

*Veggie man Jay Maynard connects chefs with local, seasonal fare*

# Farm to Kitchen

BY BRY S STEPHENS

Photography by Shawn Weismiller

“**Y**ou’ll have to excuse my truck,” says produce broker Jay Maynard as I park my car on East Bay Street and climb into his. “It’s a dirty, beat-up old farm truck.” The outside of the truck is covered in dust from trips down dry dirt roads out at Thackeray Farms on Wadmalaw Island, and the inside is well worn. I’m spending the day with Maynard to see firsthand how the best quality produce from local and regional farms gets to Charleston chefs and their tables.

Maynard, who sells produce for Thackeray Farms on Wadmalaw Island and Blackbird Farms near Greenville, is an unusual kind of produce broker. He makes weekly visits to dozens of Charleston restaurants in person. He navigates their back doors and walk-in refrigerators, snagging a few minutes with chefs so he can tell them what he’s got for sale. Together they read over Maynard’s product list and talk about how to incorporate seasonal specialty produce into their dishes, and then place their orders.

It’s fast-paced business done the old-timey way. “I’m very anti-technology,” says Maynard, clutching handwritten lists of produce and orders from chefs. “I like my legal pad. To me, social networking is talking to customers in person and figuring out what they need. I brought a level of customer service to this in addition to beautiful products and get my hands on the most beautiful produce I can find. That’s something rare.”

Maynard works with Shawn Thackeray of Thackeray Farms and Billy Haynes of Blackbird Farms, both of whom grew up together on Wadmalaw Island. Maynard sells and delivers produce from both farms to local restaurants. He also retails their products at the Marion Square Farmers Market, Whole Foods in Mt. Pleasant, and Earth Fare in West Ashley. Maynard focuses on local products, but he’s able to get the best regionally, too, depending on local chefs’ needs and the season.

“We’re kind of like personal shoppers for chefs,” he says. “I’m also selling things from Columbia now that aren’t available here, but that chefs still need.” Crops like broccoli rabe, for example, come from Blackbird, which has cooler weather and higher elevation.

As I follow Maynard in and out of back doors in downtown kitchens, I’m constantly dodging cooks carrying plastic containers filled with all kinds of ingredients — mussels, chickens, carrots, celery — you name it. As we link up with chefs, I see how Maynard’s 20-year culinary career (he grew up in a restaurant family and managed Fulton Five for about 10 years) comes in handy. He knows his way around the kitchen and reads each chef a list of produce from Thackeray, Blackbird, and elsewhere.

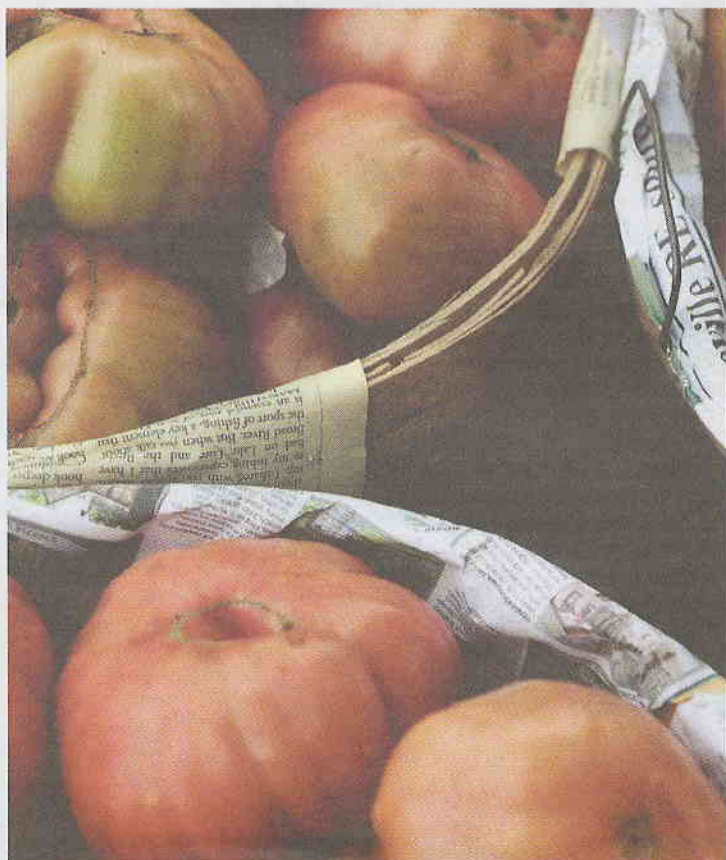
“Cucumbers are going out, cantaloupes are coming in. I’ve got beautiful cubanelles, and I’ve found the most incredible cherries from upstate.” The brainstorming begins — dishes are developed on the fly. It doesn’t seem too complicated given the quality of the produce. Simple is better, and the chefs place their orders quickly.

