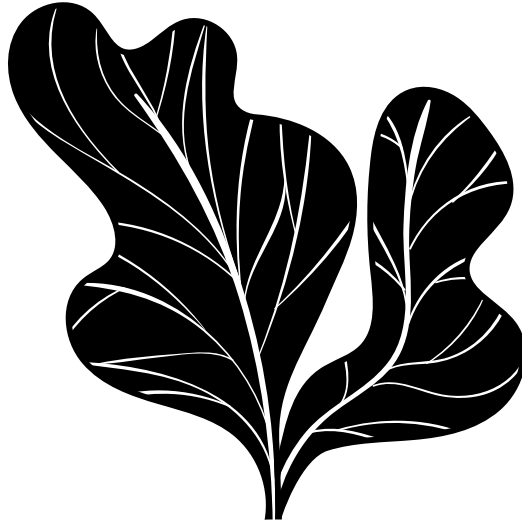


# ROOTED

CENTRAL ARKANSAS FARM & TABLE

LACEY THACKER & SARA MITCHELL





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# FEATURED PRODUCERS



## **ST. JOSEPH CENTER OF ARKANSAS**

North Little Rock  
Produce / Farm Store



## **HONEYSUCKLE MERCANTILE & CATTLE CO.**

Rose Bud  
Farm Store / Cattle



## **CAPI PECK**

Little Rock  
Restaurateur using local produce



## **BARNHILL ORCHARDS**

Lonoke  
Produce



## **THE ROOT CAFÉ**

Little Rock  
Restaurant using local produce



## **RATTLE'S GARDEN**

Vilonia  
Produce and Cut Flowers



## **SCOTT MCGEHEE**

Little Rock  
Restaurateur using local produce



## **LOBLOLLY CREAMERY**

Little Rock  
Ice Cream



## **ANITA DAVIS / THE BERNICE GARDEN**

Little Rock  
Private Garden for Public Use



## **HEIFER INTERNATIONAL**

Little Rock  
Livestock / Education for Sustainable Living



## **JOSH HARDIN**

Sheridan  
Produce



## **MYLO COFFEE CO.**

Little Rock  
Coffee / Restaurant using local produce



## **RATCHFORD BUFFALO FARMS**

Marshall  
Buffalo Meat



## **WYE MOUNTAIN MUSHROOMS**

Little Rock  
Mushrooms



## **ROZARK HILLS COFFEE ROASTERIE**

Rose Bud  
Coffee



## **DUNBAR GARDEN**

Little Rock  
Produce



## **BEN POPE**

Little Rock Children's Hospital  
Produce



## **ACCESS GARDEN**

Little Rock  
Herbs



## **FARM GIRL MEATS**

Perryville  
Pork / Poultry / Beef

# FEATURED LOCATIONS





## CAPI PECK

Trio's Restaurant founder Capi Peck's life reads like a fairytale. Raised in the famed Sam Peck Hotel in downtown Little Rock (now known as the Hotel Frederica), Capi was as much a fixture of the hallowed halls as former Governor Winthrop Rockefeller, who lived at the hotel from 1953–1955 after leaving New York. A renowned destination from the late 30s to early 70s, Capi could be found among the civilized guests operating the switchboard, refining her palette on oysters shipped in for the hotel restaurant, the Terrace Room, and spying on the city's movers and shakers in the bar, After Five. Capi's grandparents, Sam and Henrietta Peck, lived in a penthouse on the sixth floor of the hotel, and when Capi was only fifteen she had her own apartment on the grounds. Hospitality, entertaining, and travel were all Capi knew, and she would only later learn how uniquely cultured her family was.

"That's where I fell in love with hospitality," says Capi. "It was a great way to grow up. In the 50s and 60s, Little Rock was not very cosmopolitan, but I got to meet a lot of interesting people that would travel through here. It was close to the federal building and the Arkansas State Capitol. There was a lot of wheeling and dealing. I was exposed to a lot of things that a young girl was just not exposed to in Arkansas in that era."

Capi admits that opening a restaurant was never on her radar. She did not attend culinary school, but she had developed a passion for cooking through her family and her travels. It seemed a natural fit to everyone else that the family's fourth generation in Arkansas hospitality would continue the tradition. Encouraged by a friend after the friend tasted Capi's food at a party, Capi opened a gourmet to-go deli and retail shop in 1986 in the original Trio's space at Pavilion in the Park, becoming one of the building's first tenants.

