

Cooking Light

JUNE 2011

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A Bit of Hot Chef Action Down in South Carolina

Why the (mis)adventures of a cook-turned-farmer matter.



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WHEN I FIRST MET South Carolina Chef Shaun Garcia and learned that he was planning to plant several acres of fallow land to supply vegetables to the busy restaurant where he worked, I was enthusiastic, but not exactly for the reason Garcia was enthusiastic. I liked the scheme because I thought it would make an interesting story, whether the heirloom tomatoes groaned on the vine or withered thereupon. I figured there might be a fair amount of withering, because Garcia told me he was a total newbie farmer; had his mind's eye on something much more ambitious than a mere garden; and planned to use volunteer kitchen staff to handle what I assumed would be enough work to

terrify an ox. I immediately assigned Senior Food Editor Julianna Grimes the job of following the progress of what became known as Soby's Farm.

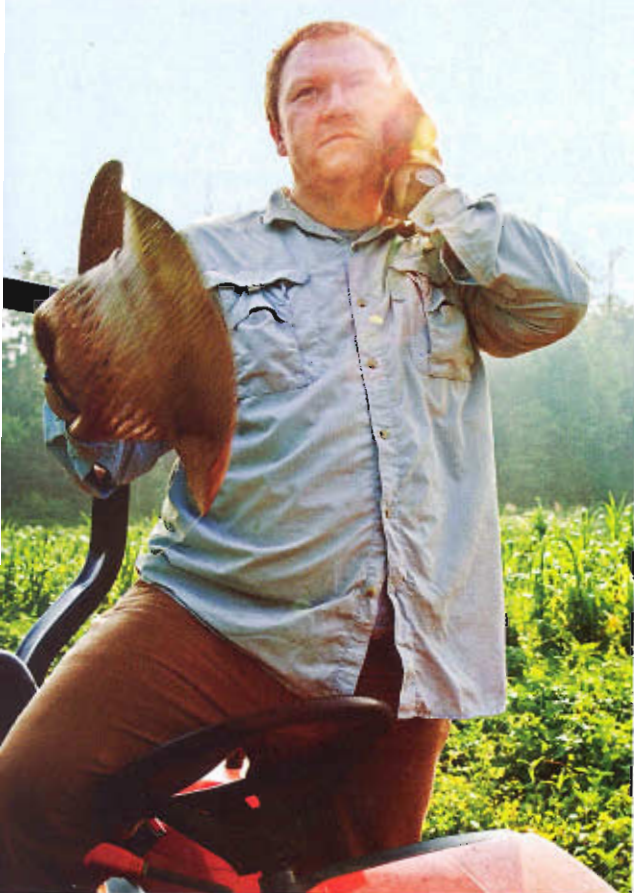
The farm is in a place called Traveler's Rest, but, of course, it turned out that there would be no rest for chef-farmer Garcia in the spring and summer of 2010. As Grimes' account on page 148 reveals, the unusually punishing heat last year; the demands of a hectic restaurant kitchen; and a litany of goofs, born of inexperience, all yielded a somewhat uneven crop.

What's your take on the farm-to-table idea? E-mail me at Scott_Mowbray@timeinc.com.

THE PLAN HAD THE WHIFF OF NOBILITY AND NAÏVETÉ FOUND IN SO MANY PIONEER TALES.

In the end, he got about halfway to the finish line. But you have to respect the effort. Few restaurants of any ambition fail to sing the farm-to-table song these days; often that means a chef calls in a few small-scale suppliers and lists their produce on menus with reverential gravitas. I've found that a few restaurants can be a bit slippery about this—listing major poultry operations as if they were small, local, family efforts. But here was a guy putting his own muscles behind the dream, along with the modest horsepower of a small tractor named Lucille. The whole idea had the pleasing whiff of nobility infused with naïveté that informs so many American tales of the pioneer. You could regard the experiment as folly—like trying to build a barn on a whim. I prefer the more sunny view: that farm-to-table, at its heart, is not a joke; that it restores the values and the flavors of careful agriculture to our plates; and that a chef who puts his back into such work deserves our thanks—even though most sensible cooks would rather sweat in a 90-degree kitchen than on a 100-degree South Carolina field.

—Scott Mowbray



Chef, Broiling

One gorgeous day in April of last year, **Shaun Garcia** spent two hours sloshing around knee-deep in mud and muck, wrestling with an irrigation pump in the Saluda River in rural South Carolina.

