



CONNECTED

MAN ON THE RUN

IT pro goes
the distance

CO-OP COOPERATION

A partnership to build
a better future

MAKING A CONNECTION

Broadband links
home and work
to the world





— By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO —
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association


Staying well, staying connected

It's late March as I work on my thoughts for this issue. Knowing that the magazine won't reach your mailbox for another four weeks, I asked myself, "What will the world look like in late April to early May?" So much has changed in just the past two weeks, it's hard to imagine what the immediate future holds.

There are, however, a few things I know with great certainty. In this time of crisis, community-based broadband providers across America have stepped up their already deep commitments to keeping you connected. As Americans are increasingly compelled to work or study from home, use telemedicine, and lean on virtual tools to connect with loved ones, the work of your local broadband company has become more essential than ever — for you and for the national economy.

Working with one voice through NTCA, these providers have been on top of national issues such as adopting the FCC's "Keep Americans Connected" pledge, communicating with Congress on the importance of the "Keeping Critical Connections Act," and advocating for support to help small broadband providers ensure internet connectivity when it's extremely critical.

Locally, providers like yours are balancing employee safety with their commitment to keeping networks functioning. In times of crisis, we see more strongly than ever that these providers' investment in building resilient networks — and in the people who operate them — is foundational to our society.

Stay well, stay healthy and stay connected. We will get through this together. 

WE WERE HERE

when our communities needed a modern, reliable communications network.



WE ARE HERE

to help you stay connected during this time of national crisis.



WE WILL BE HERE

supporting the recovery through a broadband network that builds businesses, creates jobs and drives the economy.

**PROUD TO BE YOUR
COMMUNITY-BASED
BROADBAND PROVIDER**

Unlocking the potential of rural businesses

Story by NOBLE SPRAYBERRY

By turning to digital technologies, more than half of small businesses in rural areas expanded their customer base not only locally but also throughout their state, and about one-third grew their market in neighboring states. In fact, about 16% of rural businesses even used digital resources to expand into international markets.

Those were only a few findings from a study Amazon commissioned from the U.S. Chamber Technology Engagement Center that showed how broadband has the potential to further benefit the economy in rural communities and the nation as a whole.

What's the possible upside of improving access to digital tools such as broadband? Rural small businesses have the potential to be critical blocks in the foundation needed to strengthen the nation's economy.

Increasing the number of businesses adopting online tools and digital services could support thousands of jobs. Businesses with revenue of less than \$100,000 have the greatest potential to benefit.

Increased adoption of technology could be responsible for generating billions of dollars of revenue, and Southern states have the most room to grow.

Results of the study released in 2019 were compiled from a survey sent to more than 5,000 rural small businesses across the country. And the report made three policy recommendations that could help make the projections a reality.

CONNECTIVITY

Selling online depends on internet and mobile phone service. About 27% of rural residents lack access to high-speed internet, compared with 92% of all Americans who can access faster services. The private and public sectors should continue to identify opportunities to expand connectivity through initiatives such as the creation of new infrastructure.

NEW POLICIES COULD EASE CONCERNS OF RURAL SMALL BUSINESSES

66% of rural small businesses say poor internet or cell-phone connectivity negatively impacts their business.

38% of rural small businesses say they can't hire the talent with the right digital skills in their area.

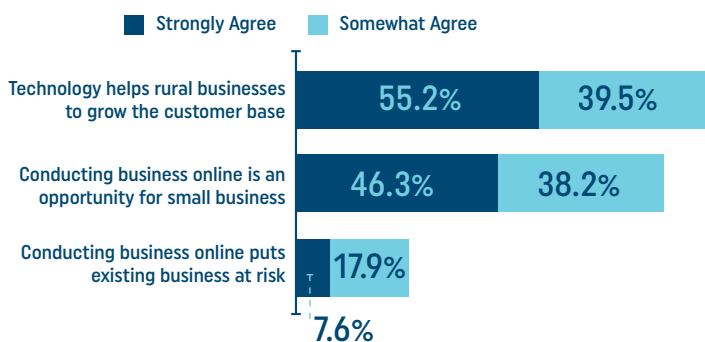
Nearly **41%** of rural small businesses agree that policy-makers should create incentive programs that make it easier for rural small businesses to incorporate digital technology into their daily operations.