"When we were looking for a space, everyone would say, 'Oh, that's just way too far west,' and now this kind of seems like midtown," Capi laughs.

The catering side of the business quickly took off and Capi and then-husband Brent realized the location and parking were not ideal for a grab-and-go restaurant. They transitioned to a full-service restaurant with staff and focused on

Capi's Mexican-inspired food. There were also some nods to her family. The popular Peck Salad with bacon, roasted chicken, and almonds, dressed with a signature vinaigrette, was a salad created by Sam Peck and served at the hotel. Sam Peck was adventurous with his food. He brought the first Caesar salad to Little Rock after he was served one tableside in California. Following Sam, Capi is known for bold flavors and daring cooking, a departure from the Southern staples found in most Little Rock restaurants at the time she opened Trio's.

Capi also built a reputation for delivering fresh, innovative cuisine using local produce, a tradition which started with a patron. A master gardener who was a regular in the restaurant mentioned that she grew herbs and lettuces and asked Capi if she would be interested in trying some. This was in the late 80s, and it would help launch Capi's staunch philosophy of using locally-grown ingredients to deliver the highest quality product. She was one of the first in Central Arkansas to be openly driven by these values.

"Some people make a very conscious decision as to where they spend their dining dollars," Capi says. "I want to know where things come from. We are what we eat. I want to know what I put in my body."

Capi started working with local grower Sue's Garden in the 90s and bought thousands of pounds of strawberries and carbon tomatoes. She also developed relationships with Armstead Farm, Barnhill Orchards, Rabbit Ridge, and local mushroom foragers. She has had a long relationship with Alan Leveritt's India Blue Farm, known for its heirloom tomatoes.

"Everybody knows a tomato shipped in looks like a tomato but doesn't taste like a tomato," says Capi. "I'm fortunate in that my clientele will pay a little more if I'm using organic and local. They understand that it's going to taste better but it's going to cost a little more."

Capi admits it would be much easier for her to order her produce from a large provider and have a standard menu, but it is not what her customers expect. She is grateful that farmers are now embracing technology, texting her lists of

available produce, and willing to come to her at the restaurant. A master at time management, Capi appreciates this efficiency.

“It’s so much easier now. I can remember ten or twelve years ago, it would take me all day Saturday just to go around to the different markets and make runs in my car buying produce for the week,” Capi says.

She still enjoys visiting the markets and meeting farmers, since what is in style, even in food, is constantly changing. A popular feature on Trio’s menu is the summer “Farmer’s Market Splendor” where Capi will create a dish based on what she finds at the market. Featuring items provided by local farmers, the splendor may have an heirloom caprese, purple hull peas, okra fritters, or a squash medley. It all depends on what is in season and what Capi can create.

## “We are what we eat. I want to know what I put in my body.”

Capi and Brent were also big proponents of recycling and incorporating environmentally sustainable practices in the business when few were operating this way. Capi is responsible for helping to launch Little Rock’s first recycling program, and she and Brent formed AGRA, the Arkansas Green Restaurant Alliance, in the 90s. An idea ahead of its time, the goal was for restaurants to form a co-op to buy expensive compostable packaging in bulk, ban Styrofoam and unnecessary plastic from member restaurants, and make environmentally responsible choices.

“I’d be more profitable if I wasn’t doing those things. Honestly, it takes a lot more energy and it costs a lot more, but I bought into it a long time ago. It’s the way I want to do business.”

In the kitchen, Capi now focuses on menu planning and expediting at Trio’s. It’s been many years since she has cooked on the line, but she mentored Shanna Merriweather, Trio’s executive chef of nearly two decades. As the expeditor, Capi checks the outgoing plates, confirms orders, and acts as

the conductor of the kitchen orchestra—a performance she would have seen nightly at the Terrace Room of the Sam Peck Hotel.

Capi is most humbled by and proud of her staff’s longevity. She has several employees who have been with her for more than fifteen years. One of her first employees, who started at Trio’s as a sophomore at J.A. Fair High School, is still with her.

“This has been his only job,” Capi marvels. “I am so proud of that.”

