

HOW TO FIND A LOCAL HERO

Food experts are a special breed, and with all those fresh, artisanal products out there, you need passionate guides in markets and shops. We tracked down a few.

STORY BY JOHN KESSLER PHOTOGRAPHY BY CEDRIC ANGELES, JASON WALLIS, & SUSAN SEUBERT

(Clockwise from left) Atlanta's Judith Winfrey, white radishes, Portland's Mark Bitterman, Cabot Clothbound Cheddar, and Denver's Jimmy Cross



TIM GADDIS stands in his domain, a small, ripe-smelling corner alcove that is the cheese department at the Atlanta food market Star Provisions. He pulls out a mobile device and taps “Only two *burrata* left.” A colleague, getting her first Twitter lesson, is rapt. “So if I wanted one, I could call you or send you a message?” she asks.

Yes, if she was quick about it. But Gaddis’ Tweet is barely Tweeted when a triumphant voice chimes in, “The *burrata* are mine!” A regular customer, iPhone in hand, is hurrying toward

the counter. This woman had been waiting in line for a sandwich elsewhere in the market when she checked her Twitter feed and realized she had to act fast if she wanted the last two rich bundles of imported Italian mozzarella and cream.

Gaddis sends messages throughout the day as “Timthecheeseman,” and hundreds of Atlantans follow along to find out when he’s offering a tasting or cracking open a wheel of Parmigiano-Reggiano—an event he says is “always a circus.” With his Atlanta cheese Tweet, Gaddis is applying the social-media tool of the moment to one of the most basic, ancient, and social of all human activities: the finding, cooking, and eating of food. In evolutionary terms, he is basically signaling to the local hunter-gatherers—and the nearest, most advanced, get the mozza.

But really, this has been going on—minus the Tweets—since the beginning of civilization. Yakking about food is as much the essence of the marketplace as the exchange of money. You see it at every souk, fish market, and farm stand, from Paris to Tokyo to Sumatra: people talking about the food they grow, buy, cook, sell. And in America, where the hyperefficient modern supermarket stifled much of this social pleasure under shrink-wrap, the locavore movement, greenmarkets, and artisanal producers are bringing the pleasure back—even to the smarter supermarkets. At the heart of this social phenomenon is the idea of the local expert: the one who knows what is fresh and good, what is absolutely worth buying now.

Only question is, how do you find these people? That person is there, in your community. He or she practically has a local-expert medallion swinging from the neck. You just have to be creative. And listen.

Michael Stern, half of the famous *RoadFood* duo with ex-wife Jane Stern, has been traveling the country in search of food experts and hidden food sources for decades. When he arrives in new territory, he has a trick: He gets a haircut and announces that he’s looking for lunch. “Once I was in this old-fashioned barbershop by the Roanoke River in North Carolina, and a guy told me the herring were running. I was like,

Blythedale Farm Vermont Camembert (top) and Roquefort; (at right) Tim Gaddis at Star Provisions’ cheese counter



“Two *burrata* left,” he Tweets. In a moment, the cheese is gone.
 ★ CHEESEMONGER **TIM GADDIS**, STAR PROVISIONS, ATLANTA

Have a question about the local food chain? Ask Judith.
 ★ FARMER JUDITH WINFREY, LOVE IS LOVE FARM, ATLANTA

‘Herring?’” The Sterns spent the next days feasting on this previously unknown local specialty.

The rest of us may not want that many haircuts, so we resort to other means. In the larger cities, finding a food expert can simply be a matter of asking around—or searching online—until you locate a store like Atlanta’s Star Provisions, which employs a whole troupe of experts: Over at the meat counter, Todd Immel lays out slices of his incredible house-cured *salumi*, and he has a good price on Kobe culotte steaks.

