

Homegrown Heroes

Two Savannah eateries are taking organic dining to a whole new level by tapping local farmers to help create the freshest dishes around.

We like to think things are better here in the Lowcountry. Boasting beaches, marshes, pine and maritime forests, Savannah and the Coastal Empire certainly plays host to a slew of scenery to appreciate. Still, it is hard to scrub that provincial habit of looking over your shoulder and wondering, telling and asking about what's going on in the bigger cities of Dixie. But just because the cities are larger doesn't mean you have to run off towards sparkling skylines to fix every craving—especially when the craving is of the epicurean sort. After all, what are provinces if not the breadbasket of the cities?

Detached from congested cities and sprawling suburbs, Savannah is instead conveniently close to farms and producing seasonal produce so fresh it can turn a simple salad into a dining delight. And thanks to the increasingly popular appeal of eating healthy food with known origin, these local farms and farmers are finally getting their day in the sun. It helps too that larger-than-life personalities are helping to proliferate the pros of organically and locally grown produce.

Farmer D is one green-thumbed Georgian making waves in the world of localized produce. As an Atlanta-based organic farmer with an unmatched passion for fresh food, Farmer D not only has his own garden center in Atlanta, a television show on the Mother Nature Network and a line of biodynamic compost sold through Whole Foods Market, but he also maintains a thriving farming consulting practice that has him providing step-by-step guidance to start-up organic farmers.

Farmer D makes agricultural advancement look easy, which may be one reason why two Savannah restaurants, Cha Bella

➤ **Good to be green:** Chef Matthew Roher of Cha Bella sits in the restaurant's 3-acre farm off of Tennessee Avenue



➤ **Funky fresh:** (below) Cha Bella presents a grilled, organic local harvest eggplant & oven warmed plum tomatoes with farm fresh sweet basil.



"By this summer we're expecting to grow 70-80% of the produce we use at the farm," Roher glows.



Ch of the day: Cha Bella's chef Bryant Loeffler has a hand in the freshest ingredients.

local 11 Ten, have cited him as an inspiring one-time assistant to bringing sea-to-table produce to their diners' plates. At other establishments, chefs are using locally sourced produce (and even locally sourced seafood) to create bold tastes and dishes that have locals coming back over and over.

★★★★★

Roher first saw Cha Bella as the place where both his out-on-the-town patrons and the home-cooking public could come to close the farm-to-table gap. The plan involved using as many local ingredients as possible in the kitchen of the restaurant and using the outdoor space as a weekly farmers market where local growers bent on sustainability and organic growing methods. The eatery-market concept was inspired by Athens, Georgia's favorite, Big City Bread Cafe, but its focus on farm fresh ingredients was modeled after Hampton Island Preserve, a private farm-to-table restaurant located off the Savannah coast. At the time Roher served as the executive chef on Hampton Island, Farmer D was hired to build Harvest Lake, an organic



> Farm family: Vince and Debbie Baker pose with their daughter on their organic farm.

community farm. Recently, with Harvest Lake secured as a productive operation, and Roher striking out on his own, Farmer D has helped to develop Cha Bella's own 3-acre farm off of Tennessee Avenue, thus shrinking the farm-to-table gap to a few city miles.

"By this summer, we're expecting to grow 70–80 percent of the produce we use at the restaurant," Roher glows. The idea is novel, if not a little out of order: Building a farm to provide for an already thriving restaurant. But the concept is exactly what turns the chef on as he knows this corner of the South is the ideal place for any number of agricultural and aquacultural activities. One of his latest fascina-



Farm For Yourself

"My primary business is empowering people to grow food, whether it's a home gardener, a school, a large scale farm, or residential community," says Daron "Farmer D" Joffe. In case you find yourself inspired to try out your own green thumb, Farmer D provided the following three tips for getting a homegrown vegetable garden started:

- 1. Test your soil.** You wouldn't build a house without surveying the land, so determine the condition of the soil so you can set yourself up for good growing. Also, consider creating a raised bed garden. "The soil in Georgia is pretty poor," explains D. "Raised beds give you a nice jump start," and keeps things easy.
- 2. Use lots of compost.** This stratagem is essential to biodynamic farming and developing composts is a big part of D's business. On a 400-acre farm just north of Savannah, Farmer D takes in 40,000 pounds of food residuals from Whole Foods Market grocery stores (previously landfill fodder) per week to make signature composts now available for sale.
- 3. Keep it organic.** To create the tastiest, healthiest fruits and vegetables while also keeping chemicals out of the soil and water supply, use "organic fertilizers, seeds and pest control," advises D.

For more information on Farmer D and his various projects, call 404.325.0128 or visit www.farmerd.com.