TRAINING

There should be a goal of increasing the talent pipeline of candidates trained in digital skills, such as the use of cloud computing and digital marketing. Such a workforce could offset the existing shortage of IT professionals in rural areas.

DIGITAL TOOLS

Increasing the adoption of digital training and digital tools by rural small businesses will allow them to better scale their operations. This study highlights two points: the positive benefits for rural small businesses effectively utilizing digital tools to sell online and the potential for businesses currently underutilizing those digital tools to grow. 🗨



Source: Unlocking the Digital Potential of Rural America, A U.S. Chamber Technology Engagement Center study commissioned by Amazon.



Essential services? Look at broadband

Early in 2020, we didn't necessarily have any reason to consider what the "essential" goods and services were in our lives. As we know, that all changed this spring when many "nonessential" workers were sent home and we were urged to only leave home for "essential" trips.



JEFF WILSON
Chief Executive Officer

Amidst this strange season we're in, two things have become crystal clear for me:

1. Broadband and communications services are essential for our community and,
2. When our community counts on our team at WCTEL, our employees shine.

I'd like to use some of this space to say how proud I am of our employees. These men and women helped navigate this unprecedented time for our cooperative, communicated changes with our members and made sure our network did its job connecting all of you.

I'm also proud of our community and would like to sincerely thank the medical personnel, grocery store workers, first responders, civic leaders and others who are still working tirelessly to keep our community running. Additionally, I would like for everyone affected by the economic impact of the virus to know we have joined the FCC's "Keep Americans Connected Pledge" to ensure our members can stay connected during this COVID-19 crisis.

ESSENTIAL CONNECTION

Part of the reason our team continues to work so hard is we realize what a broadband connection means to members of our community.

Very early on in the coronavirus crisis, we saw government officials, school administrators, pastors and even entertainers embrace digital content.

Some of that information was critical to help students continue learning and keep people safe. In other instances, it may have been purely for entertainment. But I believe that when we were asked to remain in our homes, having access to all of the quality entertainment options broadband provides was a blessing.

The industry statistics I've seen certainly indicate people are putting communication networks to work. National carriers reported seeing a 25% increase in voice phone call activity and a 15% rise in call duration during the first couple of weeks after leaders began encouraging people to stay home. At that same time, estimates indicate web traffic grew between 13% and 40%.

At your home, that increase may have been children taking virtual field trips or accessing school resources. Worshipers all across our region went online on Sunday mornings to stream church services. Many people worked from home over their broadband connection — teleconferencing platforms saw a 300% increase in traffic, according to reports in Wired Magazine. Maybe you called a friend or family member to catch up, instead of visiting in person.

From an entertainment standpoint, networks like ours also saw a surge. Nielsen, the company famous for its TV ratings, said that people staying home leads to an almost 60% increase in the amount of TV we watch. Traffic to Netflix reportedly increased by between 54% and 75%, and online gaming sites reported a 400% increase in traffic.

I don't bring all of this up to bore you with statistics, but I wish to underscore a point. The communication network we provide is an essential service both when times are dark and in the brighter days I know are coming soon. [🔗](#)



CONNECTED

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is a member-owned cooperative dedicated to delivering advanced telecommunications technology to the people of Abbeville, Anderson and McCormick counties.

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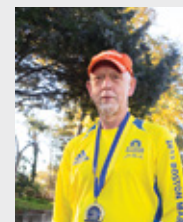
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Produced for West Carolina Tel by:

WORDSOUTH
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On the Cover:



Lifelong runner and Abbeville Medical Center IT Director Tim Stewart is looking for a return to the Boston Marathon in 2021.
See story Page 9.



Congratulations to WCTEL employees!

