

Zoning In on the Freshest of Flavor

This take-and-bake is the perfect way to shop and eat local



At Zone 7 Foods, Z7F for short, chefs and owners Chris and Emily Russell have made it easy for you.

TEXT BY HEIDI BILLOTTO PHOTOGRAPHY BY GERIN CHOINIÈRE

It's summer. It's hot, and the last thing on your mind is cooking. You want to eat at home, and you want feed your family a great meal. The solution: Time to zone in on a great little Charlotte spot offering the finest of local fare.

At Zone 7 Foods, Z7F for short, chefs and owners Chris and Emily Russell have made it easy for you. The cooking is done for you as the menu is comprised entirely of pre-prepared local, sustainable and organic dinners you can take home, keep in the freezer and reheat to serve at a moment's notice. From "our freezer to yours", the Russells like to say...

It's a brilliant concept really, a play on the old TV dinner scenario made popular in the mid 1950s and 60s, but no more pasty mashed potatoes or "mystery meat" Salisbury steak. This is organic fresh from the

farm fare, expertly prepared and delicious to boot!

While Swanson Brothers may have coined the term "TV Dinner", Chris and Emily have taken the concept to a whole new level. The kitchens and store front at Z7F are located in a small inconspicuous strip mall at 4113 Monroe Road in Charlotte. With a blended family of five children between them, time at home with their kids is important to this young entrepreneurial couple, and so Chris and Emily have set up their business to suit their lifestyle.

If you are looking for a wonderful pick up to-go lunch, the Z7F retail is open on Thursdays and Fridays from 11 am to 2 pm. Come in a pick up enough frozen pizzas, soups and TV dinners to stock your freezer; and while you are there take home delicious fresh baked ricotta roll open faced

hot sandwiches, soups and salads to enjoy for lunch as well.

Each week the Thursday and Friday Z7F menu is posted on their website at Zone7Foods.com and in a email newsletter Emily sends out to those who'd like to be on the list. The menu changes on a weekly basis as local product comes and goes with the seasons but, I can say with confidence based on my eating experiences here – it's all good!

Look forward to a seasonal hot or cold soup and salad offering as well as a trio of wonderful open-faced sandwiches. Each sandwich is served on a ricotta roll – a scrumptious recipe the two developed using Zack Gadberry's outstanding and locally produced Uno Alla Volta Ricotta cheese.

There are generally two meat-based sandwich

offerings (don't miss the meatballs, oh my!) and always a tasty vegetarian option. All are served with lettuce, roasted tomato and Z7F vinaigrette.

And because every good meal ends with a sweet note, there are always Emily's fresh baked cookies for dessert – the chocolate chip oat cookies, which, by the way, are also dairy free; but don't pass up the molasses cookies while you are buying. Made with local molasses, these sweet little bites are my personal favorite. Not only can you get these little jewels fresh-baked at the shop, but Z7F sells the cookie dough packaged in frozen balls so you can take-and-bake your own – if you don't just eat the delicious frozen dough first, but I digress...

During the week, you'll find Z7F products at Greeneman Farm at 7th Street Station uptown and at Queen City Pantry at the Atherton Mill & Market in SouthEnd. On weekends, look for Emily and Chris selling at this year's new Cotswold Farmers' Market on Sharon Amity and on 36th street in Noda at the well established Noda Farmers' Market, as well.

"I've always been convinced that our bodies know what we need and how to eat the right things. Eating local is easy with so many local farms in and around Charlotte. We just go with what makes us feel good, and we cook for our customers the same way," Emily explained, when I asked how the concept for Z7F came to be.

In case you are wondering, the name is a clever nod to local agriculture. Zone 7 is Charlotte's USDA Plant Hardiness Zone. It is the standard by which gardeners and growers can determine which plants are most likely to thrive at a location.

Emily and Chris believe in eating foods grown and raised as close to home as possible, not just for the health benefits but to support our local community and farmers.

In establishing their business, the two innovative and creative chefs saw a need and wanted to bridge the gap for people who wanted to eat local sustainable foods all year long, but didn't know quite how and where to begin.

Each week the Russells support 10-12 local farmers and producers and always list the names with the week's menu and on their frozen product labels. If they can't find a local product, then they opt for a commercially produced sustainable and organic alternative.

In addition to their regular line up of seasonal take-and-bake and fresh made soups, salads and sandwiches, Z7F also caters. Just give them a call or shoot them an email from the contact form on their website to discuss the delicious details. For more information visit Zone7Foods.com.