And you have to stop by The Local Farmstand, a cooperative farm effort just outside Star Provisions. Here you’ll meet Judith Winfrey, who along with her “sweetheart” and business partner, Joe Reynolds, owns and operates Love Is Love Farm—she runs the business and Reynolds runs the farm, where he tends the fields and their flock of Delaware chickens. At Farmstand, Winfrey often has gorgeous bags of braising greens and simple advice for cooking them. Oh, and some sorghum from a guy she knows—you have to get a bottle and make a pan of corn bread to go with it. She also mans their farm’s booth at Peachtree Road Farmers Market on Saturday mornings.

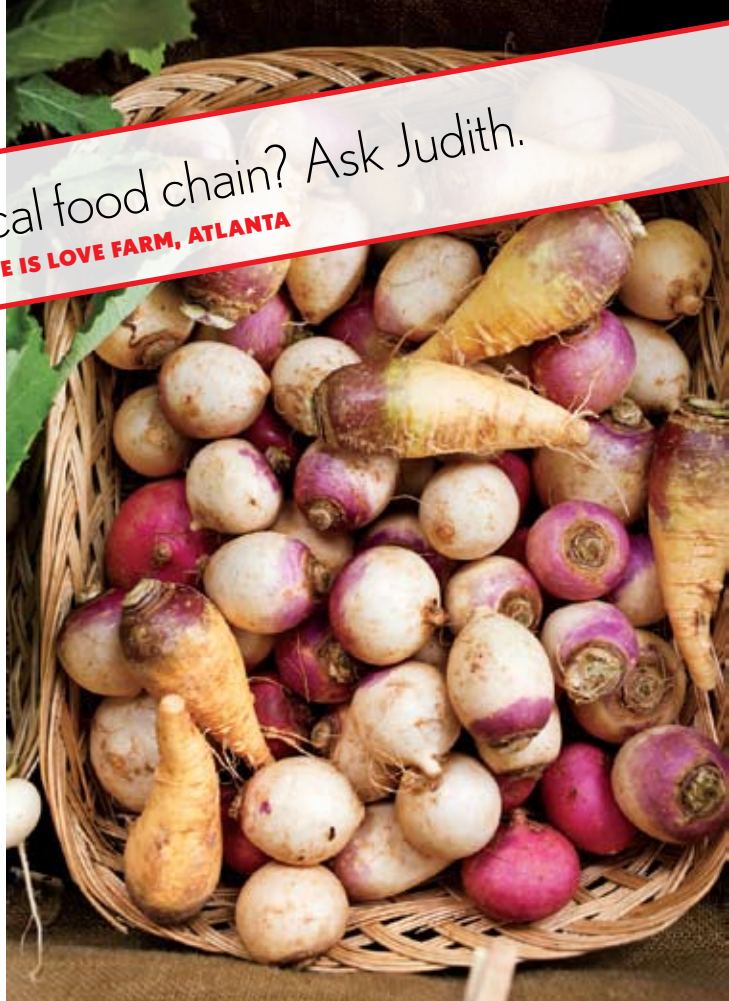
Both Reynolds and Winfrey have liberal arts degrees, and she admits, “We never thought we would be farmers.” It was a mutual love for food that brought the couple together though, so it seems a fitting pursuit.

People in Atlanta soon learn: You have a question about the local food chain? Ask Judith. Every week people ask her about restaurants, what to cook, and where to shop. Her answer?

“It depends on where they live,” says Winfrey. “If they live out in Dacula (a distant suburb), I’ll tell them about this lady I know who raises alpacas and has started her own farm market. If they live in Midtown, I might just send them to Whole Foods.”

THESE ARE THE SORT OF SHOPKEEPERS who will gladly share their passion for good food, as well as their interesting backstories. (You never know who has fallen in love with food: Gaddis was a beat cop in his North Georgia hometown.) They function more like culinary personal trainers than retailers; they live to teach, encourage, and cajole their customers. For those of us who are shy, or in too much of a hurry, it’s simply a matter of relaxing into a conversation, and the pleasures of real market shopping will unfold.

Turnips (top), Judith Winfrey and Joe Reynolds; (at right, clockwise from top) Love Is Love Farm, The Local Farmstand, Delaware chicken



WHO'S YOUR LOCAL HERO?