More than a dozen WCTEL employees recently completed CompTIA Network+ classes. Pictured from left: Chris Davis, received certification; Brian Sorrow, received certification; J.R. Hagan, completed training; Richie Stone, received certification; Jordan Riley, completed training; Rusty Latham, received certification; Ryan Walton, received certification; Barry Ferguson, received certification; Stacy Norris, received certification; Chad Culbreth, completed training; Jesse Stone, received certification; Zac Campbell, received certification; Jay Jordan, received certification; and John Lawrence, received certification. The certification focuses on IT infrastructure, including troubleshooting, configuring and managing networks.

West Carolina Rural Telephone Cooperative BOARD MEMBER ELECTIONS FOR 2020

At WCTEL's annual meeting scheduled for Aug. 17, an election will select three members for the board of directors. The three seats up for election this year are due to normal rotations as per our bylaws and are as follows:

- **Area 1 — Starr**
- **Area 6 — Calhoun Falls**
- **Area 9 — South McCormick**

The three directors who currently hold these positions all plan to seek re-election.

A nominating committee will be appointed and shall select one or more members from each of these three areas to be nominated to the board. If you wish to notify the nominating committee of your interest in serving on the board, you may provide the company CEO a letter of intent that can be turned in to any of the WCTEL offices during regular business hours no later than 5 p.m. on May 29. Materials on qualifications and how to file

are also available upon request from any of our offices. Please remember you must be a member from the area where the vacancy is occurring and meet the other qualifications outlined in the bylaws.

A person not nominated by the nominating committee may file as a petition candidate, which is more specifically described in our bylaws. In accordance with the bylaw requirements, petition candidates will have a period following the nominating committee's meeting to file as a petition candidate and still be listed on the election ballot provided they have met the bylaw qualifications to be a board member. Petitions must be received no later than 5 p.m. on July 2.

If you have any questions, you are encouraged to contact WCTEL CEO Jeff Wilson at 864-446-2111.

This information is for notification of the process for board election only and is not the notice of the annual meeting.

Rest, relax and rejuvenate

A vacation does not necessarily require a plane ticket, hotel room or even a tank of gas. In fact, whether you're on a budget or just looking for a way to unplug from the stresses of day-to-day life, there are plenty of relaxing options if you never leave home.

After all, any break is a good break, so here are a few resources, suggestions and tips for those interested in unwinding without heading out.

Explore



► Are you a burgeoning birder? iBird, Peterson Birds of North America, the Audubon Society and others have created apps to help both the novice and experienced birder. Apps may include photos, artwork and birdsongs to help you identify birds where you live. You can even earn an online certificate from birdercertification.org.

► Arborday.org offers an online database for identifying trees across the U.S. along with its "What Tree Is That?" pocket field guide. Snap a photo of a leaf and the website will help identify it.

► Backyards are meant for play and family barbecues, but take a closer look. Grab a magnifying glass and learn what's out there beyond the grass. Create a nature trail for kids and learn about the plants, insects and animals living in your backyard.

► Geocaching is a good old-fashioned treasure hunt with a twist. Try the app from Geocaching.com and get out in nature to find "treasures" others have left. You'll also learn some handy navigation skills.



Get playful



► Coloring isn't just for kids. It can help adults reduce stress and anxiety, improve vision and focus, and even sleep better! Best of all, coloring supplies are inexpensive and available at stores and online retailers everywhere.

- Pull the board games out of the closet and dust them off. It's time for a family-friendly faceoff. Traditionalists may prefer games like Monopoly, Life or Scrabble, but conservative estimates count tens of thousands of available board games.
- Discover your inner Monet with an online art class. A quick internet search for online art classes yields results of everything from basic drawing to comic book art to figure drawing and more!



► Piece together a pretty picture and flex your mental muscles at the same time. Family jigsaw puzzles use a combination of small, medium and large pieces so everyone can join in on the fun. Try puzzlewarehouse.com for a giant selection of puzzles for all ages.

Books and music

► Did you know there's a free digital library of classic books? Project Gutenberg offers digital downloads of titles ranging from "Pride and Prejudice" to "Peter Pan." Just visit gutenberg.org.

