

# CLOSING THE GAP

BY ALLSTON MCCRADY

When Urbie West was away at college in 1994, a sad thing happened. His family's farm near the Whale Branch River in Beaufort County, South Carolina, shut down after one hundred years of operation. Though the farm had grown to be the biggest truck farm on the East Coast, growing twenty-five different varieties of squash, zucchini, cucumbers, tomatoes, cabbage, broccoli, and other produce under the "Rest Park" brand, West's elders made the painful decision to close: farming was no longer economically viable. The land sat idle over the next decade. Much of it was sold off.

This tale is far too familiar, and although in West's case it has a happy ending (we'll get to that), more often than not rural farmland loses out to wide-scale development, a problem that plagues ecologists, conservationists, and essentially anyone who wants to eat quality, fresh, local food. Of the \$11 billion that South Carolinians spend on food each year, less than 10 percent of that is grown locally, and much of it comes from overseas, a bitter irony given the state's strong agrarian roots. Five years ago in Charleston, South Carolina, the Coastal Conservation League (CCL) decided to take action. Lisa Turansky, CCL's director of sustainable agriculture, knew that the rural areas the league sought to protect relied on agriculture as their economic engine. What could the league do to help? After all, with the thriving locavore movement, and Charleston's booming restaurant scene, there was huge demand for locally grown produce. Thus, the inspiration for South Carolina's first so-called food hub: GrowFood Carolina.

PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER SHANE



By Delivering Farmers Produce  
Directly to Retailers and Restaurants,  
GrowFood Carolina Helps Revitalize  
South Carolina's Agricultural Community

GROWFOOD CAROLINA'S NATE  
TOTH MAKES ONE OF HIS MANY  
DAILY DELIVERIES. THIS ONE TO  
CHEF CHRIS "TED" JACKSON AT THE  
WESTENDORFF IN CHARLESTON, SC



# “THE SEEDS FOR GROWFOOD CAROLINA

were planted around a conference table on East Bay Street,” says Turansky, referring to the bustling thoroughfare in downtown Charleston, “with a farmer, a philanthropist, a former restaurateur, and conservationists, all having witnessed years of the devastating ecological and economic effects resulting from farmland conversion to sprawling suburban neighborhoods. We all agreed that the next logical step in the conservation movement was an obligation to provide infrastructure that would keep farmers farming.”

GrowFood Carolina, a nonprofit food marketing and distribution center now celebrating its fourth anniversary, is achieving just that. Farmers who used to spend hours manning roadside stands or farmers market booths can now concentrate on the growing and leave the task of distribution to GrowFood. No crop is too small because GrowFood aggregates smaller harvests to meet larger orders while always maintaining single source identification. Farmers who used to rely on local CSA programs (Community Supported Agriculture) or small local markets can now tap into GrowFood’s well-established network of participating chefs, supermarkets, and institutions. GrowFood works closely with growers before crops are even planted to avoid a glut of any single crop and to align supply with demand. GrowFood then returns 80 percent of its profits to the farmers. After all, it’s all about saving farms. The growth is tremendous. GrowFood hit a milestone last fall when they reached the \$1 million dollar mark paid to growers since they opened their doors.

On Morrison Drive in Charleston, the door to GrowFood’s warehouse opens early. When operations manager Benton Montgomery arrives at seven a.m., growers are sometimes waiting for him, eager to unload their perishable produce for immediate distribution. Produce such as organic kiwis from River Run Farms, crisp asparagus

from Bates Farm, giant Napa cabbages from Wabi Sabi Farm, and Asian pears from Maple Ridge. Depending on the season, the warehouse fills with heady aromas of strawberries, fresh peanuts, ripe melons, or sweet muscadines.

Montgomery knows what to expect before its arrival because GrowFood works with producers from planning to seed to harvest. In this age of smartphones, if farmers have questions on quality, size, or the best way to pack something, they can take a photo of their crop and text it

to GrowFood, where it quickly goes out to the team, launching discussions. The sales team can also retext the pictures out to chefs, getting them excited about incoming produce.

