



GEORGIA'S RURAL CENTER

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CONTACTS:

David Bridges 229-391-4847, dbridges@abac.edu
Scott Blount 229-391-3070, sblount@abac.edu
Jessica Akins 740-225-2394, jessica.akins@abac.edu

ABAC CELEBRATES GRAND OPENING OF GEORGIA GROWN DINING EXPERIENCE, COMMITMENT TO GEORGIA'S FOOD PRODUCERS

TIFTON—Possibly one of the best-kept secrets in Tifton lies within the walls of Donaldson Dining Hall on the campus of Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College. Ask just about any ABAC student, staff or faculty member, and they will tell you: The college's main dining hall is *the* place to find the best old-fashioned, Southern-style lunch in Tifton any given Thursday. From crispy fried chicken to homestyle macaroni and cheese, the menu that has been sure to satisfy week-in and week-out for decades now packs more down-home flavor than ever before, as ABAC announced Thursday its official status as a Georgia Grown partner.

Georgia Commissioner of Agriculture Gary Black was one of many state and local leaders on hand to help celebrate the college's commitment to sourcing at least 50 percent of all menu ingredients from within the state of Georgia, including those Southern staples on Thursday's menu.

"It is one thing to say that you support Georgia agriculture," Black said. "But to actually fuel your students with Georgia-grown food—that's taking your commitment to a whole new level, and that is precisely what ABAC has done with this project."

Beginning in 2018, when ABAC assumed control of campus dining services after more than 20 years of outsourcing the operation, the school set a goal of purchasing 25 percent of menu ingredients in-state. With Vice President for Finance and Operations Paul Willis at the helm of the project and Dining Services Director Dan Miller and Executive Chef Jay Johnson both committed to the vision, ABAC began testing the new way of doing business in July of 2018. The proof was in the proverbial pudding, according to ABAC President David Bridges.

"Students, faculty, staff and guests all fell in love with the new menus. The business model worked. Financials were good," Bridges said, calling the first 12 months of the new model a "proof-of-concept" year.

Based on the success of year one, the team doubled down in 2019, increasing its commitment to 50 percent.

Georgia consistently ranks within the nation's top producers of a variety of fruits, vegetables, nuts, meat and poultry products, and southwest Georgia in particular is an agricultural powerhouse. Though it might require innovation, the idea that the ABAC community could enjoy improved menu quality while simultaneously shortening the culinary supply chain *and* putting money in the pockets of Georgia farmers was a no-brainer.

One of those farmers in attendance at Thursday's event is Ricky Sparkman, president of Sparkman's Cream Valley in Moultrie. Sparkman's supplies ABAC dining services with milk and ice cream products straight from their operation less than 40 miles from campus. An ABAC alumnus, Sparkman takes special pride in his new connection with the school.

"It's an honor to be part of the vision that ABAC has put together," Sparkman said, shortly after attendees "toasted" that vision with jars of his company's chocolate milk. "To have come here as a student myself, then to get to come back to do business—it's surreal."

It is a feeling that is not lost on Bridges, also an ABAC graduate, whose roots in rural Terrell County and knowledge gained as an agricultural educator, researcher and administrator in the state helped underpin the theory behind the model. Its initial success and seeming sustainability are points of pride not only for Bridges as an ABAC administrator, but also as the interim director of Georgia's Rural Center, located on the ABAC campus.

"The Rural Center was conceived with the notion that the economic surge Georgia has experienced over the past several years does not have to be—in fact, shouldn't be—limited to the state's urban centers," he said. "There is no reason that, with a fresh perspective and a little hard work, we can't bring that same vitality to the state's rural areas."

Reconnecting rural and urban Georgians, Bridges added, is a main goal of the Rural Center, and a reason the ABAC dining project was one the center supported from the outset.

"It only takes a spark to get a fire going," Bridges said, "and we hope what we've accomplished here will only be the beginning of a new way of thinking about how we do business and go about our daily lives in this state. If ABAC can purchase half its food from rural Georgia, why can't everyone? That's the challenge we're issuing."

For more information on ABAC's Georgia Grown dining experience, contact Bridges or Rural Center Associate Director Scott Blount at 229-391-4847. Georgia growers and distributors interested in partnering with ABAC's dining services team as suppliers should contact Paul Willis at 229- 391-5052. Learn more about the Rural Center's other on-going efforts to reinvigorate rural Georgia at www.ruralga.org.

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