- For those who believe "all the world's a stage," playbill.com offers a range of resources, including guides to finding streaming videos of stage performances.
- Check with your local library about e-book selections using apps such as SimplyE and Libby.



► If you need help selecting a book to read, do a quick Google search for Time magazine's All-Time 100 novels. If mysteries are your thing, visit theedgars.com for a list of the latest award winners. And for sci-fi fans, pop over to nebulas.sfw.org.



Go virtual

- Consider a virtual tour, and begin with a visit to google.com/earth. Search for one of the 31 virtual visits to national parks such as Acadia, Everglades and Joshua Tree. They're fantastic.
- Check out Virtualiteach.com for a guide to online tours of places such as the Louvre, the National Museum of History, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and other popular venues across the world.
- Many zoos offer entertaining live webcams, particularly if the viewer catches the animals at just the right time. A great first stop is the San Diego Zoo: zoo.sandiegozoo.org/live-cams.



► And don't miss artsandculture.google.com for tours of The Modern Museum of Art, the CERN laboratory and much more. Seriously, this is a must-visit. ☑





HI! I'M AMANDA CLARK

In this column, you'll learn about technology and read simple tips to get the most out of your electronics. For more tips or help with your devices, be sure to read this column in future publications. I'm always happy to help!

APP OF THE MONTH



Grammarly

Do your business contacts ever read your social media posts, requiring you to make sure your grammar is perfect? Or does your English-whiz friend give you grief if a comma lands in the wrong spot? Consider Grammarly, an online copy editor that can integrate with your web browser. The free account is robust, and a premium version offers additional writing tips and tools for less than \$12 monthly if you pay for a year in advance.

Get social safely

Social media is a great way to be informed, stay in touch and keep track of what friends and family are up to. But as more and more of our lives are posted on Facebook or captured on Instagram, it's important to be aware of the pitfalls and to know how to best protect your online security.

Consider the following tips on how to stay safe on your favorite social media platform.

- Set a strong password. No password is unbreakable, but don't make it easy on a potential hacker by using a common word or phrase. Use combinations of numbers, uppercase and lowercase letters, and special characters. Also, use different passwords for each social media account.
- When given the option to set up security questions to recover your password, make sure the questions you select are not easy for someone to know the answer to, such as where you went to school, the street you grew up on or the name of your first pet. You can also answer those same questions with random words — just make sure you remember them.
- Activate two-factor authentication, which most social media platforms, including Twitter, Instagram and Facebook offer. When you access your account from a device or browser your social media platform doesn't recognize, it will ask you to input a code it sends to you via email or text to confirm your identity. The extra step may be annoying if you access your accounts from different computers or usually block cookies in your browser, but it's a mild inconvenience for security.
- Know who your friends are. Especially on Facebook, it's important to only accept friend requests from people you know. A recent trick is for scammers to take a photo and name from someone you're already friends with and then send you a friend request. You accept and unknowingly give a stranger access to your private posts.
- Know your audience. When posting, Facebook allows you to select who might see your post. If you want something to reach the widest audience possible, choose "public" in the privacy settings, but don't forget to set it back to "friends" once you're done.
- Reconsider taking that personality quiz. Of course you want to know how much of a Libra you are or which Disney character is your spirit animal. But before you go clicking and sharing, make sure you read the fine print on how the information you're giving this application will be used. Most of these quizzes are harmless fun, but giving away some of your data is the price of admission.





Tim Stewart, IT director for Abbeville Area Medical Center.

Going the distance

Hospital IT director finds outlet and balance on the run

Story by JOHN CLAYTON
Photos by MATT LEDGER

Tim Stewart started running as a boy at the urging of his father. He had no idea where he'd be going.

But the sport took Stewart, information technology director for the Abbeville Area Medical Center, from his Greenville hometown to college and the Boston Marathon and still provides him a haven from the stresses of professional life.

"It keeps me focused, because you can't really be competitive if you're not eating right or if you're drinking too much or doing other things that take up your time and energy," says Stewart, 58, who entered his first 10-mile race as a teenager 45 years ago. "Instead of doing that, I focus on running, so I think that helps me keep my focus at work and in my personal life, too."