Garcia—a self-taught chef and head toque at Soby's, a popular restaurant in Greenville—knows his pike from his perch, but this was his first go-round trying to irrigate a freshly planted 7-acre farm. In fact, it was Garcia's first try at farming anything more than a small backyard plot. And the irrigation pump was turning out to be a bit trickier than he had anticipated: The hose kept collapsing flat on itself every time he tried to suck water from the river to water his fragile young crops.

Story by **Julianna Grimes**
Photography by **Peter Frank Edwards**





SHAUN GARCIA and his tractor, Lucille. (At left, clockwise from top) Battling heat; hand-sowing pumpkin seeds; tomatoes ripening on the vine.



GARCIA (fifth from left) directs volunteers during the early spring tomato planting. Opposite page: Soby's employee and volunteer Kelly Brinson, and a small seedling ready for planting.

Frustrated, Garcia finally whipped out his cell phone and called his father-in-law, Bob Smart, who worked in a commercial nursery for more than 30 years. Garcia learned the source of the problem: wrong hose. He needed something rigid, like PVC pipe. Again, he set out to the nearest hardware store, a 45-minute round-trip—fourth one that day.

Success: The chef could now water his land. And with that, Garcia became chef/farmer. It was a small but important triumph, the symbolic start of the agricultural phase of Garcia's dream. This was a dream that, in Garcia's view, would see a regular brigade of happy restaurant workers showing their farm-to-table solidarity in the fields alongside him, as organic vegetables burst forth for Soby's tables. He did not foresee that, a few months down the road, he'd find himself almost alone in the pounding Southern sun, the workers gone, the crops faltering. But isn't this story just a new variation on the old tales of the pioneer American farmer?

BEFORE HE STARTED his own farm, Garcia, like many chefs across the state, had joined the Certified South Carolina Fresh on the Menu campaign in 2008, pledging that 25% of his ingredients would be sourced from within the state. That's a pretty impressive commitment, especially when you consider that few farm-to-table restaurants in the country, for all the listing of bucolic-sounding farm names on their menus, set a quantifiable goal.

South Carolina, a largely agricultural state where the capital city of Columbia is home to the Okra Strut (a two-day festival celebrating the gooey green pod), has a food scene that's more progressive than an East or West Coaster might think. The Fresh on the Menu program is just one example. Throughout the state, intensely regional foods are in demand and plants are being preserved through seed-saving. Charleston is home to acclaimed Chef Sean Brock of McCrady's and Husk. Brock, the 2010 James Beard Award win-



ner for Best Chef in the Southeast, farms a 1½-acre plot in McClellanville, where he and his staff grow heirloom veggies.

Of course, the idea of a chef's garden—often attached to cottagey restaurants in Europe or the U.S.—isn't new, nor is the idea of the chef/farmer. Back in 2004, Dan Barber made a big splash when he opened Blue Hill at Stone Barns outside New York City, and others followed. "It's so beautiful," Garcia says reverently of Blue Hill. "I would actually eat their dirt."

Blue Hill is a fine-dining establishment—with just 75 seats in the main dining room—whose New York prices support a chef, livestock manager, farm manager, and staff. By stark contrast, Soby's is a busy mid-price restaurant with a kitchen staff that fluctuates between 9 and 12 people, including part-timers and dishwashers. "In restaurant lingo, we're a kitchen that's cranking," Garcia says. "We need those 450 nights, those 500 nights" (referring to the number of guests served). A glance at the restaurants' menus illustrate the

differences. Soby's dinner menu changes quarterly and offers favorites like Fried Green Tomatoes served with pimiento cheese fondue (\$8), or Soby's Meatloaf with Maple Creole Mustard Glaze (\$19). Meanwhile, the menu at Blue Hill just lists the vegetables and meats in season on the farm on any given day. The eight-course Farmer's Feast is \$148, which might make a few farmers wonder if they're on the wrong side of the equation.

But Garcia's experiment is perhaps more interesting: not boutique, not premium, but middle-of-the-road. If the farm-to-table idea is going to take root beyond the pampered big cities, it's chefs like Garcia who will take it there.