Tell us about your favorite local food expert, giving name, location, and specialty. E-mail us at letters@cookinglight.com.





If it runs, flies, or swims, this guy can make any cut out of it.
★ BUTCHER **JIMMY CROSS, MARCZYK FINE FOODS, DENVER**



“Just be careful,” warns Phil Lempert, the “Supermarket Guru” who edits the *Lempert Report* on grocery buying. “There are a bunch of people who think they know about food, who love the idea of being in the food world. But that doesn’t make them experts.” While he’s tracked a spike in the number of small specialty markets, he has also seen too many shops open “with all those jars and jars of salsa” and a few desultory slabs of cheese and past-its-prime beef. Lempert loves the return of neighborhood butchers and fishmongers, but views general gourmet shops with suspicion and says you should quiz your retailer. Look for the real passion. And *real* knowledge.

In my experience, the retailers who are just trying to move product don’t listen—they’re all too ready to wrap something in butcher paper and just sell it. The people you want to become your food confidants are the kind of pleasant crackpots who are constantly shoving things in your mouth and then scanning your eyes for a reaction. Sure, they’re out to share their knowledge, but that’s not all. They’re looking for customers to share their passion for and love of good food.

THE STAFF AT MARCZYK FINE FOODS—a specialty grocer and social hub in the Uptown neighborhood of Denver—tracks customer feedback with a system they call “Pig Love!” and “Mad Cow!” At weekly meetings, employees share customer kudos (Pig Love!) and complaints (Mad Cow!) in an open forum and then file reports. “The point is training our staff to have listening ears,” says Pete Marczyk, who owns the market with his brother, Paul.

Indeed, much of the pig love—and cow love, and lamb love—centers on the bodacious meat counter, with its centerpiece dry-aging chamber. This department is the purview of head butcher Jimmy Cross, an easy fellow to pick out thanks to the twin meat cleavers tattooed on his forearms.

Cross sells sustainably raised Niman Ranch meat exclusively and rotates the stock with the seasons. For instance, he begins selling hanger steaks in spring, after Denver thaws out enough to grill these fatty, smoke-producing steaks outdoors.

One can’t buy a steak at Marczyk Fine Foods without getting a lesson, a tip, or even a suggestion to buy a completely different cut of meat. According to Marczyk, that’s just what his customers want. “One of the number one questions in the market is, ‘What’s new?’”

Because the butcher shop purchases huge primal cuts of beef, it generates a goodly amount of trim. On any given day, customers might espy Cross inside

**Jimmy Cross
(top), Niman
Ranch porter-
house steak**

the glass-walled dry-aging chamber making fresh house-ground beef.

To know a food expert is, to an extent, to surrender to her or him. The expert tends to be, shall we say, extremely persuasive. You may walk into the shop looking for a jar of pasta sauce and leave with San Marzano tomatoes, pancetta, onions, and a quick recipe for Amatriciana sauce tapped onto your cell phone. Wanting blueberries for a favorite dessert, you may get a polite reminder—it can be a rebuff, really, a mild chastisement—that something else is in season, or simply better at the moment.

JULIA ADAMS, for example, has surrendered to Laurie Crowell, who owns Golden Fig Fine Foods in St. Paul, Minnesota. “Oh, she just tells us what to make for dinner,” Adams laughs. “She’s the foodie.”

The first time Adams entered the store, she found a 1,000-square-foot room stacked to the rafters with locally produced

pastas, honey, grass-fed steaks, fresh pastries, and Crowell’s line of infused vinegars, spice blends, and flavored syrups. Every item comes from the upper Midwest. “People can ask me about any product in my store, and I’ll tell them about the producer,” Crowell says. “That’s a great connection.”

For all their persuasive powers, the best experts also know they are part of a community. If Crowell doesn’t have something, she points customers to other nearby stores in St. Paul’s Crocus Hill neighborhood for wine, cheese, housewares, and spices. She even singles out passionate independent retailers in her newsletter to promote as her “local business of the month.”

