

A Taste Revolution

Bert Gill pulls together the finest local ingredients for big taste in Gainesville. By **Edwin Marty**

You hardly realize you're in the midst of a revolution as you put fork to plate at one of Bert Gill's three restaurants. For instance, at one of his eateries, Mildred's Big City Food, you're at the edge of a nondescript strip mall near downtown Gainesville where, yes, the tomatoes taste like real tomatoes. The flavors please you as much as the styling of the food itself.

But revolution? It starts with Bert's aim to buy and serve locally produced ingredients. "I just try to find the freshest ingredients for my food and build relationships with the producers," says the executive chef. His valuable connections range from a half-dozen local organic farmers to the University of Florida's meat-processing school. "During the last eight years, I've tried to find farmers, fishermen, and ranchers who share my appreciation of quality," he adds.

Opportunity Realized Bert, who also owns the New Deal Cafe (next door to Mildred's) and Ti Amo! downtown, was born in Central Florida, where he lived until he was 7. His family then moved to a farm in Missouri for three years before returning to Florida. Bert met his wife, Tara, while working at a Gainesville restaurant. When she graduated from the University of Florida, they married and moved to Vermont, where Bert attended an accelerated program at the New England Culinary Institute. After a brief stint in Boston, the couple returned to The Sunshine State. "I felt, and still do, that there's great opportunity for a restaurateur in

Gainesville. It's also a great place to raise a family," says the father of three young children. "I was thrilled to get back."

Well, sort of. When Bert started putting the restaurant together, he couldn't find the caliber of ingredients he easily obtained working in Boston. "I knew there were great products out there," he says. "I just wasn't getting them through the distributors."

So the chef left the kitchen and hit the streets, literally, meeting farmers, who make up a large part of the Gainesville community. "After getting to know these growers and seeing how hard they work, I wanted to do whatever I could do to support them," says Bert, who now purchases about 70% of his produce, meat, and seafood from local purveyors. "I realized I could get high-quality, fresh produce right here." And that, says Bert, translates into better-tasting food on his customers' plates.

Meet the Producers Bert began his search for local producers at the Alachua County Farmers' Market, where he met farmer Rose Koenig. "Bert and I both want to see the whole community embrace the concept of buying local," says Rose. "And we both see food as the first step to getting consumers interested."

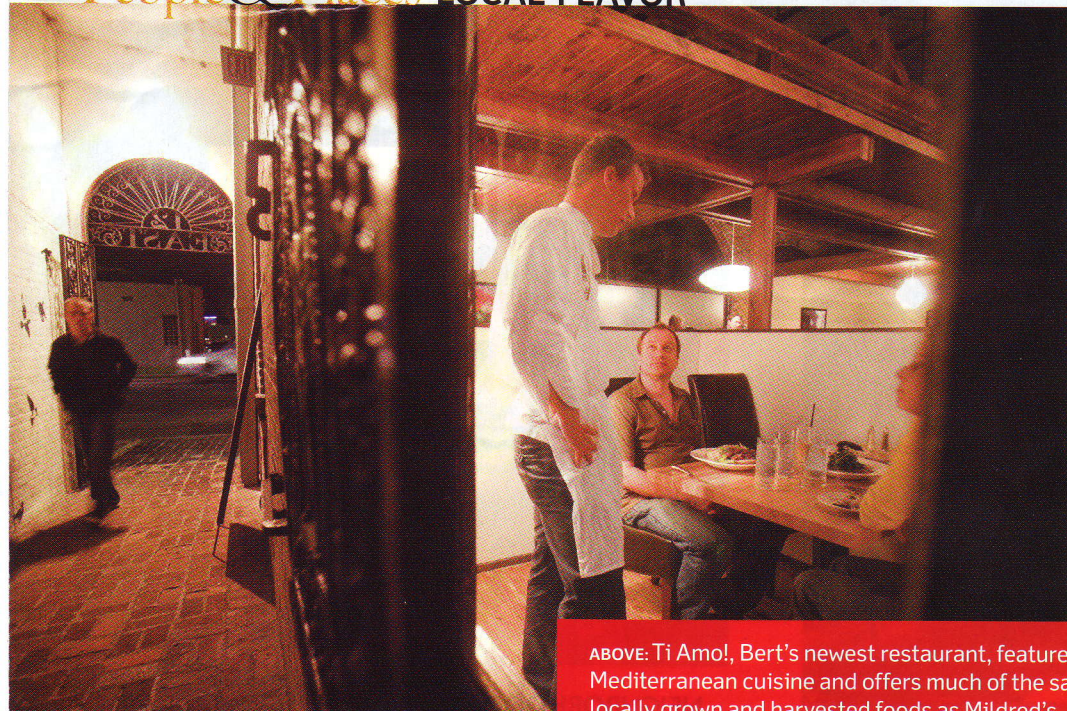
Bert buys fresh organic vegetables from Rose. **turn to page 10**

LEFT: Charley Andrews (right) provides Bert Gill with herbs and vegetables from his Hammock Hollow Herb Farm. During the off-season, Charley is a volunteer consultant for programs that teach sustainable farming techniques to people all around the world. **BELOW:** At his restaurants, chef Bert Gill strives to use what local producers grow and harvest.



TV Dinner

Catch Bert on *North Central Florida Flavor*, the television show he cohosts on WCJB TV 20. Now in its fifth year, the show airs at 5:30 p.m. every Friday. For more information and to try some of Bert's recipes, visit www.wcjb.com.



ABOVE: *Ti Amò!*, Bert's newest restaurant, features Mediterranean cuisine and offers much of the same locally grown and harvested foods as Mildred's and New Deal Cafe. RIGHT: Knowing we also taste with our eyes, Bert adds visual flair to every dish to make it as good-looking as it is flavorful. LEFT: Bert met many local suppliers at the Alachua County Farmers' Market, including organic farmer Rose Koenig, who grows a variety of vegetables.



Think Local

Here's where to turn to learn more about local gardeners, farmers, and organic food.

- **USDA National Organic Program:** a good guide to understanding organic produce; www.ams.usda.gov/nop
- **Slow Food USA:** has information about an international movement away from fast food and toward environmental sustainability and social justice; www.slowfoodusa.org
- **Local Harvest:** an organization pointing consumers to sources for locally produced goods; www.localharvest.org

"I'm lucky to be surrounded by business-oriented producers," he says. "They deliver what they say they're going to."

Other local suppliers include Joe Durando of Possum Hollow Farm, who supplies Bert with organic vegetables and uses waste from Bert's restaurants to create compost. "It's great to see the circle from the farm to the plate and back to the farm," says Bert.

Spreading the Word But working with all these different growers means that Bert can't make just one phone call. It requires a lot of extra work, but it's worth it. The business at Mildred's alone has grown more than 300% since it opened eight years ago.

Bert also works to spread the good news about the benefits of local produce and other edibles. He and Rose developed a marketing campaign promoting the ideas to area restaurants, and Bert worked with the University of Florida to increase the amount of locally grown produce it purchases. Bert also teaches these practices to his staff; to the public on a television show he cohosts; and to the Eastside Culinary Team, a program he coaches at Gainesville's Eastside High School.

Ask Bert what kind of food he serves at Mildred's and his answer is simple: "I cook what's fresh, and that means what's locally fresh. I guess that makes it local Southern food," he adds with a smile. ●

Mildred's Big City Food and New Deal Cafe: 3445 West University Avenue; www.mildredsbigcityfood.com or (352) 371-1711. **Ti Amò!:** 12 Southeast Second Avenue; www.tiamogainesville.com or (352) 378-6307.

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RESTAURATEUR