

# MY Maryland<sup>TM</sup>

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NATIONALLY KNOWN

# Chef

RETURNS

TO

ROOTS

LOCAL AGRICULTURE IS KEY TO SUCCESS FOR VOLT

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Chef Bryan Voltaggio is as passionate about local, sustainable and organic agriculture as he is about his nationally acclaimed restaurant, VOLT. And, he's quick to express that he holds as much respect and dedication to farmers and agriculture as he does for his own restaurant located in downtown Frederick, MD.



"I chose Frederick for my restaurant because I grew up here ... it's being close to agriculture and having products to sustain my restaurant. It's the way I want to do it," said the Top Chef runner-up from Bravo's popular reality television show. "Stay close to it and it stays close to the community and the farmer. All these things make sense to me 28 years later. In 30 years we've in essence screwed things up and gone away from localism. Now it's time to make a change ... at least from my viewpoint as a restaurant owner and a chef's standpoint."

And it's his strong principles and highly touted cuisine that has continued to build his restaurant business over the last two years. "I worked for Chef Charlie Palmer at his restaurant for a number of years, and his focus was on American products being bought, prepared and served in his restaurant rather than from other countries. I say let's continue to celebrate this country, and more specifically, locally, as much and as best as we can."

Voltaggio had plenty of exposure to farming while growing up in the rural areas of Walkersville and Jefferson. He remembers jumping off the bus every evening

and running straight to a neighboring farm. "I baled hay and pulled corn. I can remember when the neighbors would all gather at my parents' house and we'd shuck corn and make it into cream corn," he said. "Those things impacted me on the importance of food. My family and our neighbors had gardens and we went to markets. We had farms that backed up to our houses."

All of those early experiences have steered the star chef's career. "Being a chef is a rough life, with little time to spare, especially being involved and entrenched the way I am, but I like going to the farms and meeting with farmers and I want to stay connected," he said. Voltaggio even takes his staff to the fields, building relationships with local growers and producers. "The staff here at the restaurant wants to take field trips to farms, even



*Maryland wine, cheese, produce, meat and cream highlight Volt's restaurant menu.*

on their days off. They are committed to see where the products come from that we prepare and serve here. It's inspirational. I'm only as good as the team around me, and the more they know about our products, the better."

In the restaurant business, Voltaggio could be known as the poster boy for supporting local farmers. "I believe in the cause of agriculture, local agriculture, and I see the value and the benefits. We should be doing the flipside of things and honoring the farmer, and talk with them about their products rather than the dishes we prepare and serve. It's the farmer that makes it all happen," he said. "If the product is not grown well, it won't taste good. We need to put farmers on a pedestal and get them committed and inspired to grow more and different things. People need to see the faces of the people who grow the product. I also think it's important for the farmer to see their food transformed into plate. It's important for them to see their food processed at a place like our restaurant."

So for Voltaggio, buying locally is about "developing relationships and looking at ways to educate and connect my clientele with where we get our products from, and how and from whom they are grown. It's about whole food ... what you want your child to eat. My thought is to be more responsible and use local products."

"The farmer puts time and energy and money in the ground ... they have an investment too, and I'm working to get some of them to commit to growing some of this and that in the areas of fresh produce," he said. "If the farmer plants it, grows it and harvests it and can't sell it, he doesn't get his return on his investment, which is why many farmers turn to large cash crops. I want to see that reversed."

The chef believes that if communities invest in farmers, everyone will benefit. "More local producers are committing to growing for establishments like VOLT," he said.

And when this nationally acclaimed chef isn't busy building relationships, planning menus and running a restaurant, he's keenly buying products at local farmers' markets. "Summertime offers everything to play with in the food sense. There's just a whole array of products available at the local markets this time of year. I go to each booth and buy all that I can – corn, squash, stone fruits, green beans, red char, yellow wax beans."

This season, Voltaggio said he plans to "buy



*One of the many local product providers for Volt Restaurant is Cherry Glen Farm in Boyds that produces many varieties of goat cheese. Below, Bryan Voltaggio, left, and restaurant partner Hilda Staples, center, visit with farm owner Wayne Cullen to see first-hand where and how the cheese is produced.*



*Chef Bryan Voltaggio, left, and Wayne Cullen talk about the many cheese varieties produced on Cherry Glen Farm in Boyds.*



the heck out of local tomatoes and preserve them so that I can use them in other ways, like tomato preserves, later in the year when tomatoes aren't in season. Come January it will still be a local product, but one that we preserved."

It's the seasonal offerings that the chef builds his menus from each day. "My menu changes based on the season and the product availability," he said. "I'm flexible with my menu when there's more product availability."

Whatever is on the menu at VOLT, you can bet that the products have met Voltaggio's very specific requirements ... it's either local; been grown, raised and/or harvested through sustainable methods; or it's organic. "Not all things are available organically, but I try to buy locally. The local impact is that food travels less, reducing the carbon footprint. Getting the product here, straight off the vine ... the food's better and tastes better. As a chef I don't understand why people don't do it that way.

"Buying locally, eating seasonally ... it just tastes better and you know the difference," he explained. "When corn comes in locally, we include it on our menu and we buy from local farmers or at local farmers' markets. The only times we've had to supplement our offerings is when people have enjoyed it so much."

And by supplementing, Voltaggio means purchasing specialty items from Chef's Garden in New Jersey and from the Mennonites in Pennsylvania. "But it's all grown with sustainable practices in greenhouses," he said "Part of my challenge is getting through the winter months without local products, but I'm satisfied that at least we don't purchase products from Chile or New Mexico. I would say 80 to 90 percent of the produce is grown locally."

The chef tries to be a "responsible buyer" with other products, like fish, meat and poultry. "I buy fish from Australia but it's from a responsible and sustainable farmer who uses these practices," he said. "It's through the Clean Fish Alliance and they are using practices that don't harm the ecosystem."

Voltaggio explained that 700 people live on the island where Arctic Chard comes from and all are hand caught with sustainable lines and fishing practices. "These people maintain and sustain their lifestyles through this industry," he said. "Obviously I pay more for a product like that, 'til I fly it and truck it here, but at least I'm not ripping trout out of the Potomac (River). So I try to balance that out to the point where I can sleep at night."

The side motive to Chef Voltaggio's work is to "get people more excited about food. Sometimes the challenge as a chef is to be more creative ... we want to impress our guests, and have our guests stretch us to achieve that."



*While the kids (young goats) play in the barn, right, cheese is produced in a facility next door, top. In addition to taking top honors for his goat cheese, Wayne Cullen, below, has exhibited several grand champion dairy goats at local, state and national fairs.*



But even more than that, he said, "We need to get back to basics of family gatherings. If we did that, there would be more appreciation for food, more respect for what we put on our plates. It gives us the opportunity to talk about where the food came from and when we do that, the next generation will have more of an appreciation for it.

"My mom demanded that our family all be seated for dinner every evening. Come hell or high water we all better be seated at 5:30. It's the respect for food and the meal and family time. Let's face it, in many homes today the dinner table is used for the mail and laundry."