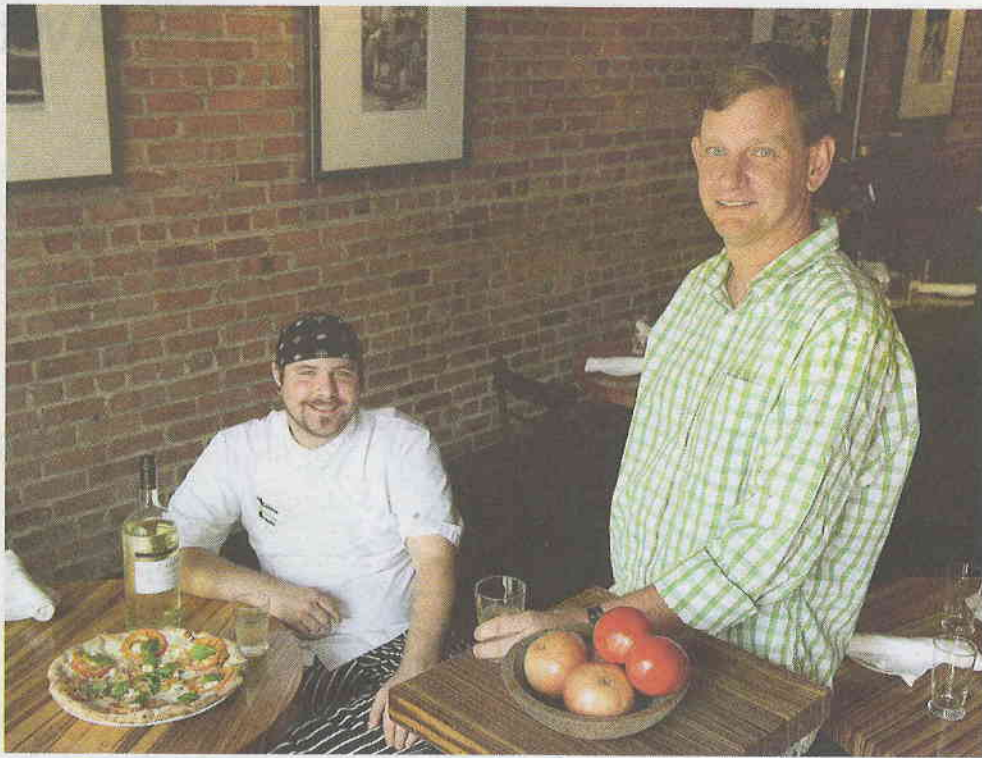
“Most of our stuff is going to be on special,” says Maynard. “That’s where having a culinary background really helps us and makes us unique. When I come through the door, I understand the challenges local chefs have.”

After making rounds with Maynard, I head to Monza for lunch, just as chefs Will Fincher and Josh Keeler (who’s preparing to leave Monza to open Two Boroughs Larder) are scribbling down specials with produce from Maynard and his partners.

“The flavor is always good,” says Fincher. “And the yield is always good since the products are so beautiful. It’s definitely inspiring for making specials. And the interaction as well. Jay comes in and we talk about the products — then we can make specials from that.”

