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TAKING THE TABLE TO THE FARM

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When you arrive at Pemberton's North Arm Farm you're literally taken aback by the majesty of Mount Currie, the northernmost peak in the Garibaldi Ranges – and that's before you see the elegant dinner table, nestled among rows of brightly coloured blossoms and large leafy greens, draped with white linens and set for 300.

In its fifth year at the picture-perfect estate, the Araxi Longtable flips the farm to table approach on its head and brings the table to the farm. The culinary finesse and impeccable service that have made Whistler's Araxi Restaurant and Oyster Bar an internationally adored destination since opening in 1981 are transported to this al fresco wonderland, hosted by farm owner (and former Pemberton mayor) Jordan Sturdy and his family.

While executive chef James Walt, who has led Araxi's kitchen for nearly 20 years, and his team prepare a regionally-inspired, four-course, family-style meal in an adjacent row of white tents, wine director and 2013 Sommelier of the Year, Samantha Rahn makes sure every glass is filled, and restaurant director Neil Henderson ensures every guest's mood is merry.

Much of the ingredients for dinner are plucked from North Arm's surrounding 60 acres, where fertile fields yield more than 40 different organically grown crops. Both at work and at home, Walt has been practicing this farm-fresh philosophy for nearly a lifetime. From his childhood on a farm near Ottawa where his mom "grew everything" and a four-year stint at 100-mile-diet-champion Sooke Harbour House after graduating from the Stratford Chefs School, to his appointment as executive

chef at the Canadian Embassy in Rome where he adopted the Italians' local market mentality, and now his young family's productive garden plot at their Pemberton residence.

"Where we live is fantastic because it's an agricultural community and it's just a real part of the culture," says Walt of the pristine seasonal ingredients available from the surrounding farms, ranches, rivers, lakes and Pacific Ocean. "If you're eating locally you're eating well," he says. "It benefits you nutritionally to eat products that are in season."

At the Longtable, the entire dining experience is heightened by the spectacular backdrop, the special ingredients harvested nearby at their prime, the communal energy of 300 strangers fast becoming friends, and the relaxed pace as the event unfolds.

Upon their late-afternoon arrival, guests mingle in a covered breezeway and on the manicured lawn, where canapés are passed and cocktails are poured, and before walking along a tractor-worn path toward the dinner table, they're invited to tour the farm to see firsthand the fields that nurture much of what they're about to consume.

As the last bites of pastry chef Aaron Heath's desserts are enjoyed, the entire team lines up for the eruption of applause that meets their bow. Guests slowly trickle out, pausing to shake the hands of Walt, Rahn, Henderson and their team, thank the Sturdy family for sharing their home, and take one last look at Mount Currie as the sunlight begins to fade behind it.

This year's Araxi Longtable at North Arm Farm will be held over the Labour Day long weekend on Saturday, September 5.

For information, go to araxi.com/longtable. ■



TOP Long table dining set at Pemberton's North Arm Farm. **BOTTOM LEFT** 300 strangers fast becoming friends. **BOTTOM MIDDLE** Quail's Gate was one of the event's selected fine vintages. **BOTTOM RIGHT** Many ingredients are plucked from the surrounding fields.