

The Go-Between

Someone has to put the farmer with the market.

Mischa Byruck melts butter in a pan as he slices eggplant and oyster mushrooms for lunch. The butter comes from Smith Creamery, the eggplant from Christine Monica and the mushrooms from Brent Williams. They're all vendors at the Crescent City Farmers Market. Once the vegetables cook, he piles them on a slice of ciabatta bread from Voodough Bakery, another market vendor.

"I don't shop anywhere else," he says. "I get everything that I need there, except for spices and booze." He opens a bottle of Miller Lite. "I don't necessarily always drink local. Abita is a little heavy for me."

Byruck is the new forager for Market Umbrella, which runs the Crescent City Farmers Market. His job is to seek out area farmers and fishermen and connect them with potential customers, which could be the Crescent City Farmers Market, other markets, restaurants or even schools. The day before, he visited Monica's 15-acre farm. That morning, he stopped by the Edible Schoolyard program at Green Charter School, which teaches students how their food is grown and who grows it. "I'm a go-between," Byruck says.

At lunch in his Carrollton-area home, he wears jeans and a blue striped shirt, but the goatee and oversized silver belt buckle make him look more like a hip New Yorker than a Northshore farmer. And a few years ago, the 25-year-old was living in New York as an undergraduate at Columbia University, where he got a degree in history. "I've not been hired because I know so much about farming," he says. "I've been hired because I can do a good job reaching out to people and making connections."

He learned those skills when he volunteered in a Waveland relief kitchen after Katrina and Rita. "Within my first couple of weeks, I was put in charge of all inventory, receiving and procurement," Byruck says. "I was packing

up rented box trucks with soy milk destined for Common Ground, I was sending frozen chicken to Mary Queen of Vietnam in New Orleans east and I was distributing boxes of chicken to firefighters, police chiefs and Department of Homeland Security officials." Along with a friend from college, he founded Emergency Communities, which still runs relief centers in the Lower Ninth Ward and Plaquemines Parish.

The forager position addresses the demand for more local food in New Orleans after the levee failures. Before, most vendors found the Crescent City Farmers Market through word of mouth. Now, Market Umbrella runs only two markets instead of four, but several neighborhoods have included a farmers market in their rebuilding plans. Demand for fresh produce is rising, but many growers are still recovering. Even before the storms, Market Umbrella saw the need for a forager. Markets across the country want more vendors, and the growing movement to serve fresh food in schools will require better supplies of local produce. "All the work that we do is based on what we know we want locally," says Darlene A. Wolnik, Market Umbrella's Deputy Director, "but we also know that it's needed nationally. We take on ideas because we see that they can be replicated."

If the work of Market Umbrella's forager succeeds, then more neighborhoods and more students will sit down to a lunch of fresh, local produce like the one that Byruck cooked. And more people around New Orleans will be able to make a living as farmers.

"Part of the purpose of extending the local food system is that you tie the fates of the people in the rural areas with the people in the urban areas," Byruck says. "So if the storm affects New Orleans, it's affecting the farmers. And if a frost affects the farmers, it's affecting New Orleans. That's a good thing. We want to be connected to our land and to our region."

Going for the Iron

The Next Iron Chef, the Food Network's new six-part series, concludes on November 11. Local chef John Besh of Restaurant August is among the eight competitors, and one of them will join the cast of *Iron Chef America*. As I'm writing this, the first episode hasn't yet aired and, for all I know, Besh might be eliminated before this issue hits the streets. After seeing him beat the renowned chef Mario Batali in a 2005 *Iron Chef* episode, however, I would wager that Besh goes far in this game.

I worry, though, that Cleveland-based chef Michael Symon might have an advantage because one of the three judges is Cleveland-based food writer Michael Ruhlman. It's not just that Ruhlman and Symon share a hometown. It's because, as Ruhlman wrote in a 2005 *Cleveland Magazine* article, "we've become good friends and I no longer write about him."

Maybe we shouldn't expect the judges on the *Next Iron Chef* to be free from bias. The show is just entertainment, after all. There was no similar tryout for the other Iron Chefs, and the "chairman" is an actor. Still, it is presented as a competition....

Other News

Chef Corbin Evans has left Savvy Gourmet. New Yorker Eve Cohen and local Matt Brewton are now running the kitchen....At the Emeril Lagasse Foundation's annual Carnivale du Vin fundraiser on November 2, some of the country's top chefs, including Eric Ripert, Mario Batali and Rick Tramonto, will cook a meal to benefit area children's charities....The great French bakery La Boulangerie has moved up the block to a larger—and air conditioned—new space a half-block from its previous location on Magazine Street.

La Boulangerie: 4600 Magazine St., 569-1925.
Restaurant August: 301 Tchoupitoulas St., 299-9777.
Savvy Gourmet: 4519 Magazine St., 895-2665.