



The Mind of a Chef

Have you ever wondered how your favorite chef grocery shops? At the Wilmington Island Farmers' Market you can tag along with one. *Florence M. Slatinsky* gets the goods with Chef Mir Ali. PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANGELA HOPPER

WHEN I AGREE TO INTERVIEW Chef Mir Ali of Lili's Restaurant and Bar at the Wilmington Island Farmers' Market, I've got visions of lamb, tender lettuce and just-picked radishes dancing in my head. But instead of succulent spring foods, the hallmarks of spring weather—thick, yellow pollen; swarming, lusty gnats; intermittent thunderstorms—threaten to dampen our excursion. Fortunately, the clouds part, the bug spray is plentiful, and the chef's enthusiasm for the fresh harvest is contagious. Word has gotten out that the market is open for the season—and Chef Ali is back for his second year of "Shop with the Chef," held the last Saturday of the month at 10 a.m. when the farmers' market is open.

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A crowd of 20 or so shoppers are gathered, peering from beneath our hoods and swatting at gnats with the chef's recipe for roasted pork tenderloin and caramelized vegetables. Chef Ali greets us warmly, raising his voice to be heard over the crowing roosters and barking dogs. He explains that he will lead us down the row of vendors assembled and give us tips on how to shop and what to buy.

"The more you know, not just about what to put into my recipe, but about all that you see here, the more you can use what's available and support our local vendors," he says and then heads off.

FRESH OFF THE FARM

Ben Deen of Savannah River Farms is up first. In a drawl so thick you could spread it on a slice of fresh bread, he explains that his pork tenderloin comes from "right here," gesturing toward the middle of his abdomen, and sits up against the baby back ribs. His farm's tenderloins are small, generally about a pound, unlike the commercial counterparts, which

come off much larger hogs who are fatted fast on a feeder diet.

When asked about his pigs' diet, he says with pride, "We're all Genetically Modified Organism free. In the next few weeks we'll get our certification, and we'll be one of about three farms in the country that slaughters on site and is certified GMO free."

Chef Ali nods his head in appreciation and recounts how important it is to think about what we're eating and how it affects our bodies. Much of what we eat isn't natural and can adversely affect us, he continues, showing us the silver sinew that runs down all pork tenderloins and should be removed before cooking. A little fat is fine and will add to the





flavor, he says, but the sinew is tough and needs trimming.

FEAST FOR THE SENSES

Our recipe doesn't call for bread, but the chef can't resist stopping in front of the aromatic loaves arrayed under the Spouses Bakery tent. Unlike just-off-the-farm eggs, which don't require refrigeration due to their

waiting expectantly under a sample tray.

Chef presses on toward the vegetables. We pass natural body products, locally sourced honey (much deeper in color than the grocery-store version because it hasn't been heated and filtered), handmade pasta and savory homemade dips. I get sidetracked by the olive tapenade and have to jog to catch up with the group.

The bounty of produce gets Chef Ali's creative juices flowing. He starts throwing out ideas: basil with pine nuts and olive oil for fresh pesto, chopped radishes to perk up a salad, roasted beets or squash with some local honey and salt.

freshness, preservative-free bread should be eaten, refrigerated or frozen within three days. We sample asiago cheese and sourdough, and we shake our heads wondering how a loaf that good could survive three days in a home. We also try samples from Savannah Rum Runners Bakery, including a focaccia that we learn is eggless—a solid choice for vegans.

It's hard to stay focused on our recipe. The crowd has grown as the weather has improved. Dogs and people are stopping to chat, including a parti poodle, aptly named for his brindle coat. He barks excitedly at a basset hound

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I'm not sure I've ever had this much fun grocery shopping. It made making the dish all the more delicious. ■

ROAST PORK TENDERLOIN WITH CARAMELIZED VEGETABLES

Serves 4 to 6

- 2 to 3 Savannah River Farms pork tenderloins
- Coarsely ground salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- ½ cup olive oil, divided
- ¼ cup balsamic vinegar
- 4 rainbow carrots, peeled*
- 2 sweet potatoes, peeled*
- 1 large sweet onion, peeled*
- 1 bell pepper, rinsed*
- 6 whole garlic cloves, peeled
- Assorted fresh herbs, chopped

Preheat the oven to 400° F. Set aside a roasting pan.

Wash and pat dry the pork tenderloins. Remove the sinew from each, then season all sides with salt, pepper, balsamic vinegar and a dash of olive oil. Set the tenderloins aside.

Prepare the vegetables and dice them into equal sizes. Place the vegetables in a mixing bowl and toss with the garlic, remaining olive oil, salt and pepper. Place the vegetables in the roasting pan and cook for approximately 20 minutes or until caramelized.

Add the tenderloin to the vegetables, then continue cooking for 20 minutes more or until the pork is slightly pink in the center. To achieve well done tenderloins, cook 5 to 10 minutes longer.

Let the pork rest for 10 minutes before carving and serving with the roasted vegetables. Garnish with fresh herbs, such as rosemary, thyme and parsley.

*Note: Feel free to substitute any hearty vegetables in season.

