

EATING



GOOD ENOUGH TO EAT: Executive Chef Matthew Roher picks produce for Cha Bella's evening meal at the restaurant's new organic farm (opposite and center). Organic carrots for sale at Thrive (left) and local shrimp brought in by wholesaler Blue Marlin (right).

As Savannah's chefs dig into the freshest culinary trends, their greatest allies are outside the kitchen. Ever wonder who handles your food? Look to the local characters behind the plough, the net and the churn.

By **Tim A. Rutherford** » Photography By **Imke Lass**

LOCAL

“Health and flavor are the two basic components in our choice to serve organic and local food. Freshly picked, locally grown ingredients have more nutrients than food that’s been preserved and amended with chemicals. And as a chef, I know this food will have fullest flavor profile.”

— Cha Bella Executive Chef Matthew Roher

Local. Sustainable. Organic. All-natural.

These words are all the buzz in Savannah’s culinary scene. On the surface, the concept seems simple: Serve fresh foods grown in season, preferably without chemical or man-made influences, from a thriving local environment that supports ongoing production.

But as Savannah’s restaurants race to satisfy our hunger for succulent, sustainable dishes, their greatest challenge is finding sufficient local produce, meats, cheeses and eggs in the first place.

Green Ingredients

Shirley Daughtry of Heritage Organic Farm in Guyton knows all about the challenges.

“We were the first certified organic farm in Georgia,” Shirley explained to me one chilly afternoon at the Trustees’ Garden Farmer’s Market. Although Heritage Farm produces dozens of different fruits and vegetables on its

tightly managed 20 acres, that production is just enough to sustain the 200 families who pay a subscription fee of about \$26 for weekly delivery of organically grown fruits and vegetables. “We only come to the market with surplus.”

Bottom line: The supply chain is the challenge for local restaurants that want organic foods.

“We’re adding a hoop house (a temporary greenhouse) to add more production and to extend the growing season,” Daughtry said, acknowledging that it won’t put much of a dent in area restaurants’ increasing demand for local and organic produce.

Farm to Table

To fill that void, restaurateurs and chefs are becoming more creative. In the case of Cha Bella owner and executive chef Matthew Roher, he and his staff are pulling on overalls and work boots to tend their own crops.



THE GOOD EARTH: Savannah’s surrounding farmland offers a growing opportunity to local restaurateurs who are hungry for the tastiest trends.



“When I started working for Liz (Elizabeth on 37th founding chef Elizabeth Terry) in 1983, she was already working to source seasonal food from local growers. Chef Kelly Yambor continues that tradition. Seasonal, local food is Southern food at its best. That’s our legacy.”

— Elizabeth on 37th co-owner Greg Butch

or organically raised meats. Niman Ranch has been a pioneer in the nationwide supply of beef and pork, and recently, Armstrong has begun using ground beef from White Oak Pastures, a Bluffton, Ga., farm known for its grass-fed beef. Cheeses at Thrive come from Thomasville cheese maker Sweet Grass Dairy and from newcomer Flat Creek Lodge in Swainsboro.

To help her customers learn to embrace natural or organic foods, Armstrong also sells packaged grocery goods — jams, sauces and the like — as well as produce she acquires at the Trustees’ Garden Farmer’s Market.

“It’s harder, you really have to work at it,” Armstrong said. “When we opened, we were able to order organic produce from local wholesalers, then they quit providing organics. For a while, we relied on a supplier from Florida, and there are still things I prefer to get from them. I’m really excited now that we’re going into the growing season, I can’t wait to see what local farmers produce.”



To Market

The linchpin for much of the local supply is Trustees’ Garden Farmer’s Market. The twice-weekly market, held at the Charles H. Morris Center on East Broad Street, hosts only organic farmers and local artisans and craftsmen. It features educational programs on cooking with organics, demonstrations of practices like yoga or tai chi — and is a great place to pick up lunch or dinner to-go.

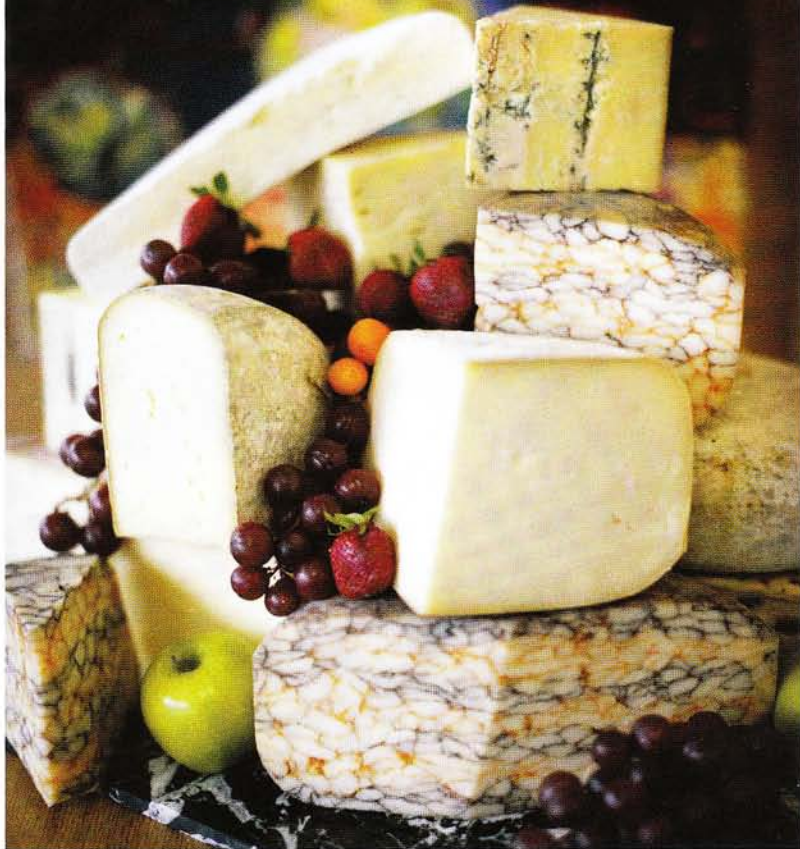
Producers at the market include Heritage Organic Farms, Clark and Sons Organics of Portal and Adcote Acres, an egg producer from Sylvania. Cha Bella and Thrive sell dinners to-go or walking-around snacks. Organizers expect more organic growers to come on board as the growing season develops.