GOOGLING FOR EXPERTS

EXERCISE YOUR WEB SKILLS AND TUCK IN

FINDING THE GUY with the right Twitter feed—like Tim Gaddis, the merry cheese Tweeter of Atlanta—can be invaluable. But there’s also a lot of noise on the Internet, and a lot of hype. Anyone with a laptop can claim to be a restaurant reviewer, but how do you know who really has something valuable to say? Here’s my strategy.

TWITTER

I don’t follow every foodie in my community. Some suffer from severe Twitterhea and let you know about every piece of toast. Yet there are some community-minded souls who practically edit a food digest—finding and sharing the best information about what’s in the restaurants and in the markets. My favorite vegetarian chef Tweets his daily specials; even if I can’t make it to the restaurant, I always know what to look for in the farmers’ market. I’ve also found that some famous food writers, chefs, and experts love to Tweet. Chicago Chef Rick Bayless (@Rick_Bayless) fields and answers cooking questions all the

time in flawlessly abbreviated Twitter speak, while cookbook author Paula Wolfert (@soumak) tells people where to shop for spices and cookware.

You can use Google to search for Twitter feeds: Entering “Atlanta cheese Twitter” turns up, yes, Tim Gaddis.

FACEBOOK

Zoka Coffee Roaster & Tea Company started as a small roaster and coffeehouse in Seattle. They’ve used their Web site and Facebook page (facebook.com/Zokacoffeeroaster) to drive sales and help grow their business to six locations, including three stores in Japan.

The best thing about Facebook is that everyone is at the party. Is there a food expert that you’ve read about in, say, *Cooking Light*? Try sending him or her a Facebook message when you have a cooking question. You might be surprised just how often you hear back. Facebook has a powerful search engine.

BLOGS

In every community, a small army of food bloggers has emerged. Some are more interested in exploring the dining scene; others prefer to cook at home. But most have something to teach you as long as you cast a critical eye (and look for real knowledge). For instance, *Grow Great Grub* is a book about small-space edible gardening, complete with recipes and instructions for canning and preserving your spoils. Gayla Trail, the book’s author, got her start writing the popular gardening blog yougrowgirl.com.

Googling works for finding blogs, too: “Seattle coffee blog” turned up several, not surprisingly, including the *Seattle Times* blog, Coffee City.

MESSAGE BOARDS

I find “restaurant review” message boards, such as Yelp.com, a blessing and a curse. They’re fine if you’re scouting the hot place everyone is buzzing about but useless for directing you to

overlooked gems, or for sussing out chefs working with fresh, seasonal ingredients. Also, the aggregate ratings bother me: I prefer the voice of one trusted expert over the mean impressions of everyone. Still, I search for a few commenters whose tastes I trust and follow their advice.

WEB SITES

Popular markets staffed with knowledgeable staff find every possible way to educate and communicate with customers. Murray’s Cheese Shop in New York City has a thriving Web site. Visit murrayscheese.com to order products, watch a range of Webisodes that teach viewers about the finer points of cheese, or to access their Twitter feed, where they post information on all the latest happenings. —JK





Where else in Traverse City for a melty Leelanau raclette?
 ★ SHOP OWNER **KEN BURRITT, BURRITT'S FRESH MARKET, TRAVERSE CITY, MI**

FOR THOSE WHO DON'T LIVE in big cities, the hunt for local experts can be trickier, though the local food movement is by no means restricted to the Atlantas and San Franciscos. In Traverse City, Michigan, population 14,000, on a bay off Lake Michigan 300 miles north of Chicago, the food hound will inevitably track down Burritt's Fresh Market. Burritt's started as a corner meat market 23 years ago but has grown into a full-fledged specialty grocer. "But I think our real draw is the locally made products," like the melty Leelanau raclette, says owner Ken Burritt.

English professor Eric Hendrix was sick of never finding any—zero, zip, zilch—fresh fish in tiny Sylva, North Carolina. So he opened Eric's Fresh Fish Market in a defunct downtown art studio on Saturdays only. He used his \$600 economic stimulus tax refund to buy his first shipment of seafood from Inland Seafood in Atlanta. Soon he was adding hours. In the summer of 2008, when his contract wasn't renewed at Western Carolina University, the fish market was already open three days a week. Now his shop stays open four days a week and offers grass-fed beef and local, organic produce.



