or hospitality management, Katia has defied the restaurant odds by forgoing normal brick-and-mortar traditions. Instead, she's attracted a crowd with her once-a-week-or-so dinner, reservations by website or text messaging, one seating time (5 p.m.), buffet-style service of more than 40 items and a down-home approach to cuisine. She doesn't offer alcohol, but encourages diners to bring their own wine (there's no corkage fee).

Born in the farming village of Coronel Fabriciano in Brazil's Minas Gerais state, Katia remembers drinking fresh cow's milk and harvesting vegetables from her family's garden to bring to the dinner table. The house ran on hydroelectricity (the only house in town with any electricity). While she describes her sisters and brother as the more obedient children, Katia says, "I was a free spirit. I was the one who liked to be outside with no shoes on."



HOUSE BEAUTIFUL Regina Katia welcomes more than 100 guests to her Sailboat Bend home each time she hosts a traditional Brazilian dinner at Regina's Farm.



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On a whim after high school, Katia applied to study at a nearby seminary, receiving a scholarship to the theology school. There, she met her husband, Elizeu Silva, who eventually wooed her to Fort Lauderdale in 1992 to start a new life in the States. Even after living in South Florida for a few years, Katia felt incomplete being away from her home country. "I missed Brazil," she says. "But I couldn't go back to live there because my family had a life in the States. So, I thought I could take my country with me to the States."

She started out making rice and beans for lunch at Westminster Academy, where her sons went to school. She thought if she could prepare food for hundreds of students, then she could certainly serve meals for a few church members at her home.

Katia began collecting clay and stone pots and had Silva, who doubles as Las Olas Worship Center's senior pastor, build a wood stove, all the traditional modes of cooking in Minas Gerais. When they started seeing a surge in attendance, Silva built a second wood stove. In fact, he's built almost everything inside their 125-square-foot backyard, including the picnic tables and a covered terrace from which string lights, pots and pans hang. "I am the dreamer, he is

the maker," Katia says. "Before I finish dreaming, he finishes making it."

For a Saturday dinner, Katia begins preparing on Tuesday or Wednesday, buying the organic chicken and produce from a market in Miami. She'll marinate the meats on Thursday, the same day she'll prepare the flan and the other desserts. During service nights, the closed-door restaurant staffs a team of eight, including Katia's husband and sons.

Famous Brazilians have attended her dinners, including socialite Zilu Di Camargo. Soccer legend Ronaldo, who is now a co-owner of the Fort Lauderdale Strikers professional soccer team, has been invited to dine, and Katia is just waiting for him to take her up on that offer.

As Regina's Farm has grown in popularity, so has Katia's fondness of cooking for her guests. "I love seeing people happy as they stand in line, waiting for the food to come out," she says. "I think of my home as a little sanctuary that brings people together."

For many, it's a time to try a new flavor, and for others, it's an opportunity to be reminded of a familiar one. Either way, it gives guests their chance to come home. ■



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