Pearl, a big, beautiful White Leghorn chicken, clucks peacefully while passersby admire the large, pristine white eggs gently cartoned on the table. Arianne McGinnis and Elliott McGann patiently explain their practices to curious egg buyers.

“We have 700 hens, half White Leghorns and half Rhode Island Reds, who produce about 300 dozen eggs a week,” Arianne said. “The Rhode Island produces these brown eggs and are fed with commercial organic feed. The white eggs come from hens like Pearl and are fed with Clark and Sons feed.”

These aren’t bargain-basement eggs. Browns go for, at best, \$2.50 a dozen if you buy two dozen; the whites are more than \$4 a dozen. Still, cooks who try the eggs agree that there is that much difference in quality, flavor and size when compared to commercially produced eggs from the grocery store, which often sell for less than \$2 a dozen. Wendy makes a quiche with Adcote Acres eggs — it’s light, silky and decadent. “And we’re completely transparent,” Arianne said. “You can visit our farm, see the hens, see the feed bags, see the land — and know exactly what you’re going to be getting.” ■

FRESH OFF THE BOAT: A just-caught fish (left) and a beautiful clam dish at Elizabeth on 37th (opposite) may go from ocean to table in a single day.



A GRACIOUS PLENTY: Locally made cheeses (this page) and an organic manifesto (opposite) at Thrive.

"We have two acres, we call it Avondale Farm, on the site of an old dairy in east Savannah," Roher said. "We had late-winter harvests of baby greens, baby beets, arugula and broccoli rabe — all of which we immediately plugged into Cha Bella's menu."

Roher gets fish fresh from the boat, and locally sources shrimp, oysters and clams — and accesses as much free-range meat and poultry as suppliers can provide.

He's no newcomer to the process. Roher was formerly general manager and executive chef at Hampton Island Preserve, where he and Daron "Farmer D" Joffe teamed up to bring biodynamically grown produce to the table. Together, they should be credited for raising the profile of organically grown produce in Savannah.

The weekend before St. Patrick's Day finally brought warmer, sunny days, and Cha Bella general manager Steve Howard was wasting no time. He and a band of volunteers and staff descended on the farm to plant 150 new herb plants and to begin preparing plant beds for crops ranging from pole beans to bell peppers, squash to tomatoes.

"We feel that we're going to produce more than enough produce for the restaurant," Roher said. "When that happens, we'll have produce to sell other restaurants and to sell at the market. I would ultimately like to offer our own customers box service that they can pick up at the restaurant."

According to Roher, the economics play out. The cost of seeds, plants and additional labor are offset by eliminating shipping costs and the markup of buying organic goods from big wholesalers. And locally grown produce, he said, means fresher, better-tasting produce.

"Beets or arugula we pick this morning are on the menu tonight," he said. "The produce has not spent days on a rail car or truck before arriving at the restaurant."

Shopping Around

On Whitmarsh Island, owner and chef Wendy Armstrong of Thrive, A Carry Out Cafe, blends locally accessible goods with supplies from national companies.

"I prefer to use locally grown produce," Armstrong explained. "But when I can't get that, I'll order from wholesalers. In the end, it's about what tastes best."

Like Roher, Armstrong still relies on suppliers from around the nation for free-range

SHOP LOCAL

Put some sustainable food on your table. »

Organic, free-range eggs
 Adcote Acres
 By appointment only, Sylvania
www.adcoteacres.com

Organic fruits and vegetables
 Clark and Sons Organics
 400 Clark Farm Road, Portal
 (912) 865-3200

Heritage Organic Farm
 By appointment only, Guyton
 (912) 728-3708
www.heritageorganicfarm.com

Local, all-natural cheeses
 Sweet Grass Dairy
 19345 U.S. Highway 19 North,
 Thomasville, Ga. (229) 228-6704
www.sweetgrassdairy.com

Flat Creek Lodge
 367 Bishop Chapel Church Road,
 Swainsboro, Ga., (478) 237-3474
www.flatcreeklodge.com

Natural, grass-fed beef
 White Oak Pastures
 Bluffton, Ga., (229) 641-2081
www.whiteoakpastures.com

Locally caught seafood
 Russo's Seafood
 201 E. 40th St., 234-5196
www.russoseafood.com

The Market at Trustees' Garden

10 E. Broad St.
 Wednesday, 4-7 p.m.;
 Saturday, 9 a.m.-3 p.m.
www.trusteesmarket.com