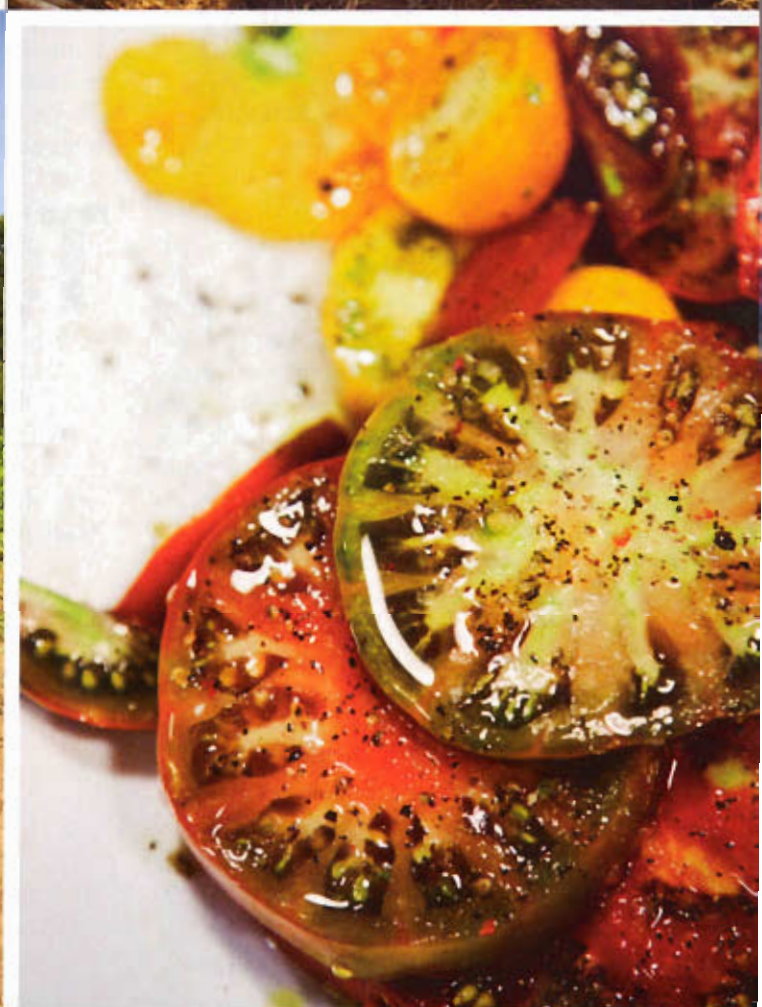
Garcia is not a trendy guy. The *Hell's Kitchen* side of the chef business may be known for foul-mouthed, hot-headed, egocentric personalities, but Garcia reveals himself over time to be humble, yet a big thinker. He is interested in the history of food, the history of each ingredient and dish, and producing honest but fresh interpretations of foods that are rooted in Southern culture—she-crab soup and crab cakes and his Applewood-Smoked Bacon-Wrapped Pork Tenderloin. For special occasions, he likes to slow-smoke red wattle pork shoulder from a heritage breed of pig.

He practically grew up in his grandmother's family-owned greasy spoon restaurant in North Spartanburg, helping her cook modest regional comfort foods like fried chicken. She and her down-home cooking are never far from Garcia's mind.

THIS IS A CHEF with one foot planted in the past. But by 2009, he was itching to plant food in the dirt, and mentioned to a local magazine reporter that he wanted to farm vegetables for Soby's. Bill Garren, a horticulturist and former director of horticulture at the Biltmore, saw the article. Garren and his wife, Pat, own close to 200 acres of land about 15 minutes outside of Greenville in Traveler's Rest, so he offered Garcia the use of a 7-acre plot, which at the time stood vacant and

A few months down the road, he'd find himself almost alone in the pounding Southern sun, the workers gone, the crops faltering.





overgrown. Garren had just two requests: He wanted Garcia to leave the land as healthy as he found it. And this term was irresistible: “Pay me with sweet fresh corn,” nothing more, Garren said. Suddenly Garcia had an idea and land, cheap.

SOBY'S FARM BEGAN as a group effort. In January of 2010, the restaurant owners, Carl Sobocinski and David Williams, bought an orange Kabota tractor, which Garcia named Lucille. They bought thousands of seeds for Mortgage Lifter, Japanese Black Trifele, and 20 other varieties of heirloom tomatoes; Clemson Spineless okra; corn; yellow squash; zucchini; butterbeans; peppers; Sea Island Red Peas; pink-eyed peas; and crowder peas from three different sources: Seed Savers Exchange, Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds, and Southern Exposure Seed Exchange. Garcia hired Susan Hart, a local farm consultant, to plant the seeds and greenhouse the plants until after Easter, when the threat of frost was minimal. Although most lacked farm knowledge and experience, willing volunteers, mostly from Soby's staff, helped clear the land and plant Garcia's seedling plants. Garcia used Lucille to till the rich, dark soil in April, and the planting was staggered from April through May. They planted upwards of 6,000 plants and seeds.

