

The People Behind

the Plates

It's easy to
forget the power of food.

We think about it three times daily, often in a rush. Food, however, is a way to travel without ever leaving the table, to learn about other cultures. It brings people together to share stories, innovates and draws inspiration from its community. Healthy Living learned from four local restaurateurs what it takes to serve different, delicious dishes just like this.



By Katie McPherson • Photography by John Jernigan

Chef Patrice Perron,

La Cuisine

The magic of food is why La Cuisine in downtown Ocala exists today—because Chef Patrice Perron appreciated it, even as a boy. He loved watching ingredients transform in the oven.

“I was fascinated by the magic of this step. What it’s going to be? What it’s going to look like after we make the batter? It was fun for me, really.”

Being born and raised in Lyon, France, the gastronomy capital of the world, was all too perfect. But Perron began his career in banking, until the feeling of being just a number grew tiresome. He stopped everything to attend culinary school at Institut Paul Bocuse. During a master class he met Chef Joseph Viola.

Chef-in-training Perron began working at Viola’s restaurant, Daniel & Denise, under Viola’s mentorship. While most chefs enforce a kitchen hierarchy, this was not their relationship.

“He was like a second father,” he says. Perron’s dream was to open a French restaurant in the United States. During a vacation with his family in 2005, they stopped in Ocala to visit a friend.

“Very quiet, very peaceful, nice people. When I came into a couple of restaurants, they were packed. In my mind I came to the United States to make a market study on where I should go. I said ‘yeah, let’s go here.’” Perron, his wife, Elodie, and their two children sold everything in France and bought their downtown location in 2008,

remodeling and opening in 2009.

“In American people’s minds, French cuisine is something fancy or trendy, almost posh. I used to go in restaurants in France and it was comfort food with friends, you drink a lot of wine, talk about the world. It was friendship cuisine,” he says. “There is always a stew or gratin, or pasta with cheese and bacon, but something very classical, simple.”

La Cuisine has a crowd of loyal dining guests after seven years of business and five consecutive *Florida Trend* Golden Spoon Awards. Thanks to them, Perron’s personality can shine through his food, a cuisine ruled by traditions and mathematical mother sauces.

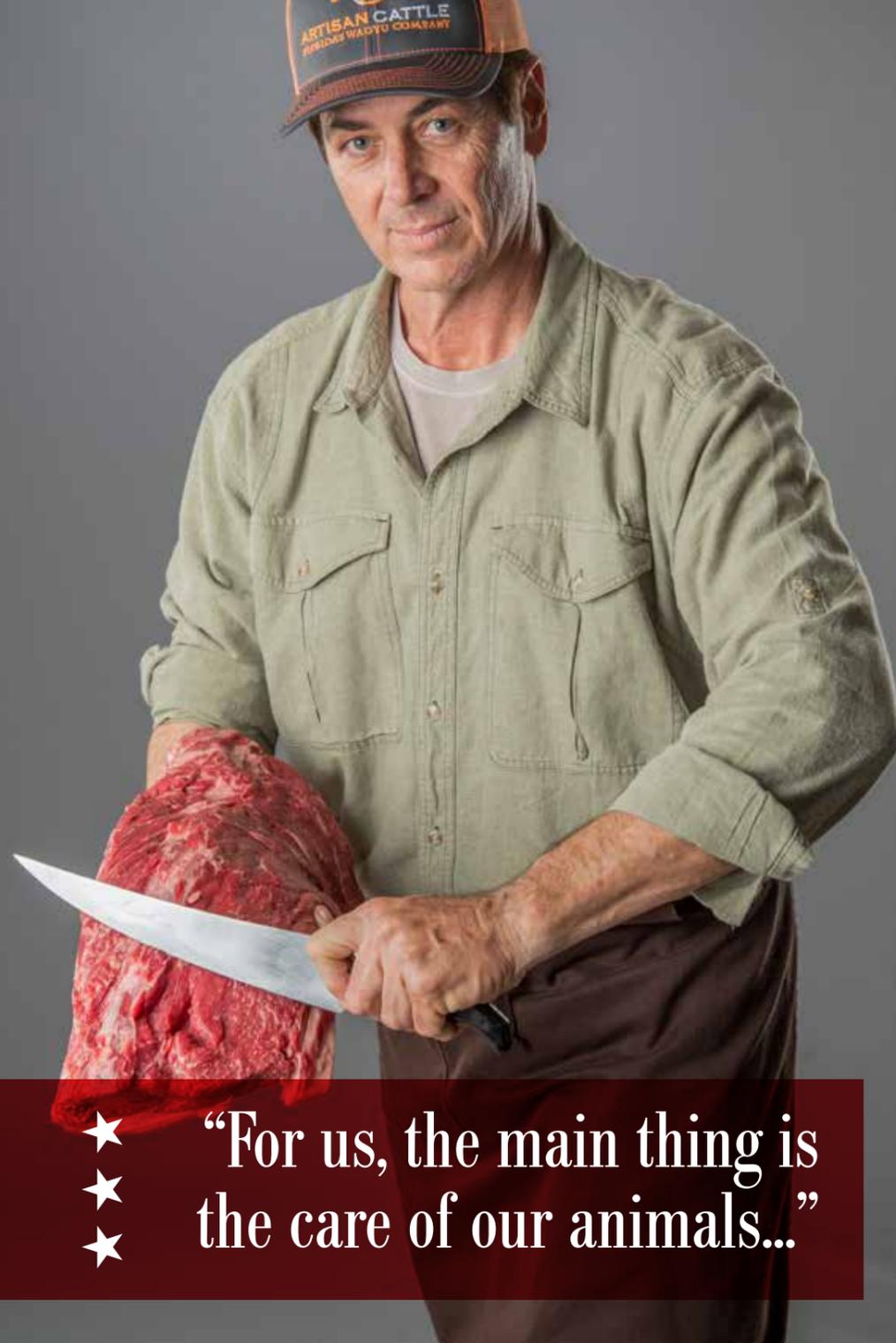
“There is the culture, and after, there is your personality. This is more to share my culture, to share the base. But day after day, when you start to know people and they come back, they know the classics and want more, so you can add a little bit of your personality. This is what I like.”