Stewart says that first race in 1975 was

an eye-opening experience. "I hadn't trained for it, so I had no idea what I was doing," he says.

Nonetheless, he kept running, earning a scholarship to what was then Brevard Junior College in North Carolina before heading to Clemson to pursue his bachelor's degree. He stopped competing at the collegiate level but continued to run and to challenge himself as part of the Greenville Track Club. He's been a member since high school and has been inducted into the club's hall of fame.

"That's part of it — the social life," says Stewart, who still competes regularly in local races. "Going to the races and seeing people I've known for years — or decades now — and meeting new people and getting to socialize with them is a big part of running."



Being a part of that group also led him to compete in several marathons, including the Boston Marathon, which he has run six times. Training for the 26.2-mile races requires a commitment of time and effort, but a hamstring injury slowed him down recently. As a result, he won't be attempting to qualify for the 2020 edition of the marathon event but says he hopes to return in 2021.

"I'd always heard about Boston, and everybody I knew that ran said, 'Oh, you gotta go do it,' so I finally qualified and went up there," Stewart says. "It was so enjoyable — the people and the crowds are just so wonderful. It's the oldest one. It's been around since 1897, and they've run it every year. If you're going to run a marathon, everybody's goal is to go to Boston."

The Boston Marathon also provided Stewart with one of his more harrowing memories. His wife, Eden, was waiting near the end point of the race in 2013. In the minutes after Stewart finished, two homemade bombs set off by domestic terrorists exploded near the finish line, killing three and injuring several. Stewart and his wife were a safe distance from the scene, but the memories are still vivid.

"We didn't really know what was going on until we were at the subway station, and somebody came in and said bombs had gone off," he says. "It was just overwhelming at first. We couldn't believe it, but then they shut everything down. The subway stopped running. They blocked the cell signals. Everything was cut off, so we knew it was for real then." 📶



A trusty solution

Broadband creates a key resource

Access to fast internet service is an increasingly important resource, a realization playing out in large and small ways for rural communities across the nation. And state and local governments are striving to make it easier for residents to take advantage of new communications resources.

For many, the benefits created by access to broadband are deeply personal, and the choices made by one Tennessee family illustrate the possibilities.

Aaron and Becca West lived in Spring Hill, a Nashville suburb, when a national communications provider brought high-speed internet to their neighborhood. Aaron West took advantage, working from home and eliminating his 45-minute commute to a software company. Also, the new technology allowed him to grow his own business, an audio and visual consulting company serving churches.

When the family opted to relocate to the more rural area of Crossville, Tennessee, they did not leave behind the opportunities made possible through broadband. The local telephone cooperative, Ben Lomand Connect, provides 1 Gbps internet service

through a fiber optic network. And the couple took advantage.

"I've had the company for about nine years, but I couldn't operate it the way I can operate it now," West says. "The fiber was so huge for the contract work. It was so much easier to communicate. When we were looking for homes here, we immediately ruled them out if they didn't have high-speed internet access."

Broadband has also helped the career of Becca West, a teacher by training. She connected with a program called GoGoKid, allowing her to use the internet to teach English to Chinese students. The arrangement also made it easier for her to home-school the couple's two daughters.

While fast internet access improves their connectivity to the world, the family also experiences its capacity to create a deeper connection with each other. "We're all here together, and we're very intentional about doing things together," Aaron West says. "We're able to go to parks and libraries. We're freed up to focus on our family instead of it being career first and family second."

UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

Stories such as that of the West family are only the beginning. The full potential of broadband remains untapped, and states nationwide can benefit as fast networks reach rural areas.

Last year the U.S. Chamber Technology Engagement Center released results of a study commissioned by Amazon that found Texas could add as many as 23,433 jobs in rural communities over three years.



Becca West teaches English to Chinese children via the internet.



Aaron West,
a Tennessee
resident, in his
home office.

And hitting that mark could generate an additional \$6.6 billion in annual sales and \$963 million in annual wages.

