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Accidental Butcher: A Granola-Head Is Happy in the Smokehouse

By KARLA COOK

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WHAT is old is new.

If Emil and Joe Maresca are traditional butchers, genuine New Jersey institutions, then Stephen McDonnell is the new version. Mr. McDonnell, a self-proclaimed granola-head, was casting about for a business to run when he happened upon a smokehouse for sale in Flemington.

Without consulting family or friends (because he knew what they would say), he bought it and took the founder's son, Chris Ely, as a partner and began to remake the meat business.

Since that day in 1987, Applegate Farms, with its offices in Bridgewater, has become a leading purveyor of nitrate-free, antibiotic-free, deli-style meats, sausages and smoked items, wrapped in plastic and offered for sale at mostly high-end markets and organic grocery stores. He differs, he says, from Alice Waters, the California chef and food entrepreneur who in the 1970's revolutionized the restaurant landscape by serving only fresh, locally grown produce that she commissioned from growers.

"Should we support local? Yes, but farming is important," Mr. McDonnell says in a telephone interview. "I want to support small and local farms with the natural environment that supports the natural production of what we want raised." So he travels the world to find farms that suit his philosophy of sustainable agriculture. He likes beef from Uruguay, pork from Canada and turkeys from small farms in Pennsylvania.

The business, he says, is competitive, but it's all about patience. "Quality in meat is about slow and steady. It's the same in growing birds and animals. The best thing about meat is giving it time to mature and air-dry. Slow-cooking usually nets better quality and better flavor." What's nice, he says, is that his products, are getting back to original flavors. "Italians come and taste the sausage and they say: 'Oh, my god! This is what it tasted like when I was a kid.'" Karla Cook

Applegate Farms products are available at Delicious Orchards, Foodtown, Kings, McCaffrey's, ShopRite, Whole Foods and Wild Oats markets. For more information: www.applegatefarms.com.
