



» Q&A

Reality Check

In this age of “field-to-fork” and “market-sourced,” **Chris Becker** dodges the buzzwords. As Bagby Restaurant Group’s chief operations officer, he labels his company’s venues simply “real restaurants.”

The Fleet Street Kitchen (page 34) menu lists the farm supplying the main ingredients in each dish. The most common source? Cunningham Farms in Cockeysville, Maryland—Bagby’s own. Twice a week, farmhands deliver coop-fresh eggs and crates of mint and fava beans from the high beds.

Becker oversees it all: A new restaurant in Towson called Cunningham’s (opening in the fall), a rural butcher shop in-the-works and 150 employees.

Editor *Kelsey Snell* spent the morning on the farms (page 4) and later talked with Becker about his day’s work, from (dare we say) farm to table.

KS: Tell me about your culinary background.

CB: I grew up fishing, searing and sautéing at home. Culinary school came easily to me, because it was so hands-on. I finished at 19.

Are your dishes inspired by what comes from Cunningham Farms, or do you propose ingredients?

I do make requests, but I don’t force it. I trust our farmers to do what the

terroir allows. What grows together goes together. That’s the beauty of cooking seasonally.

But what are your must-haves?

Always Sun Gold tomatoes, fava beans, cauliflower, red-veined sorrel and chard

Has an unexpected ingredient inspired a new recipe?

Kiwis. They came off the farm, and Tim [Riley] concocted a drink. He makes “shrubs,” which are like pickled syrups preserved by adding vinegar. They give drinks tartness and sweetness.

What does the process look like when you brainstorm a dish?

I know what flavors and textures go together, like the acids that contrast with a rich creamy puree, but I never force anything. If ingredients aren’t working together, I don’t use them.



Is Fleet considered “farm-to-table”?

I tread carefully on that phrase. To me, what we do is just run a real restaurant. Back in the day, restaurants cooked in season, and so do we. Our bakers even make house-made *viennoiserie* like croissants and Danishes every day.

Which chef do you look up to? Why? I’ve followed Dan Barber at Blue Hill

Farm in New York. By learning more about his food ethics, I’ve adapted my own and become more efficient. It’s the right thing to do, and the food just tastes better.

What do you look for when recruiting and hiring chefs?

A good chef should be a businessperson, a line cook, a dishwasher, a gardener, a fishmonger and a butcher. My chefs must be able to, at some capacity, wear all of those hats. And they have to be efficient and cook good food.

What’s your leadership approach with the chefs you oversee?

I let go enough to promote the passion, energy and creativity of each chef. If I micromanage, I’ll get a numb atmosphere, but if I allow every tangent, there would be no order. It’s nice finding people who are cut from a similar cloth, who believe in artisanal products, slow food and doing things the right way.

You’ve watched the Baltimore food culture change over the last 10 years. Where do you fit in?

When I was in culinary school, I knew I wanted to help elevate Baltimore’s culinary scene. I didn’t want my name to be known, just my food. I think I’m getting there.

What lessons have you learned in this last year at Fleet and with Bagby?

A restaurant is a thousand little things that one tries to do right. You have to be vigilant.