It’s a testament to Capi and the way she chooses to run her business. She always takes the time to listen, teach, and learn. Relinquishing control of her restaurant to her trusted staff has freed up time for additional projects including an unexpected turn to local politics. Encouraged by her fellow restaurateur and Little Rock Vice-Mayor Kathy Webb, Capi, whose initial reaction to entering politics was “Hell no!” ran for, and won, a seat as City Director of Ward 4.

“It is the ultimate way to give back to Little Rock,” Capi says. “I love this place so much. I grew up here. My business is here. I have been successful because of the community.”

Not surprisingly, many of Capi’s most passionate initiatives revolve around food and hospitality. Food, after all, is often a way to bring people together. She has been on the Little Rock Advertising and Promotion Commission for a decade, is active in the Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance, and is an advocate for affordable housing for low-income families and those without homes.

Now that she has learned the ins and outs of the local government, which she describes as “huge,” it’s clear this form of leadership has become a new passion and the next chapter in her tale.

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**Location:** Little Rock  
**Known for:** Bold flavors and locally-sourced ingredients  
**Site:** [triosrestaurant.com](http://triosrestaurant.com)  
**Social:** [f](#) [t](#) [@](#)trioslr







## BARNHILL ORCHARDS

"I baby these things," laughs Barnhill Orchards' Rex Barnhill when describing his strawberries. "I put a blanket on them when it's cold; I feed them and make sure everybody is happy. A happy plant makes a happy berry."

Many Arkansans would argue that Barnhill has the happiest berries in the state. So popular are Rex's berries that the farm's phone rings constantly during strawberry season, and the white and red delivery truck gets stopped all over town with pleas for any berries that can be spared.

On the day we visit, the strawberry plants have about had it, and they'll be pulled later that afternoon. Rex and his sister Ekko invite us to try one, and they are luscious, juicier than any found in a store. Picking them directly from the field only enhances the experience, Ekko noting that the curling leaves on the top of the berry mean it is at its peak ripeness.

But Barnhill didn't start out raising berries. The farm originally began as a peach and pecan orchard. In 1980, Bob Barnhill, a retired military colonel, and his wife, Carlotta, purchased the 100 acres in an area of Cabot known as the sandhills. The Barnhill's large family of seven lived in the original farmhouse, which dates back to the early 1900s. The Barnhills later purchased an additional fifty acres for the peach orchard. Realizing their most precious resources were time and family, not one inch of the property went to waste. This is why you will still find pecan and peach trees peppered throughout the property. The Barnhills determined that wherever there was space, they would plant.

The Barnhills also soon realized that the sandhills beneath their feet had a unique advantage over other farms. The sandy soil and the rise in the hills provided better drainage and minerals for crops. Fruits such as strawberries, blackberries, and blueberries flourished along with summer and fall vegetables like tomatoes, new potatoes, lettuces, and squash. Ekko Barnhill, the youngest of Bob and Carlotta's children and their only daughter, believes this is what makes their strawberries special.

"The sandy soil makes the berries sweeter," claims Ekko. "Fruit is what sells on a farm. We bring that sign out and people around here know we have berries. Particularly

when the kids come in, they put their hands on the fruit and say 'Mom, this looks good.' They aren't grabbing for the squash," says Ekko.

The sign Ekko is referencing is another essential example of efficiency and resourcefulness that is the hallmark of this farm. The backboard of the "sign" is an old cotton wagon, which the Barnhills can tow out during the season and park along Highway 89. The red hand-painted "STRAW" in "STRAWBERRIES" can be flipped and replaced with "BLACK" when blackberries are in season after the strawberries.

The farm has been and continues to be a family-run business. Along with his "babies" in the field, you can find all of Rex's real babies working the farm. His three daughters work the corner market, sort the produce, and make deliveries to restaurants and buyers. You can find them in Carhartts with bushels of onions in their lap before heading in to study for a test, all three pursuing medical degrees. Rex's son also works in the fields. Rex's daughters and son, along with their cousins, comprise the third generation and future of the farm.

"Every day is a holiday when you can be outside and be with your family," says Ekko. "That's a blessing, that we are going to be able to pass this on."

With help from their aunt Ekko, the girls are also implementing fresh ideas such as farm boxes—think a co-op box where you pick the contents—and using technology to expand customer options and improve delivery.

Ekko and the girls will text local restaurants on their way into Little Rock letting them know what they have picked in the last week, and several chefs will build their menus around what is fresh. "The vegetables don't stop growing," says Ekko. "Providing fresh, quality produce is what we do best."