Even the health-food co-ops of yore are getting a makeover as we all discover that fine food is health food. In Ames, Iowa, the Wheatsfield Cooperative Grocery, which once operated from a campus building at Iowa State University, busted out into a 10,000-square-foot showcase store in 2009—doubling its staff to 50. A bounteous display island (they call it "Athena") replaces the humming upright refrigerated cart from the old store. The choice of 125 cheeses provides an ever-changing lesson, with tastes. Every Iowan already knows the taste of local Picket Fence Ice Cream.

MEANWHILE, even at the supermarket level, where most food in America is sold, changes are afoot. Whole Foods, with more than 280 stores nationally, has—despite the controversy over its prices and its definitions of "natural"—tapped into the hunger for both local foods and local food experts. The cheese department tends to be run (and styled) more like a cheesemonger's shop and less like the packed-in-plastic curds dispensary of a modern supermarket. And customers often find that there are experts on the floor. Wendy Watts, wine buyer of the wine department at Whole Foods Market in Birmingham, Alabama, has more than 30 years of experience—she was assistant national sales director for the legendary Kermit Lynch Wine Merchant company of Berkeley, California, importer of some of the most distinctive French

Ken Burritt (top), Michigan farm-raised rainbow trout



A “selmelier” who can make a salt connoisseur out of anyone.
★ SHOP OWNER **MARK BITTERMAN, THE MEADOW, PORTLAND**

wines brought to the American market. In Alabama, Watts lives to spread the word to wineheads and novices alike.

“A woman came in and said that she didn’t like dry wines. She wanted something wet,” Watts laughs. “I was thrilled to help.” Watts loves customers who want to be nudged along, echoing a note I often heard from local food experts—the best customers come not just to shop but to learn.

This can sound presumptuous: Do I need a lecture with my turkey breast? Lots of fuss in the service of high prices, a skeptic may say—because the prices of specialty foods can be breathtaking. Does one really need, for example, 120 varieties of salt, costing as much as \$40 an ounce for a special Korean bamboo salt used in Taoist medicine (but delicious on food)? It takes a committed expert to convince the skeptic that, yes, 120 varieties of salt are a good thing. Enter Mark Bitterman, owner of The Meadow, an idiosyncratic shop in Portland. Bitterman lists his offerings: “Chocolate, flowers, wine, and salt. That’s it. But we’re best known for our salt.”

The sodium variations are stacked on a 10-foot-high case, with slabs and tablets

**(From left)
Mark Bitterman
preparing for
a salt tasting,
Himalayan salt
at The Meadow**

of every hue, crystals and flakes, fine granules displayed in a profusion of apothecary jars. Customers walk in and gape, and some are tempted to turn around.

Bitterman calls himself a “selmelier,” but acknowledges, “Facing a wall of hundreds of salts can be intimidating.”

A simple question will launch him into explaining that the delicate crunch of *fleur de sel* befits subtle foods like scrambled eggs. The “quick little pop” of flake salt perks up salad greens. Moist, minerally *sel gris* stands up to a juicy hunk of beef. Bitterman will match a smoked sea salt, say, to barbecued salmon with as much care as he would suggest a local pinot noir to wash it down. He works his storytelling magic.

He tells of the day an older Welsh couple stopped in, the wife practically dragging her husband by his ear. The man looked dismissive. Bitterman pulled out a jar of Halen Môn Gold, an amber-colored smoked sea salt from Wales, and told them the story behind the salt. An 800-year-old oak tree fell, devastating the property owners, who mourned until they decided they could use the wood to smoke the local salt.

“The husband’s eyes just went wide,” Bitterman gleefully recounts. “I knew he’d love that gorgeous, oaky, barbecuey salt. It’s a manly flavor. They became regular customers after that.”

The local food expert: find one, talk to one, and soon he’ll have you under his spell.