La Cuisine French Restaurant
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(352) 433-2570
lacuisineocala.com



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★ “For us, the main thing is
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Chef Greg Mullen, *The Blue Wagyu*

“If we can do it from scratch, we do. If it’s not in season, I don’t want it. We take more of a rustic approach. We’re a little more country than rock ‘n’ roll in that sense,” Chef Greg Mullen laughs.

Mullen spent his early years in his mother’s restaurant and moved to Southeast Asia his junior year of high school, where he first encountered wagyu beef. He came to Ocala about 10 years ago and opened a downtown cooking school, where he met Mary Maverick Gary, now his business

partner. Blue Wagyu began when the two attended a wagyu convention, which led to procuring land to raise their own cattle, responsibly.

“It started off with 20 cows. Now we’re at 400-plus animals,” says Mullen of the farm they use to supply the Blue Wagyu restaurant and store. “For us, the main thing is the care of our animals and to do it a better way. We are opposed to feed lots, so that meant we had to fall into a pasture-based program.”

For them, wagyu is also a way to redirect the future of cattle farming.

“These animals bring high concentrations of monounsaturated fats and omega 3s and 6s. If you were to take those genetics and put them over into commercial cattle, you’re going to up the quality level and the health benefits,” Mullen explains.

Commercial beef are harvested at 18 months, but Mullen’s livestock isn’t harvested until over three years. They breed both 100 percent wagyu (of which there are only 5,000 in the United States) and American wagyu, which are 75 to 87 percent wagyu and part angus.

“All of our burgers, 90 percent of our steaks, all of our chuck roast, our chilis, it’s all made from beef we produce here in Ocala,” says Mullen.