While the Lone Star State leads all states in potential gain from broadband growth, both Ohio and Mississippi could also see significant gains. The study emphasized that achieving the potential growth would require investments such as an increase in rural broadband and cellphone access, as well as growth of the number of people with digital skills necessary for these jobs.

With so much potential at stake, local communities are incentivized to promote broadband-based jobs, even if that means updating local regulations, as one Wisconsin county has done in recent years.

EMBRACING OPPORTUNITY

Once, home-based businesses in Wisconsin's Bayfield County were required to secure permits to operate. Now, the county takes a more common-sense approach as the description of a home-based worker evolves.

"We've recognized the direction of business in America today and around the

world," says Rob Schierman, director of planning and zoning for Bayfield County. "We created some breathing room for when a business would need a permit and when it doesn't. We're creating opportunity while still protecting the integrity of neighborhoods."


The area was one of the first to receive the state's Telecommuter Forward! Certification, one step in promoting work-from-home jobs and taking advantage of the internet network of Norvado, a telecommunications cooperative in Cable, Wisconsin.

"We're providing a means to try to stimulate some of that employment activity coming to Bayfield County and to take advantage of the fiber optics that we have here with Norvado," Schierman says.

The issue is personal for Schierman and his wife, Jennifer, who understand the benefits of telecommuting.

Her employer is based in Minneapolis, but she works from home. The need for high-speed internet connectivity is a necessity. "We connect via phone, and we hold meetings on Skype," she says. "It works. It's very slick."

Like other telecommuters, she enjoys the freedom to get up and move, to go walk the dog or to pitch in a load of laundry. "It definitely makes life easier," she says.

Rob Schierman says that freedom is part of the draw for telecommuters who live in Bayfield County or those considering relocating there. "The younger workforce doesn't like to be married to a desk or a location," he says. "They're a little bit more fluid in their lifestyle and like to be where they can hop on a bike trail or go fishing or go kayaking. They can take advantage of the resources in Bayfield County — we're uniquely situated along Lake Superior and close to a lot of undeveloped areas where recreation is still plentiful." 



Jennifer
Schierman
telecommutes to
the city.



BEING THERE

WCTEL managed services brings tech and peace of mind

Story by JOHN CLAYTON | Photos by MATT LEDGER

Little River Electric Cooperative was at a crossroads three years ago when a staff change prompted a call to WCTEL's managed services department.

When Little River's contracted IT services employee left for another job, General Manager Mike Ellis decided to bring in WCTEL's team to help move Little River forward with needed technological advances.

"It's a great fit," Ellis says. "The WCTEL team has a lot of knowledge. It saved us a lot, not having to hire somebody on staff."

A full-time IT employee just didn't make sense for Little River at the time, and neither did keeping some antiquated equipment and processes in a fast-paced technological climate.

As a utility cooperative, WCTEL has a unique understanding of Little River's goals and needs, and the managed services team, led by Ryan Walton, made the transition easy, Ellis says — and helps him sleep a little better at night.

"It's become a lot easier to not worry about anything as far as the technology end of it," Ellis says. "They stay on top of it. Being small, we don't have a real need for a full-time IT person or staff, but if the need arises, we've got a team to call, and they're right here."



Managed IT Services Tech II Rusty Latham, left, and Jordan Riley, Managed IT Services tech I

Walton says peace of mind for WCTEL's managed services customers is the objective. "Our goal is to get everything up and running smoothly to the point that you only know we're there if something bad happens," he says.

Little River serves about 14,000 customers in Abbeville, McCormick, Greenwood and Anderson counties. Since signing on with WCTEL's managed services to go with the existing phone and internet services, Little River has streamlined many of its processes. "Our billing, mapping and all of that works through the servers there, and it's all tied together," Ellis says.

Several years ago, Little River technicians still used paper maps to find locations along the cooperative's 2,100 miles of lines. Now, technicians on the road use tablets to help navigate the area. Meters are read remotely via the web. Because of improved capabilities, Little River is able to offer prepaid billing so that some customers can purchase wattage much like they would buy minutes for a prepaid cellphone.