GrowFood’s very first order came by text. It was October of 2011, just after GrowFood manager Sara Clow had sent the initial produce list to chefs, wondering if they would bite. GrowFood started with only five farmers making deliveries, so initial pickings were slim. “I was so nervous,” says Clow, “I wasn’t sleeping. Then all



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:**  
NATE TOTH UPDATES THE SEASONAL PRODUCE BOARD; TOTH PREPARES FOR THE DAY’S DELIVERIES; SALES & MARKETING TEAM, JESSICA DIAZ AND ALISON PIERCE, SOLICIT ORDERS FROM CHEFS AND FROM RETAIL STORES RESPECTIVELY

**OPPOSITE:** SHELDON RESIDENT WOODY COLLINS, ONE OF SOUTH CAROLINA’S FIRST CERTIFIED WILD MUSHROOM EXPERTS, DELIVERS FRESHLY HARVESTED CHANTERELLES.





**“I got this text at around two a.m. It was Travis Grimes from Husk. I can’t remember what he ordered specifically, but I was literally like...” [throws her fists in the air triumphantly], “YES! IT’S GONNA WORK!” —Sara Clow**

good. But after two seasons, the CSA model inexplicably tanked. Clow visited his operation and explained how GrowFood aimed to relieve farmers of the time-consuming burden of marketing and distributing their product.

West now farms roughly forty acres of the family’s original one thousand-acre farm and delivers to GrowFood twice a week. He still maintains a CSA under the Pinckney Produce brand, but he trusts GrowFood to get his product into the commercial market.

“There’s a lot of guesswork involved in farming—Mother Nature, potential obstacles, predation,” says West as he eyes a coyote checking out his young tomato crop. “My day typically starts at four a.m. when we’re harvesting. I don’t have time to keep up with what the restaurants are doing or to negotiate with supermarkets. GrowFood handles all that.”

For chefs, the feeling is mutual.

Executive Chef Christopher “Ted” Jackson of the newly opened The Westendorff in Charleston features GrowFood’s burgundy and green okra and shishito peppers in his maque choux. He also has a 100 percent GrowFood salad on his late-summer menu, with smoked South Carolina peaches, a peach gastrique, local tomatoes, and a delicate goat cheese sourced from the Upstate’s Fishing Creek Creamery, a Grade A farmstead cheese producer (meaning that they raise the goats, milk the goats, and make the cheese all on their farm).

Jackson has run restaurants from New York to San Francisco. “Back in the day,” he says, “I would have to pick up the phone and call a dozen

people every day—my watercress farmer, my heirloom potato guy, my tomato guy. There are only so many hours in a day. When I arrived in Charleston, I knew I wanted to source local. I’ve always been a member of Slow Food. So I asked around and was told to work with GrowFood.”

Will Fincher, chef de cuisine at The Obstinate Daughter on Sullivan’s Island, pickles GrowFood’s green garlic to add to his brick-oven pizzas, sprinkles local Bulls Bay sea salts from just up the coast onto his butterbean purée flatbread, and uses GrowFood-sourced berries in his house-made gelato.

“Chefs spend a lot of time sourcing

ingredients and finding the best produce,” says Fincher, “but GrowFood makes it easier because they do all the work for you. I can just pull up the daily list and text my order without having to worry about what that produce will look like when it gets here.”

In four years, GrowFood has grown from five to over seventy-five farmers. Chef Grimes, who placed that momentous first order from Husk, remembers when the initial 800-square-foot cooler felt cavernous with only a few boxes in it. Now there are three such coolers, comfortably filled at any given time with produce on a brief pause before delivery to area restaurants,

institutions, and supermarkets such as Harris Teeter, Whole Foods, and Earth Fare, all of whom flag their GrowFood product with a clever “Find the Fork” label, often including information about the people who grew it. A recent display at Whole Foods showcased the organic blueberry growers from Black Pearl Farms in Branchville. No doubt those blueberries were snatched up quickly by consumers, but thanks to GrowFood’s workhorse freezer, chefs can now get them year-round.