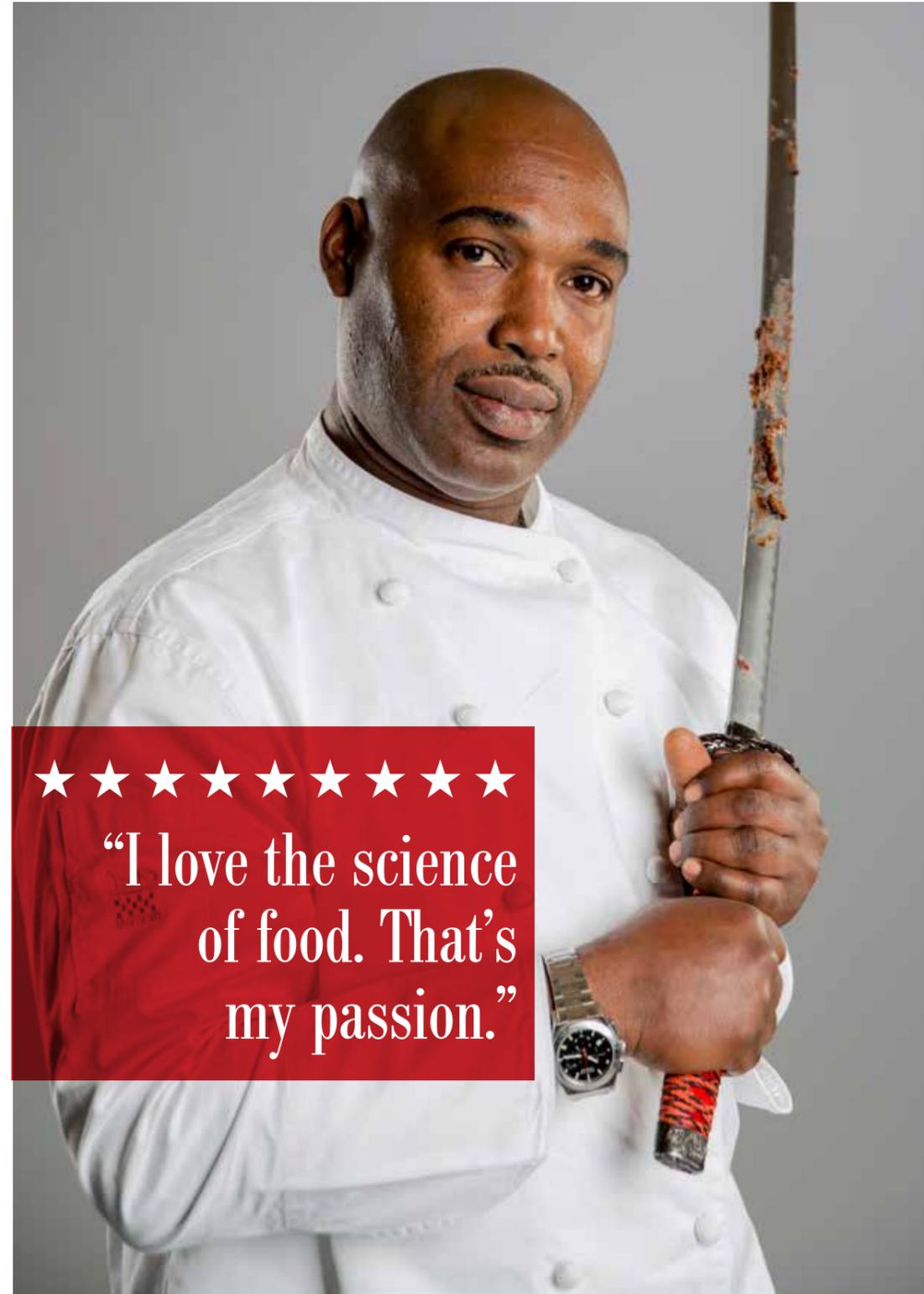
To taste a variety of wagyu beef, raised locally and imported from Japan, try a wagyu flight. The rest of the menu is laden with burgers, each named for a famous wagyu sire. (A study by Oxford University found there is such a thing as the perfect burger. Turns out, it requires wagyu.)

“You’ve got four receptors on your palate when you eat a burger and the brain registers ‘OK, that’s beef.’ Then you eat wagyu, and it hits six receptors because it’s got those higher fats and amino acids,” he explains. “I believe that’s what people want. They want food that’s wholesome, clean, simple and fires off those things their bodies say they need.”

The Blue Wagyu
6998 N. US Hwy 27, Unit #111, Ocala
(352) 622-9977
bluewagyu.com

Chef Albert Barrett, *Stella’s Modern Pantry*

Peeling 200 pounds of onions would drive anyone out of the kitchen, and Chef Albert Barrett did flee after his first day of work, but only as far as the pastry department. Now he creates flavor-fusing confections and international dishes at Stella’s Modern Pantry, a café and gourmet store, alongside Stacey Atsides and Stephanie Harrison. The three opened Stella’s in 2009 as a way to bring the world, in bites, to Ocala.



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“We wanted a Ritz Carlton atmosphere at affordable prices,” says Barrett, noting the menu items are almost always \$10 and below. Their menu is lunchtime perfection—market salads, flatbreads and sandwiches. Stella’s also deals in cured meats, special cheeses, spices and more from all over the world.

“If we have something in our store and you can go to Publix or Walmart and get it, we don’t want it anymore,” Barrett says.

Stella’s stocks wines from around the world, lately growing their selection from Greece, which Barrett says is becoming a force in the global wine industry. These are the bits of knowledge customers can pick up here during a wine tasting, tapas walk or culinary class.

“Educating people is what we’re all about,” he explains. “We did a class on salts from all over the world, different types of salts. Most people think iodized salt is salt.”

Barrett says it’s also important to source locally and drive growth in the community.

“We try to use local farmers as much as we can. We utilize Crone’s Cradle a lot. We utilize goat’s milk from a farm in Ocklawaha. It’s amazing working with local people creating food,” says Barrett.

“We do not use any form of preservative or anything artificial here. We try to produce everything from scratch.”

About Chef Barrett’s desserts: They won’t bore.

“I love the creative aspects of desserts. I love the science of food. That’s my passion. I like to break things down to the cellular structure and just have fun. I like to do wedding cakes, I like to do showpieces working with chocolate or sugar and just make things,” says Barrett.