Along with Little River, WCTEL's managed services team — staffed by Walton, two other full-time employees, two contractors and an intern — serves 31 other businesses.

Ellis says the entire team knows the ins and outs of working with Little River. “You’re not calling somebody thousands of miles away that you don’t know,” he says. “With other companies, you may talk to someone once and then three weeks later, it’s somebody else. With WCTEL, everyone you talk to knows your situation.” ☎

Mike Ellis, general manager of Little River Electric Cooperative.



Ryan Walton, team lead of managed services for WCTEL.



ABOUT WCTEL MANAGED SERVICES

Managed Network Services

WCTEL IT professionals are trained to manage networks large and small. Proactive monitoring ensures optimal performance of your network. The WCTEL team will set up secure firewalls and manage your network. Outdated hardware, software and cables, as well as network vulnerabilities, become a thing of the past.

Network Security

Protect your network from viruses, attacks and other harmful activities with WCTEL network security services. WCTEL techs monitor and protect against network intrusion, detecting abnormal activity and halting attacks to maintain the integrity of your network.

Cloud Hosting

Your business probably has a website and email system. Most likely, you use software to run applications. All of that data has to live somewhere. But if your website, email, software and/or data live on a server down the hall, your business could be at risk. Servers and laptops can fail. Storms, fire and even cyberattacks hit small businesses daily. Any one of these data disasters could shut you down for a day, a week or even more. WCTEL's hosting services keep your systems protected off-site in our highly secure data center. Full-time server administrators keep everything up and running smoothly, 24/7. You can even add Infracore™ Disaster Recovery for extra assurance in the event of a fire, storm, cyberattack or other disaster.

Disaster Recovery

Disaster recovery is a key piece of any business continuity plan. If your on-site servers go down, you lose access to critical data. Email, customer data, company files, other programs and your website must be available at all times. WCTEL's Disaster Recovery, powered by Codero Hosting, provides a redundant solution that allows for near real-time recovery of your data and restoration of IT infrastructure with military-grade security.

Cloud Backup

WCTEL's Secure Data Backup to the cloud protects your data and your network so you don't have to worry. The cloud backup is an enterprise-grade, direct-to-cloud backup solution that protects servers, desktops, laptops, tablets and smartphones. For added peace of mind, you can recover files and even entire folders in seconds.

Farm Fresh

LOCAL INGREDIENTS MAKE A DIFFERENCE



Farm-to-table dining isn't a flash in the pan. "It isn't a trend," says Tommy Hines, executive chef at Pursell Farms in Sylacauga, Alabama. "It's here to stay. I look forward to sourcing locally and cooking with the seasons."

When it comes to food philosophies, few are as straightforward as the farm-to-table movement. Simply, it's food sourced as close to home as possible — if not from a personal garden then from a farm close enough that whatever is harvested one day can be on your plate the next, if not sooner. In addition to being more healthful, with no added ingredients, the farm-to-table philosophy supports the local economy, so it's a win-win for food purveyors, cooks and diners.

Hines, a native of New Orleans, grew up and honed his culinary skills in a part of the country where farm-to-table is a way of life, with a warmer climate that allows for year-round produce and within easy reach of the fruits of the sea.

"We cook with the seasons, using foods that are out our back doors," he says. "We use Creole tomatoes when they're in season. We use Louisiana peaches when they're in season. And the fresh seafood in the Gulf and the foods that are at your back door. Everything that's available to you. That's just how I learned to cook, and



Tommy Hines, executive chef at Pursell Farms in Sylacauga, Alabama, finishes a plate of vegetables with boiled peanut hummus.

I think that's the best way to cook.

"Why cook something that's not from your area?" Hines says. "First of all, you're going to pay more money, but it's not as good quality. You know, you pick up a tomato in December, and it's nothing like those wonderful tomatoes you can get in July and August."

When Hines started at Pursell Farms in the fall of 2019, he began a relationship with farmers and other food producers in the Sylacauga area. And his menus at the resort's two dining venues, Old Tom's Pub and Arrington, reflect the partnership between chef and farmers with dishes that change according to the season.