This was the period that, in retrospect, was like the first blush of romance. Then began the back-breaking, monotonous maintenance mode. As temperatures climbed to brutal heights—according to the National Weather Service, 2010 was the hottest summer on record for Greenville, with temperatures regularly in the 90s, sometimes reaching 100°—the number of volunteers dwindled. Garcia soon realized that his original notion—that kitchen staffers could work four days in the restaurant and one day on the farm—was unrealistic. There was no budget to make up the 20% labor shortage back at the restaurant, and no money to pay for a sixth day of work at the farm. And without financial incentive, momentum at the farm fell: “Stay in the kitchen if you can't stand the heat of the farm” became the de facto mantra.

And so farmer Garcia and his band of merry helpers often dwindled to farmer Garcia, solo act. As the plants took root, he watered by manually moving pipe and hoses from row to row, not exactly a one-man job. Garcia was committed to organic farming practices, which made him initially thankful for the morning glories that started to spring up in the field. He considered them

nature's support system. He had planted about 1,300 tomato plants in all and didn't have a budget for cages or stakes to support the plants. Wasn't it a blessing, then, that the morning glories wrapped around the plants and held them upright? He allowed the weeds their initially innocent role.

One thousand, three hundred tomato plants? “My philosophy is always plant more than you need,” he allows. He felt this would compensate for natural attrition in an admittedly scrappy operation. He was more optimist than agronomist: “I treat the farm like I treat my kids. You give them a good start and then let them find their way.” In other words, once the plants were established, he relied almost completely on nature (and afternoon rain showers) to nurture his babies. This, of course, failed to acknowledge the degree to which agriculture and nature are in conflict, fighting for the same nutrients and sunlight. You probably won't find many veteran organic growers who endorse this much laissez-faire in farming. In truth, it's conventional farming that requires less work, with its chemical weaponry.

To be fair, Garcia's first priority had to remain the restaurant, and summer is the time of year everyone on staff wants to take vacation, making it necessary for him to fill in on the line sometimes, beyond his usual 50-plus hours of work every week. He tried to get out to the farm at least twice a week, sometimes before a shift at the restaurant, and sometimes making the two-hour round-trip from home on his day off—this by a family man with a wife and two young children.

In June the squeeze really came, and he missed a week at the farm. Chaos greeted him upon his return: In just seven days, the land had become overgrown. “I couldn't catch up. I couldn't keep up. And then it gets daunting.” The morning glories started to drag the corn and tomato plants down. He realized that if he had spaced the rows farther apart, he could have driven Lucille up and down with the cultivator attached and knocked back the weeds. “Spacing is crucial,” he says, reciting another farming fundamental. As it was, he had to let the weeds grow, and his crops began

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Then began monotonous maintenance mode.

(Clockwise from top left) Produce from Soby's Farm; Garcia and sons: Colin (6, at left) and Liam (8); heirloom tomato salad; Garcia planting fall crops. (Below) Celery root seedling; cherry tomatoes.





CELEBRATION at last. After the ups and downs, Garcia and a group of volunteers could toast Soby's Farm by fall 2010.

to fight a losing battle for nourishment.

By early July, the weeds dwarfed many of the veggies, and the rows were indistinguishable. Soby's Farm stood apart from most around it. The winding country roads in these parts are lined with farms, many clearly engaged in agribusiness. Crop-dusting airplanes circled overhead, and on some days the acrid smell of chemicals was thick

in the air, even if you drove with windows rolled up. Neighboring farms had manicured rows of plants, with the dry, light brown soil barely visible beneath dark plastic tarps used, along with chemicals, to suppress weeds and pesticides.

Garcia's farm was certainly peaceful and quiet by contrast. When there wasn't Latin music booming from giant speakers at the farm across the Saluda River—which was worked by a large group of migrant workers—you could hear the gentle sound of running water along the edge of the plot. Meanwhile, Garcia battled nature alone, his only companion on many days Lucille.

"I farmed out of the back of my Honda Accord," he jokes. When vegetables began to ripen, he carried baskets from the restaurant and filled them quickly with squash that had ballooned to the size of his forearm since his last trip out. He carried each load to his car until it was time to head to the restaurant, where he used the squash to prepare sides like creamy squash casserole.

And so it went through the early infernal days of summer. By mid-July, Garcia, on the verge of burnout, needed a vacation and left the farm in the care of his then-sous chef, Joey Pearson. It was a small turning point. Joey attracted a crowd to help him in the field, possibly because there's a lot more romance in harvesting than weeding: The squash and zucchini were prolific, and okra was ripening. Joey had cooks, waiters, and even Garcia's boss, Rodney Freidank, out of bed and in the field before noon, no small accomplishment for late-shifters in the restaurant business. Freidank gladly pitched in and brought doughnuts and coffee to the field as incentive, but he says the real motivator was the tomatoes. The fields were bursting with a rainbow of fruit that, if not harvested, would be lost. So they hauled them in and made tomato sauce, stewed okra and tomatoes, and the BLT Salad: a lettuce wedge served with Benton's bacon and tomatoes fresh from Soby's Farm.