Stephanos Mylonas, owner of Mylo Coffee in Hillcrest, appreciates the efficiency of texts and photographs (see page 43). With a picture, Mylonas can see the produce and determine whether or not he wants to purchase what Barnhill is offering, all while keeping an eye on his busy kitchen.



It's this mindset and flexibility that chefs appreciate about Barnhill. Izard Chocolates (see page 47) wanted to do a chocolate dipped strawberry for Valentine's Day, so Barnhill planted rows of day-neutral strawberries, which hold their shape and size better than a field strawberry and are more desirable for chocolate.

The Barnhills actually prefer knowing ahead of time what to plant. They'd rather plant a crop that's destined for a buyer than guess each season what people will want. One example of this is the public schools. The Barnhills work with Beebe, Cabot, North Little Rock, and Searcy schools to provide farm-to-school produce. This way schools are getting fresh lettuce, squash, and fruit instead of produce shipped in from out of state.

Ekko's business savvy has landed her some large restaurant accounts as well. In 2015, the owner of David's Burgers met

her at a farmer's market and commented on some of her lettuce. Not missing a beat, Ekko insisted he should use green frill lettuce, known for its quality, in his burgers. She sent him home with some to munch on. He returned the next day and placed an order for green frill lettuce to be used in his restaurants.

Not only do the Barnhills pay attention to what their customers want, they listen to what the land needs. "Our land is our greatest resource, you can't just plant once and pick forever," Rex says. "You have to move to another field. We are stewards of the land. It's kind of like the Boy Scouts — you want to leave it better than when you got here."

It has taken a lot of trial and error, but Rex has figured out how to maintain the land and prepare the soil for each harvest. After a field has been picked, the Barnhills put in a cover crop to keep the soil from eroding. Rex prefers a tall





## RATTLE'S GARDEN

Tara Stainton was a pole vaulter in college; at the time, it was a relatively new sport for women. At a track meet a month before graduating in 2000, she met a group of pole vaulters who trained at a facility in Jonesboro. They and Tara hit it off, and it made her realize that, after only having spent two years in the sport, she just wasn't done.

After returning from the track meet, she called Arkansas State University to find out whether they would accept her for their masters program in education so she could train at the Jonesboro facility. At the end of the summer, she packed up and moved to Arkansas—where, she says, nothing is similar to Iowa.

After graduate school, Tara worked for the city of Jonesboro for a couple of years running their youth sports program. She had purchased her grandparents' farm in Iowa and was planning a move home in six months. "Then I met my husband, and life took another direction," she says.

"I spent the first three years of our marriage waiting tables in the mornings at a restaurant down the road, then farmed in the afternoons," Tara recalls. As a self-described self-taught farmer, Tara spent the first several years of her growing career learning how to grow vegetables. Most of her knowledge came from books and "the rabbit hole that is the internet."

Tara grew up in the middle of Iowa; her extended family was all row crop farmers. Tara's parents grew a garden until she was three years old, and they began gardening again after she went to college. "I said to my mother, 'You would have saved a lot of money on me going to school had you ever had a garden when I was old enough to participate in it.'" But they didn't, and so Tara never imagined she'd go into growing food. She planned to become a teacher, but instead, Rattle's Garden was unexpectedly born.

Today, Tara and her husband, Robert, whom she met through a mutual friend when Robert was calf-roping in the rodeo, live on forty-five acres near Vilonia. Fifteen of those acres are certified organic. At any given time, Tara has five acres planted, with the other ten in use as rotational space.

When Tara and Robert married nearly fourteen years ago,

they'd just purchased land and begun building a home with no intention of growing food. Back then, her husband worked out of town for six or eight weeks at a stretch. It was just Tara and their five dogs much of the time. One day, she was walking through Barnes & Noble, and a book caught her eye—*Harvest for Hope: A Guide to Mindful Eating* by Jane Goodall. "That was the first time I ever heard the words sustainable or organic or anything like that." Tara spent the next few weeks reading about organic farms, and by the time her husband returned, she says, "I was converted."

Tara tells people it was almost like a religious awakening. "I fell for organic hard, and I believe in it. I've known since the beginning that if we were going to do this, this is the way I wanted to grow," she says.