In cooler months you may find crab au gratin, kale and brussels sprout salad, or chicken and sausage gumbo.

But when the weather warms, you'll find dishes featuring the bounty of summer, such as Hines' heirloom tomato and peach salad with olive crumble or the strawberry-rhubarb shortcake with whipped mascarpone.

Hines likes to think of farm-to-table eating as something that comes full circle — from the ground to the plate and, if you compost, back into the ground again. "I think people should be eating what they have the ability to grow or get from their local farmers markets," he says.

Heirloom tomato and peach salad with olive crumble

- 4 large heirloom tomatoes (about 2 1/2 pounds)
- 2 medium yellow peaches
- Fleur de sel or kosher salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 1/4 cup torn fresh basil leaves, plus whole leaves for garnish
- 1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 3 tablespoons chardonnay vinegar
- 4 (2 1/2 ounces each) rounds burrata cheese
- 2 tablespoons black olive crumble (instructions follow)

Cut the tomatoes and peaches into wedges and place them in a large bowl. Sprinkle them with fleur de sel and pepper, add the 1/4 cup basil and olive oil, and mix well. Let stand at room temperature 30 minutes to 1 hour, stirring occasionally. Place 1 burrata cheese round in the center of each plate. Fan the tomatoes and peaches around the cheese, dividing equally, and drizzle with the dressing left in the bowl. Garnish with olive crumble and whole basil leaves.

To make olive crumble: Place 1 cup pitted black olives on a wire rack with a tray underneath and roast in the oven at 175 F until dry, about 2 1/2 hours, or until semicrispy. Pulse in a food processor to a consistency of coarse crumbs.



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Strawberry-rhubarb shortcake with whipped mascarpone

For the filling:

- 1 pound medium-size strawberries, hulled and quartered
- 3/4 cup granulated sugar, divided
- 1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
- 1 tablespoon Grand Marnier
- 1 1/2 cups chopped fresh rhubarb (about 2 stalks)
- Pinch kosher salt

Biscuits:

- 2 cups sifted all-purpose flour, plus extra for work surface
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon table salt
- 2 tablespoons granulated sugar
- Freshly grated zest of 1 orange
- 1 cup heavy cream, plus extra for brushing biscuits
- Coarse or granulated sugar
- Unsalted butter (for baking sheet)

Whipped mascarpone:

- 1 cup mascarpone
- 3 tablespoons powdered sugar
- 2 tablespoons heavy cream

For the filling: Mix berries with 1/4 cup sugar, vinegar and Grand Marnier in a medium-size bowl. Toss gently and set aside. In a small saucepan, combine rhubarb, remaining 1/2 cup sugar and salt. Cook over medium heat, stirring, until sugar melts and liquids are simmering nicely, 8 to 10 minutes. Remove from heat and cool to room temperature. Rhubarb will soften as it sits. Add berries and stir. Set aside.

For the biscuits: Preheat oven to 400 F. In a large bowl, whisk together flour, baking powder, salt, sugar and orange zest. In the bowl of a standing mixer, whip cream until it forms firm peaks. Fold the whipped cream gently into the flour mixture until the dough begins to come together. (Add another 1 or 2 tablespoons of unwhipped cream, if needed.) Gently gather the dough into a ball and turn it out onto a floured surface. Press to form a disk about 3/4 inch thick. It will be slightly crumbly. Using a biscuit cutter 2 1/2 inches wide, cut out the biscuits and lay them on a baking sheet greased with unsalted butter. Brush them with extra cream and sprinkle on the coarse or granulated sugar. Bake until golden, 15 to 17 minutes. Cool on racks.

For the whipped mascarpone: Combine all ingredients in the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the whisk attachment. Beat, starting on low speed and gradually increasing speed, until the mixture is light and fluffy, about 1 minute. Refrigerate in an airtight container until ready to use, up to 3 days.

To plate: Split each biscuit horizontally. Spoon berry-rhubarb mixture on the bottom half, top that with mascarpone and cover with the top half of the biscuit. Garnish with powdered sugar. 🍷





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