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Chefs Get Growing, Coast to Coast

More and more, restaurants that farm or garden their own food are not, in fact, fancy. There's a movement afoot. Here are a few examples of chefs who are exercising their green thumbs:

Proof on Main is a popular restaurant in Louisville, Kentucky, where Chef Michael Paley started a rooftop garden to supply produce.

When the garden outgrew the space, Paley moved his growing operation out to Woodland Farm, about 30 minutes away.

Bell Book and Candle Chef/Owner John Mooney has a hydroponic rooftop garden where he farms herbs and veggies for his 80-seat restaurant in the West Village of New York City.

Bittersweet, in Denver, is a gas station turned hip, modern restaurant. Chef Olav Peterson and his wife, Melissa Severson, farm an urban space to produce food for the menu.

Gott's Roadside, a burger joint in St. Helena, California, has tucked a garden behind the famous eatery (formerly Taylor's Automatic Refresher) and its picnic tables.

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 154)

THE CELEBRATION was short-lived, though. Because Garcia had staggered his plantings, he expected to see his first summer crops ripen toward the end of June and hoped for a continuous harvest through August, possibly September. But the punishing South Carolina heat, coupled with threatening drought, brought the project to an early end. The corn never matured, so Garcia was unable to hold up his end of the lease agreement. And the fall crops—butternut squash, pumpkins, cauliflower, and greens—that he planted in July didn't thrive. By September, the weeds won, and Garcia officially called an end to his farm project for the year.

With endearing understatement, he says of Soby's Farm, "It wasn't as nice as Sean Brock's farm." Or Barber's. "Maybe I bit off more than I could chew, but I did my best. I learned a lot."

In October, Garcia borrowed a Bush Hog and mowed the field down. It was a bittersweet day. With a smile, a sigh, and a slight air of defeat, he recalls, "It felt like I was cutting my worries away." Garcia ended the year with massive new respect for farmers—and chefs who farm. "Even growing herbs is huge," he says.

But here's the thing: Garcia has renewed his farm project. This year, he's armed with knowledge and experience. His mantra: fewer plants, better spacing. He staggered his sowing: three plantings, each five weeks apart—his early crops will bear fruit soon. This schedule should lengthen the harvest, allowing him to rotate the stakes he's gathered to support the tomatoes. Also, "I have a couple of farmhands" this year, Garcia says. He again is relying on volunteer labor for the farm itself, but he's hired two people to work at Soby's who also happen to have experience with organic farming. Under Garcia's direction, they're leading the charge. Nose Dive, the newly opened gastro pub and sister restaurant to Soby's, is headed up by Joey Pearson, who wants to offer heirloom tomatoes on his summer menu. That kind of ingredient isn't pub-cheap, unless you grow your own. Suddenly, Garcia's volunteer pool has grown.

Garcia didn't deliver on last year's crop commitment to landowner Bill Garren. But Soby's farm will be back at Traveler's Rest again this year, and maybe, hopefully, Garren will get his corn.

Julianna Grimes is senior food editor at Cooking Light.



Old Plants Worth Saving

If you're going to go to the trouble to farm your own restaurant produce, you might as well plant heirloom varieties, as well. That's the view of Soby's chef Shaun Garcia, who likes the idea of serving vegetables that have a dash of regional and historic significance.

If you want to follow Garcia's lead in your own garden, go to slowfoodusa.org for information about U.S. Ark of Taste, a program promoting heirloom varieties. Seedsavers.org sells seeds for many old varieties of veggies, fruits, and legumes.

A few of Garcia's favorite varieties:

Tennis Ball Lettuce: A popular lettuce way back in Jefferson's time, still favored at the turn of the 20th century, when it was often pickled in salt brine.

Easter Egg Tomatoes: According to Chef Garcia, this tomato looks just like a broken egg yolk.

Cherokee Purple Tomatoes: A purple-fleshed tomato native to the South, which has a deep flavor reminiscent of red wine.

Carolina Black Peanuts: The shells are brown, but the skins are black. Garcia makes hummus with these little gems. "If you like boiled peanuts," he says, "I guarantee you'll like Black Peanut Hummus."

James Island Red Corn: Also known as "Jimmy Red," a rare corn with gorgeous red kernels.

Sea Island Red Peas: A shell bean native to South Carolina. Green when fresh, red when dry.

Christmas Lima Beans: Large, speckled beans that have a nutty flavor similar to that of fresh chestnuts.