Rattle's Garden began in 2006, and it was in the third year, 2008, that the garden began selling vegetables. It was also the year Conway Locally Grown, an online farmer's market, began. Through selling with Conway Locally Grown, Tara discovered a network of growers who helped steer her in a sustainable selling direction. At the time, she was one of the only farmers looking to grow organically, but she took the advice she was given from conventional farmers and considered how she could apply it toward organic growing.

### A SPECIAL MARKET

Rattle's Garden grows diversified specialty vegetables, which basically amounts to, well, a lot of vegetables. The garden also grows cut flowers to sell at the Hillcrest Farmers Market. In addition to market sales, Rattle's Garden has over 100 families who participate in their farm share program for ten weeks in the summer and six weeks in the fall. The program began six years ago as a way to sustain their operation while decreasing the need for Tara to go to Little Rock. "One of the conditions I had for my husband was that I didn't want to drive into Little Rock for work. And the year before we started our farm share program, I was driving into Little Rock for The Bernice Garden Farmers' Market, Westover Hills' Farmers Market, the Sherwood Farmers Market, and the Hillcrest Farmers Market. So that was Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday I was commuting to farmers markets." The situation was untenable. The farm share program allowed Rattle's



Garden to reach out to the Vilonia community and develop a farm model that was sustainable for Tara and her family.

Customers can collect their farm boxes from three locations: directly at the farm (which about three-quarters of customers choose), the Hillcrest Farmers Market, or the Little Rock residence of Julie Majors. Tara says Julie has been instrumental in supporting local farmers, even growing her own small network of followers. Three years ago, Rattle's Garden began offering a pickup location at her house, and Julie handles everything after the food is dropped off.

The farm is Tara's full-time job. As the first certified organic farm in Faulkner County, Rattle's Garden does a lot of outreach in organic education. Over the last seven years, she's hosted twenty-six interns through a partnership with Hendrix College, and until recently, was the chair of the New South Co-op board of directors (see page 37)w. Her original interest in joining the co-op had a lot to do with that outreach and education. "I didn't get involved with New South to be able to sell food. I got involved with New South to promote organic agriculture and help develop a network of resources and farmers. This network makes it easier for new farmers to come in and certify organic, and have an outlet to sell into."

Tara has a big-picture view of sustainability and organics,

something she often hears from other members of the New South Co-op board. She says that view is what enabled her to be so successful as a member of the board—she was able to see the big picture, not just how the co-op could benefit her farm, but how the co-op can benefit community and organic agriculture across the state. Tara notes that she could just work her own small farm, but her reach is much smaller individually than if she combines not only with other farmers, but with Heifer USA to further what she calls her "organic agenda."

#### A COOPERATIVE EFFORT

Unexpectedly, getting involved with the co-op *has* allowed her to sell more. In fact, after adding three high tunnels over the last few years, they've taken their operation from six to twelve months a year. Tara had hoped that spreading out the business over the course of the year would lighten the load in May, June, and July—the traditionally-busy months of the growing season. Instead, it's meant less of a break in the usually-slower winter. But, it's also allowed her to hire a year-round farm hand, Mike—a game changer for a farm their size. Aside from his willingness to work, and work hard, it's a huge load off Tara's plate to not have to train a new hired hand every spring.

## “I fell for organic hard, and I believe in it. I’ve known since the beginning that if we were going to do this, this is the way I wanted to grow,”

During the first two years of the internship program, Tara says she was really learning alongside her students. Though repetition is a reality of working on a farm, it’s important to her that interns experience more than ten weeks of physical labor—she wants to help them learn the *why* behind the work on the farm. Internships and apprenticeships are very common, particularly on small farms, and over the years Tara has noted that many interns are essentially treated as free labor. “I’ve developed a curriculum for them. I have a series of ten topics that our interns learn about over our ten-week summer internship. Once a week, they actually have a classroom session,” she says. While she appreciates the labor help, what she likes even more is that interns bring an energy to the farm that Mike and Tara value. “We’re a little older and tired,” she says, laughing.

### AN ORGANIC LIFE

On a recent road trip to Colorado, Tara and her husband had a conversation about the responses to organic farming from conventional farmers. When she hears conventional farmers say, “Organic can’t feed the world,” her first response is that conventional farming is not feeding the world. “We have millions and millions of people who are going hungry not for lack of food, but for problems in our policies,” she explains.