I sit down at the bar and put my napkin





◀ Jay Maynard (right) works closely with chefs like Will Fincher (left) of Monza and Closed for Business and Matt Russell of EVO (far left), providing unique, fresh ingredients straight from the farm



in my lap as Keeler pushes a late spring special salad over the bar, beautifully arranged with perky baby red romaine and heirloom tomatoes from Thackeray, thin radish slices, orange segments, and a local basil vinaigrette. The flavors are punchy, crisp, and cooling on a ridiculously hot day.

Keeler hands me a great-looking pasta special: tagliatelle with eggplant and Thackeray's cubanelle peppers that have been roasted in the wood oven, tossed with freshly grated parmesan and olive oil. The cubanelles have a vibrancy that would have been lost had they not come from just down the road at Thackeray. I try another new special: linguine caponata with Thackeray vine ripe heirloom tomatoes, more roasted cubanelles, briny capers, and softened red onions. The flavors are alive.

Later, I head up to EVO in North Charleston, where they artfully transform local produce into daily special soups, salads, pizzas, and panini. Much of their produce is from Maynard, Thackeray, and Blackbird. "At EVO our philosophy is local produce whenever we can," says co-owner Ricky Hacker. "I like to know how it was grown, where it came from, and who was growing it."

The special salad is made with local butter beans (sourced from Maynard), okra (from Thackeray), sun gold tomatoes (ditto), corn, chives, and Split Creek Farm's feta, with a citrus vinaigrette. The combination of vegetables seems almost arbitrary except that it's perfectly seasonal. The veggies are cooked through but are still a bit crunchy, bursting with the water they recently took up from Wadmalaw

Island. They taste like steamy island air. The feta and citrus vinaigrette is a rich and puckery counterpoint to the earthiness of the produce.

The caprese salad, a regular summer special at EVO, has Thackeray's heirloom tomatoes, house mozzarella, torn basil, balsamic vinaigrette, and extra virgin olive oil. This is the first day it's on the menu. The tomatoes are room temperature and bursting sweet, plumped by the early heat. There's a special pizza made with roasted onion purée, Thackeray mixed peppers, crispy speck ham, Split Creek Farm chevre, mozzarella, and parmesan. "This is unbelievable," my dining companion says, shaking his head, as he goes in for another scoop of okra, corn, and feta.

Later in the week I have dinner with Maynard at Fulton Five. He tells me that just a year ago he was a walk-on picker out at Thackeray, and before that he was in the restaurant business, working in a few kitchens around town. Then he settled in to run Fulton Five for 10 years or so, working 80 hours a week.

"I was burnt out on the restaurant business, so I decided to go back to school for horticulture," he says. "When I started picking at Thackeray, another guy was selling. I realized there was a huge opportunity. One day the kid didn't show up, so I hit the bricks selling vegetables. A year ago we were visiting a handful of restaurants. Now we've bumped it up to about 50. Our business is easily three times what it was this time last year."

Pondering the surge in business, I

remember something Jay Keeler said back at Monza: "We really are lucky here. The ease of getting local products here is such a great thing. People come in just for the specials. There are people who come in all the time and order our special salad, special soup of the day, and special pizza. They only order from that board," he says, pointing to Monza's specials board.

I'm starting to realize that Maynard's focus on less common varieties of produce lends itself to that kind of daily creativity. "We get an idea of what other people are growing, and we steer away from that," Maynard says. "With more esoteric stuff, where chefs have flexibility, they can play with all kinds of things."

This list of dishes, specials, and regulars, featuring local and regional produce around town is too long to cover here. There's Chef Jacques Larson of Wild Olive's green bean salad with arugula, parmesan, and a sunny-side-up Sea Island egg, and a recent linguine with local shrimp, tomato, garlic, red chiles, and basil. The list goes on, and it's ripe for exploring.

Sitting with Maynard at Fulton Five, Chef Josh Cain serves us a summer salad made with two varieties of cucumbers and tomatoes with arugula, blackberries, almonds, and pecorino. It's dressed in a vinaigrette made with cantaloupe and strawberries. Everything on that beautifully balanced salad is from Maynard and partners, save the pecorino and almonds, which come from Italy.

"We're having a tough time with the almond trees this year," jokes Maynard, and I almost think he's serious. **C**