

CELEBRATING

Charlotte's Chef/Farmer Connections

BY MICHAEL J. SOLENDER // PHOTOS BY MIKE CARROLL

CHARLOTTE

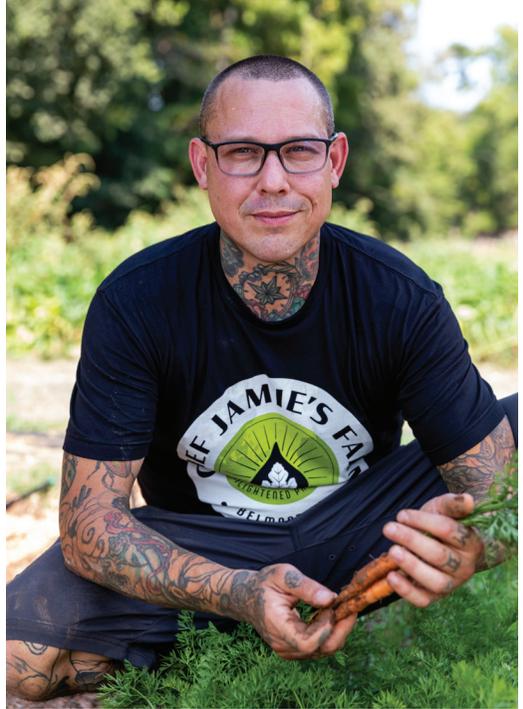
The Chef is the Farmer

JAMIE LYNCH & CHEF JAMIE'S FARM

Jamie Lynch's pure-bred Australian Cattle Dog, Harlem, is the first to greet visitors upon arrival to Chef Jamie's Farm near Belmont, N.C. Lynch owns and operates the farm with his girlfriend, Corey McGovern. The couple teamed up last spring to begin an ambitious new chapter for one of Charlotte's most recognized and heralded chefs. Lynch is chef/partner of 5Church Restaurants in Charlotte and Charleston, S.C. as well as Sophia's Lounge, located in the heart of Charlotte's Uptown. Many will recognize him from Bravo TV's "Top Chef" Season 14 and his recent return for the current Season 17 "Top Chef All-Stars."

Chef Jamie's Farm connects his ingredient sourcing with his culinary vision, enhancing the experience for his guests. "Having a from-the-ground-connection with your food provides a deeper respect for not just the food, but the work," says Lynch. "Working the farm brings an entirely different level of understanding as to what goes into the process. The amount of labor and study that goes into farming comes back into the kitchen in terms of the care and effort put into our preparation."

Only one season into the project, Lynch is long on vision for what the farm means for his restaurants. Newly planted Brown Turkish fig trees hold promise for future chutneys, charcuterie boards, and tarts. Indoor nurseries hold artichokes, various herbs and pea greens, borage (a taste



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like cucumber), and radish greens. All will soon adorn plates at 5Church Charlotte, only a 30-minute drive from here.

"When I bring in just harvested baskets from the farm," says Lynch, "My chefs love it and are inspired."

Lynch challenges his team to create dishes from whatever fresh harvest they receive. Guests, once exposed to the likes of Caraflex Cabbage, a cone-shaped cruciform with tender-crisp sweet leaves, love it and come to look for it at local farmers' markets. Other crops Lynch routinely grows include red mustard frill, kohlrabi, kale, green garlic, turnips, carrots, cauliflower, broccoli, and new this year—heirloom iceberg lettuce. "This is that ubiquitous supermarket staple—but with flavor," says Lynch.



Chef Educator & Grower

ALYSSA WILEN & COTO FAMILY FARMS

Alyssa Wilen takes extra care to extol the virtue of locally sourced food to her students who attend her popular cooking school, Chef Alyssa's Kitchen, in Charlotte's burgeoning LoSo neighborhood.

"We want people to cook better and healthier for themselves," says Wilen, who sees herself as much a food educator as a chef. "It shouldn't be just chefs who get beautiful fresh product to work with every day. I want our guests to know that wonderful produce is available to them as well. We have wonderful small farms around Charlotte with delicious year-round products."

Wilen is as close to culinary royalty in Charlotte as one gets. For more than 15 years, her star has risen over the Queen City. Early in her career she served as executive chef at Fern, Flavors from the Garden where she was recognized nationally by *Food & Wine* magazine. Her cooking has been twice featured at the James Beard House in New York City, and she's battled on the Food Network's "Beat Bobby Flay." In 2017, The Mecklenburg Times named her one of Charlotte's 50 Most Influential Women.

In 2013, Wilen launched her cooking school in South End's Atherton Market where Coto Family Farms was one of the local purveyors. Karin Coto and Alyssa quickly became friends and developed a great working relationship.

"I took Chef Alyssa's Thai and then Mediterranean class with friends," says Coto, whose small family farm in Vale, N.C. is about an hour northwest of Charlotte. "It's an honor to sell to them because I know how they do business. Alyssa is very particular about having the best quality products and



very conscientious about what she makes and how she teaches people to use ingredients."