Open the door to GrowFood’s freezer and the delicious aroma of summer blueberries hits your nose through swirling, crystallized vapors. Since the freezer was installed, in May of 2014, GrowFood has been storing items such as butterbeans, berries, and fruits that will end up in BeardCat’s gelatos, King of Pops artisanal popsicles, and seasonal beers at local breweries such as Frothy Beard’s Watermelon Wheat and Palmetto’s Blueberry Kush.

“One of our goals,” says Clow, “is to have the growers get full utilization of the field. Food waste is a huge issue in this country. It’s one of the reasons why our food is so expensive. Depending on the crop, the growers may leave thirty to fifty percent actually in the field. There are opportunities to use what’s left in the field, for multiple things.” Crops that aren’t picture-perfect (a

perfection we’ve all come to expect) are still perfectly tasty in the right medium: baked into a cobbler, fermented in a beer, puréed into gelato, infused in a popsicle, or used to flavor craft beverages. GrowFood works closely with growers to find customers for a so-called “number two” (meaning second-tier) harvest that would otherwise have gone to waste. Cannonborough Beverage Company, King of Pops, and many of Charleston’s breweries are loyal GrowFood customers.

In December 2014, Palmetto Brewery sourced sixty pounds of persimmons through GrowFood for use in its first farmhouse ale or first saison. The golden Hachiya persimmons came from Brickyard Point Farms, one of GrowFood’s original participating farms. Brickyard Point, along with countless other farms boosted by GrowFood’s services, is a farm lucky to exist.

“We never imagined ourselves as farmers,” says Jim Rathbun, who runs Brickyard Point with his wife, Nancy, on the banks of the Coosaw River near Beaufort. “My father bought the land in 1968 and grew thirty acres of pecans, pears, and persimmons. After he died in 1993, my mother lived alone there. Meanwhile, I was busy working with the Marine Corps and my wife worked with the Red Cross. I remember in my father’s last years he worried about what was going to happen to his farm.”

When Rathbun’s mother fell and broke her hip in 2006, Jim and Nancy retired, packed up, and moved to the farm to restore the neglected groves of trees, some of them plantation pecans planted in the late 1800s. The newfound farmers chose to process the pecans right on the farm, surrounded by photos of the late Colonel Rathbun. Selling the pecans was easy. “When I’m delivering pecans,” says Rathbun, “I feel like the Pied Piper. Pomegranates are easy, too. But persimmons are harder. I didn’t know how to market them.”

Luckily, Lisa Turansky of the Coastal Conservation League approached Rathbun at the Port Royal Farmers Market, pitched him on GrowFood’s vision, and the rest is history. Now his pecans grace the pie at The Glass Onion, his Meyer lemons have been transformed to limoncello for the Charleston BB&T Wine + Food Festival, and his persimmons will once again star in a repeat performance as Palmetto Brewing’s Colonel Rathbun’s Farmhouse Ale, an homage to Rathbun’s late father, whose spirit can now rest easy knowing that his farm not only survived, but thrives.



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Clow grew the fledgling nonprofit from the warehouse floor up. In 2011, she was the sole full-time staff member. Her varied background, both as a hedge fund analyst and later as the domestic commodity manager for a worldwide organic tree fruit marketer, together with

her infectious energy, made her perfectly suited for the job. Clow reached out to initial farmers directly.

Farmers such as the aforementioned Urbie West. When the century-old family farm folded, West had tried to move on. He worked for the state, then started a landscaping company, but farming was in his blood and he wanted to return to his passion. So six years ago, West and his son Ashby started farming in Bamberg, selling their produce through a CSA in Beaufort. They expanded to purchase the established brand Pinckney’s Produce, increasing their CSA members overnight from 100 to 800, then returned to the dormant family farmland in Beaufort to operate there. Business was

**OPPOSITE:** NATE TOTH MAKES THE DAILY DELIVERY ROUNDS AND CHEF JACKSON AT THE WESTENDORFF INSPECTS SHISHITO PEPPERS DESTINED FOR A STARRING ROLE IN BRUNCH’S CORNED BEEF HASH AND DINNER’S COLORFUL MAQUE CHOUX