Her second response is that organic farming will not feed the world if our culture continues to eat the way we do right now, or for that matter, live the way we do right now. Tara points out that in many ways, we live in a society that’s very disposable and very fast. “Conventional corn is being used to make plastic. It’s being used to make fuel. It’s being put to use for purposes that feed into our current lifestyle which is not a sustainable lifestyle,” she says. “So, sure,” Tara continues, “organic can’t feed that lifestyle, that culture.”

As Tara and her husband drove through Kansas and Nebraska, they noted the many fields that were planted in corn, most likely for use in plastics or fuel. “What if, Tara asks, just 100 acres of that space were planted in food people could actually eat?” Tara acknowledges the reasoning behind comments that organic farming can’t feed the world—primarily, that there isn’t enough space to grow crops that aren’t modified for high output or disease resistance—but she says it’s just the tip of the iceberg of the real issues. “There are so many other issues that have to be solved before we can begin to find out if organic farming can feed the world,” she says.

“I was self-taught and it’s so hard,” Tara explains, “not to mention expensive.” If a crop isn’t planted at the correct time or in the correct conditions, often the grower must wait until the next year to try again. Tara believes organic farming can feed the world, but she also knows it’s going to take a lot of farmers—so while she acknowledges why others worry about competition, she really thinks that what’s needed is *more* organic farmers. Tara adds, “The more I can do to make that easier for other people coming in where they don’t have some of the same barriers that I had, that’s what I want my legacy to be, not just growing tomatoes—although, I’m pretty good at growing tomatoes.”



When Tara and her husband originally purchased their property, she fully intended to turn it into a riding arena. She looks out over what are instead vegetable fields, saying, “This is never done. It can just consume you if you let it. And without a doubt, finding balance is hard.” She continues, “What I’m hoping is that in five years, we’re happy and healthy, and everybody’s able to do all this and still loving it. And if not, then that will take a different direction too. But I don’t anticipate that. In all of that stuff that I’ve done, as I’ve floated, it’s never been like this. This is where I’ve set roots down, literally.”

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**Location:** Vilonia

**Known for:** Organic produce

**Site:** rattlesgarden.com

**Social:**  @Rattles-Garden  @rattlesgarden







SEWER PIPE - 1/2 INCH DIA

## ACCESS GARDEN

ACCESS®, a non-profit serving Arkansas families, offers evaluation, education, therapy, and vocational training for children and young adults with special needs. One of the activities considered a core mission of ACCESS is therapy and vocational training through the horticulture program. Executive Director Tammy Simmons, who co-founded ACCESS twenty-five years ago, grew up surrounded by her family's greenhouses in Pine Bluff and understood the important sense of independence fostered by growing your own food. She was determined to incorporate gardening and being outdoors into the ACCESS curriculum. Today, students as young as kindergarten age work the garden alongside Tammy's mother, Norma, and her brother Scott.



Krysten Levin, Marketing and Special Events Manager, says she sees younger kids trying new things through the garden and believes it is particularly impactful on students with food issues, a common challenge for ACCESS students.

“It started with a small opportunity to supplement curriculum and therapy and has blossomed into this huge program that allows ACCESS to work with the community.”

The annual ACCESS plant sale is a community mainstay. Local gardeners, neighbors, and even commercial landscapers attend the sale supporting the services provided by ACCESS. It is also an opportunity to interact with the students, and a valuable social and vocational experience for the students who run the sale.

When ACCESS expanded to a second campus a few years ago, the horticulture program gained additional land, allowing them to try their hand at hydroponics, growing herbs and microgreens using organic-based principles. With a new greenhouse, the H.O.P.E. (Herbs Offering Personal Enrichment) program in partnership with Taziki's Mediterranean Café was developed. Seven paid interns, all students in ACCESS young adult programs, grow, weigh, package, and deliver herbs and greens to three Taziki's locations.

“Taziki's takes a lot of pride in knowing the [intern] growers,” says Krysten. “The interns take a lot of pride in basically running a small business.”



Other restaurants, including Table 28, Petit & Keet, and Diane's Gourmet are purchasing herbs and greens from the students. Being able to earn a wage gives these young adults independence and life skills that are enormously transferable in the job market.

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**Location:** Little Rock

**Known for:** Education, therapy, training, and activities for children and youths with learning disabilities

**Site:** [accessgroupinc.org](http://accessgroupinc.org)

**Social:**   @accessgroupinc

