

Through word of mouth, Tampa Bay chefs connect with farmers, producers to promote local food

By [Laura Reiley](#), Times Food Critic

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Executive chef Chris Ponte assembles salads at Cafe Ponte. He and other bay area chefs gather fresh produce out of local gardens such as Gateway Farm in Clearwater. "We like to pick carrots and tell customers, 'We just picked these two hours ago,' " Ponte says.



CLEARWATER — She wears dozens of rubber bands taut around one palm, the back of her hand freckled with sun, nails no-nonsense short. One rubber band might be a tie for her long hair, or a quirky reminder of something on her to-do list. But wearing so many is hard to figure, until she squats in one row and snips cilantro along its delicate stems, winding a rubber band expertly to make a small green bunch for one of her customers. • Pamela Sindlinger and her husband, Hank, have made thousands of these bouquets since they bought what would become Gateway

Farm in August 2004. It was a derelict landscape nursery business, its woody ornamentals and trees left to fend for themselves. The Sindlingers bought the 3.2 acres in urban Clearwater, flanked on one side by a mobile home park, on the other by condos, and turned it into something miraculous, like Frances Hodgson Burnett's *Secret Garden*. • These days, 67 families belong to Gateway Farm's Community Supported Agriculture organization, buying a "share" and picking up organically grown produce each week. Enrollment is closed, the waiting list is long. • But that's not the end of the story. • By word of mouth, local chefs have begun turning up at the Sindlingers' farm. Matt Tracy of the St. Petersburg Yacht Club has worked the soil with them, picking lettuces and herbs for his kitchen. Tyson Grant stops by to harvest peppery red mustard for dinners at Parkshore Grill in St. Petersburg. Chris Ponte visits the farm for baby fennel, delicate mizuna greens and tiny lettuces for his eponymous Cafe Ponte in Clearwater. • But even this is not the end of the story.

A tipping point

Chefs in many American urban centers have a growing conviction that, by choosing to showcase locally, sustainably and organically grown food, they have the power to change the way we eat — maybe even change the world, by doing things like reducing greenhouse gas emissions as well as pesticide and fertilizer use and improving consumers' health. Despite Florida's enormous agricultural clout — the value for all crops ranks fourth in the nation, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture — this idea has been slower to take root here.

But in the past year, Tampa Bay area chefs have begun connecting with local farmers in fledgling partnerships they hope will thrust the region's bounty into the limelight. It seems everybody had the same idea at the same time, and the public is beginning to see this conviction on the dinner table.

In *The Tipping Point*, the bestselling book about "social epidemics," author Malcolm Gladwell tries to answer two questions: Why is it that some ideas, products or behaviors start trends or epidemics, while others don't? And what can we do to jump-start a positive trend?

One of the most important ingredients, according to Gladwell, is someone called a connector. Connectors are the people who "link us up with the world . . . people with a special gift for bringing the world together."

James Canter is a connector.

Former chef at the MFA Café at the Museum of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, Canter is a peripatetic dynamo, crisscrossing the country in the name of new cooking

challenges. He has just finished filming a pilot in Los Angeles for a cooking show called *Guerrilla Gourmet*, and he's awaiting word on his role in Tampa's first gastropub, a style of pub characterized by ambitious food, often charcuterie and house-cured meats. But back in November, he was introducing his chef friends to a woman he affectionately called the Tomato Lady.

Judy Ciaccia kind of liked the nickname.

Her tomato business in Dunedin — Vic and Judy's HomeGrown — started as a backyard hobby four years ago: a few heirloom tomato plants, most with lovely names like Cherokee purple, yellow taxi and green zebra, grown hydroponically in coconut mulch and perlite. As sometimes happens with hobbies, it got out of control, the whole back yard eventually given over to stacked hydroponic containers and a complex drip system. Ciaccia, a cardiac rehabilitation specialist at Largo Medical Center, was swimming in tomatoes.

She took some of her beauties to a farmers' market in Largo, where she met Weyand Food sales rep David Rutzler, who in turn introduced her to Canter.

"It used to be organic, organic, organic," Rutzler said of his chef customers. "The trend is now switching to, 'Yeah, we want it organic, but also local if possible.' We're finding these little farms that fulfill a need. They're out there, it's just a matter of finding them."