This creative chef’s favorite dessert, however, is far more straightforward.

“One measly scoop of vanilla ice cream. But it has to be good ice cream! I like Hagen Daaz,” he laughs.

Stella’s Modern Pantry
20 SW Broadway St, Ocala • (352) 622-3663
Search Stella’s The Modern Pantry on Facebook for event dates.



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“I’m old school enough now where I still like making my own stocks, my own reductions.”

Chef Loring Felix, *Mesa de Noite*

If there’s a chef who has shaped Ocala’s food scene, it’s Loring Felix.

“I’ve been feeding her since Bella Luna,” he laughs as one of his loyal customers exits after her meal, patting his shoulder. Bella Luna Café is one of numerous restaurants he’s opened in his time, three of which are in Ocala.

“I started out frying fish at Long John Silver’s when I was 15 years old,” says Felix. “I’ve cooked French, American, Italian, a little Asian rim, but I always went back to Italian. My stepfather was Sicilian, so growing up my mother cooked a lot of Italian food, and she’s an excellent cook.”

His mother was a nurse working the 3-to-11 shift, so she’d leave notes for Felix to make dinner for his younger brother and sister. Then came Long John Silver’s, which led to baking in the Marine Corps, then opening upscale restaurants in South Florida with colleague Dick Cingolani, who reintroduced Felix to Italian cuisine.

“He had over 37 sauces on the menu. He had documentation of all the places in Italy he traveled for research,” he says. “I learned a lot of the history and culture of Italy from him as I learned to cook the food. That’s where my love of that food started.”

Felix is now chef at Mesa de Noite, where he brings his years of experience to life and still makes almost everything, down to the dressings, from scratch.

“I’m old school enough now where I still like making my own stocks, my own reductions. The only dressing I buy is ranch because I can’t make a better one than Hidden Valley,” he adds with a laugh.

Felix’s food is, above all, flavorfully simple.

“A lot of the food I do is very simplistic. Let the flavors stand on their own. I think that’s what makes my food stand out: The food itself stands out regardless of what I do for presentation on it. I like things stacked and layered for height and eye appeal, but the right combination of flavors is what it’s all about, bringing them together to complement each other.”

Mesa de Noite
2436 E Silver Springs Blvd, Ocala, FL 34470
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mesaocala.com



Top Chef Q&A: Gail Simmons

If you’ve so much as channel-surfed past Bravo, you’ve caught a glimpse of *Top Chef* judge Gail Simmons. She’s worked in innumerable groundbreaking restaurants, penned a memoir and filled *Food & Wine Magazine* with delicious recipes for more than 11 years. Who could tell us better what to look forward to in 2016?

What’s new on this season of *Top Chef*?

We shot this season in California. Usually, we go to one city and explore that city for the whole season, but this season we explored the whole state of California. It kind of felt like a family road trip. It really let us keep the challenges fresh, and we’re doing our finale in Las Vegas.

What do you think will be trending in food in 2016?

There’s a lot of great things happening in the food space right now. I like to think some of them are ultimately here to stay. One I love seeing is chefs and restaurants getting creative about not wasting food. We as a country waste something like 30 percent of our food not meaning to, even in our own refrigerators. I love how chefs all over the world are composting or finding ways to incorporate food that might otherwise be wasted.

One cuisine making an impact right now in terms of restaurant openings is Filipino food. I think it’s one of the last great cuisines of Asia that hasn’t been explored in the main restaurant zeitgeist. The same goes for Korean food. Middle Eastern food, Lebanese food, Moroccan food, Syrian food, the food of that part of the world is so much more than falafel and hummus. I think there’s

a lot of chefs opening restaurants that honor that beauty.

How can home cooks broaden their horizons and learn to cook more and better?

I always try to come home with one new thing from the periphery of the supermarket, because that’s where all the whole foods are as opposed to packaged and processed foods. Buy one thing in the store you’ve never heard of, whether it’s an apple you’ve never tasted or instead of potatoes buying yucca. You’ll always be able to try something new. Look up a recipe from a chef you trust, and give it a shot.

You have another season of *Top Chef* on the horizon. Do you have any other upcoming projects?

I’m in the middle of working on a cookbook, and I’m really excited to do my own with my personal recipes from the last 20 years of working on *Top Chef* and food and travel writing. I have a production company I’m producing a bunch of shows with I’m excited about. I still work with *Food & Wine Magazine*. I’ve been with them for 11 and a half years, and we have a new editor-in-chief coming on board soon.

Keep up with Gail!
gailsimmons.com
Twitter: @gailsimmons
Instagram: @gailsimmonseats
Sources: forbes.com