Wilen says she does business regularly with more than half-a-dozen local farms to support her weekly classes, catering and more. She's collaborated for 7+ years with Coto, sourcing her farm weekly for kale, spinach, bok choy, greens, herbs, onions, carrots, tomatoes, eggplant, and even

coffee from Karin's husband Rene's family plantation in Honduras.

"My relationship with Coto has grown as we've grown our business," says Wilen. "She is a close-knit part of what we do. I'm in love with what they grow. It's so pristine and fresh."

Taste and nutritional value lead Wilen to consistently choose local—and emphasize this to her students. "I give them the seasonal, peak of flavor ingredients," says Wilen. "They are going to work with beautiful super fresh products. I teach people how to prep their food for maximum flavor and nutritional value. There is no reason not to have great food. We're not just buying from farmers for ourselves." "... We want to share these relationships with our customers."



Classical Chef, Urban Farmer

PAUL VERICA & SMALL CITY FARMS

Paul Verica laughed out loud when asked if he ever directs his good friend and former kitchen colleague, Kim Shaw what to plant at Small City Farms, the urban farm she runs with her husband Rohan Gibbs.

“You’d have to know Kim to understand why I’m laughing,” said Verica, indicating Shaw always knows best when it comes to determining what grows best on her farm in northwest Charlotte, less than 20 minutes from his Elizabeth restaurant, The Stanley. “I buy every single thing she produces. I let her do what she does, then we figure it out.”

Verica, a James Beard Award semifinalist, is well known in Charlotte as a classically trained chef who coaxes the best from the highest quality local ingredients. A quarter century ago, Verica trained under two Michelin Three-Star Chefs, Alain Passard of Paris’s L’Arpège (the King of vegetables, according to Verica) and the late Bernard Loiseau of La Cote d’Or. “These were restaurants that got twice daily vegetable delivery,” said Verica, exalting the freshness of what he had to work with. “Oh, my goodness, the taste was incredible. That’s why we let our farmers drive our menu. We look at everything they have weekly and only then plan our menu.”

Verica met Shaw when the two first worked together at The Club at Longview in Waxhaw, about 15 years ago. “I was the catering director,” said Shaw. “Paul was



the executive chef and director of food and beverage. We planted a good-sized kitchen garden the following year, and after I left and started Small City Farms, Paul was my first customer.”

In addition to the small fruit orchard, Small City Farms seasonally grows kale, collards, beets, carrots, tatsoi, cardoons, shiso, muscadine, edible and cut flowers, and much more. The Stanley also sources eggs from them to use in desserts, pastries, and pastas.

Verica noted that everything his team does from a cooking perspective starts with the seasons. “I wish people understood we can’t have asparagus, strawberries, and potatoes year-round,” said Verica, who noted Small City Farms will also supply his new Italian restaurant in NoDa, Orto. “We’re trying to live in rhythm with our region and the products produced in our region, showcase and present them as artistically as we can.”

For both Verica and Shaw, it’s all about relationships. “This isn’t about buying commodities at a computer. It’s about sourcing locally and supporting other local businesses. These relationships are very special. We’re lucky to have people like this do what they do.”



Charlotte- Area Farmers' Markets

MANY DINERS, upon initial exposure to new-to-them produce when dining out at one of Charlotte's farm-to-table restaurants, look to enjoy the region's finest on their own kitchen table. Our region's rapidly growing small farm owners are thrilled to accommodate. Look for fresh produce all year-round at these favored Farmers' Markets:

Charlotte Regional Farmers' Market

The largest and most visited market in the metro-area, this market is operated by the N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. Dozens of local farmers display their wares here weekly along with freshly baked goods, jams, jellies, dairy, meat, and crafts.
1801 Yorkmont Road, Charlotte

Kings Drive Farmers' Market/ Simpson's Produce

Family owned and operated since 1941, this compact and mostly covered market buzzes with energy and the region's finest berries, fruit, and seasonal veggies all year long. A great stop in the fall for pumpkins, squash, Thanksgiving accompaniments, and Christmas Trees and wreaths for the holidays.
938 S. Kings Drive, Charlotte

Matthews Community Farmers' Market

The first "producer only" farmers market in the region; founded by one of Charlotte's longest serving farmers, Sammy Koenigsberg of New Town Farms. It's not uncommon to experience live music and cooking demos alongside the freshest produce.
188 N. Trade Street, Matthews

Mint Hill Farmers' Market

This market occupies the historic Carl J. McEwen Historical Village, the former site of a long-ago favored country doctor and one-room schoolhouse.
7601 Matthews Mint Hill Road, Mint Hill

Huntersville Growers' Market

A terrific spring/summer/fall market with local growers supplying the freshest harvest.
201 Huntersville-Concord Road, Huntersville



A close-up photograph of various leafy greens, including bright green leaves and darker, reddish-purple leaves, filling the frame. The lighting is soft, highlighting the textures and veins of the leaves.

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