Canter the Connector immediately put in orders for the MFA Café, but also orchestrated an heirloom tomato dinner for bay area chefs and restaurateurs at the Ciaccia home. On that night, chefs dined on vibrant Aunt Ruby tomatoes sliced into tarts, Judy's Tulsi basil and sweet stevia tossed into heaps of greens, and exotic star fruit pickles of Canter's invention. The orders for her 40 varieties of local, organically raised (but not certified) heirlooms started rolling in. Today, you'll find them on the menus at Cafe Ponte, Walt's Seasonal Cuisine in Dunedin, Savant Fine Dining in Clearwater and other local restaurants.

Local waters

Much has been made of the benefits of "locavorism" by authors like food policy journalist Michael Pollan (*The Omnivore's Dilemma, In Defense of Food*). Shorter shipping distances and less packing materials mean a smaller carbon footprint in the fight against global warming. The local food movement feeds local economies. It helps preserve biodiversity and a greater agricultural gene pool. Farmers can concentrate on ripeness and flavor instead of shelf life. And in this era of food-borne illness scares, being able to track the provenance of your food feels safer.

Mote Aquaculture Park in Sarasota County has other good reasons. In 2005, the nonprofit began exploring ways of creating sustainable methods for fish farming that focus on water reuse. Mote's scientists started farming sturgeon. With the aim of selling the meat and caviar, they felt this species would draw a high enough price to support their research.

Nadine Slimak, public relations manager at Mote Marine Laboratory, says there were two aims, both in keeping with benefactor William R. Mote's goals of giving back to the ocean by restocking, but also by developing aquaculture practices that limit environmental impact.

"Wild sturgeon are extremely overfished. We wanted to create a product that can take the pressure off wild stocks, and our other goal was to create new methodologies for fish farming here in Florida," she said.

Mote began selling the sturgeon meat a few years into the project, the caviar two years ago. Experts say this caviar is comparable in texture and taste to the overfished Caspian Sea Osetra, which commands a retail price of \$1,257 for 50 grams (nearly 2 ounces), as opposed to \$307 for the Siberian sturgeon roe from Mote Aquaculture Park. Not surprisingly, Canter showed up to buy the fish, as did other bay area restaurants and hotels, including the Renaissance Vinoy in St. Petersburg and the Ritz-Carlton Sarasota.

Planting the seeds

Finding and forging relationships with local farmers isn't easy. The convenience and economies of scale offered by national food distributors like Sysco Corp. complicate purchasing decisions for Tampa Bay chefs.

"I focused on 'farm to fork' fairly exclusively when I cooked in California, and it felt good," Canter says. "That's what I believe in. I think there's a lot to tap into here, but no one is connecting the dots."

Then this connector goes on to mention other isolated "dots." There's Lorraine's Yogurt in Tampa. Lorraine Marchetti sells her local-fruit yogurts through Publix and health food stores in a "green" package, and is prototyping 5-pound buckets to sell to restaurants. And there's Marvin Wilhite's Cahaba Clubs Herbal Outpost in Odessa, which sells micro arugula, red Russian kale and other microgreens to bay area restaurants. Marjon Specialty Foods in Plant City sells local sprouts and tofu to restaurants.

The dots are getting connected as more chefs and restaurateurs take up the challenge. On Jan. 19, a group of chefs convened on several benches in Gateway Farm's funky greenhouse. Cathleen Ryan, pastry chef at Bailey's in Tampa and consulting chef for the farm, got to work. Chefs Grant and Tracy along with chef-colleagues Chris Knowles from Sea Sea Riders Restaurant in Dunedin, Peter Leonavicius from Tampa's Toasted Pheasant and caterer Gui Alinat contributed ideas for what will be the bay area's first "Dinner in the Field," scheduled for March 15. The idea: Invite the public into the garden for a dinner prepared by local chefs and comprised of Pamela and Hank Sindlinger's local produce. The chefs began discussing the menu. Inspiration was all around them.

Laura Reiley can be reached at lreiley@sptimes.com or (727) 892-2293.

On the cover

Chef Tyson Grant of Parkshore Grill in St. Petersburg snips herbs at Gateway Farm in Clearwater as owner Pamela Sindlinger looks on.