

FROM BETWEEN THE VINES

Harvest at Seaside Farm.
Photo by Janet Garrity Saucier.

BY KATE BUSH
PHOTOS BY MICHELLE LYNN MORRIS

The cure to your next hangover is growing in bulk beside the marshes in Frogmore, South Carolina. And has been since you were far underage.

It didn't take Ross Taylor and Will Collins very long to see that their signature Bloody Mary Mix was leaps and bounds beyond the competition. After all, when you begin with a superior source, a superior product is sure to follow. And when you start with vine-ripe tomatoes, cultivated and perfected over the past 115 years, superiority is but a few sprinkles of Carolina Sea Island spice away from perfection.

Ross Taylor grew up on his Great Great Granddaddy, Gus Sanders', 400-acre plantation; among the vines, he helped his family pick green tomatoes by hand—sometimes hundreds of thousands at a time—to be crated and distributed after June harvest. Now on their sixth generation, the Sanders family harvests up to 25-million-pounds of premium tomatoes for companies all along the East Coast.

But a standard of the industry, plantations like the Sanders' experience a considerable overhead in fruit that is too ripe to sustain a proper shelf life. The Sanders' call these tomatoes "ripe right now." It isn't uncommon for the family to pay to dispose of

up to ten million pounds of ripe right now tomatoes each year, resulting in what Ross Taylor doesn't describe as a loss, but rather a natural consequence of the business.

What began as pure experiment—two Clemson boys putting their hungover minds together to tweak a recipe for a heartier, fresher mix made from vine-ripe tomatoes—resulted in a product with the right amount of kick to help them overcome the shenanigans of last night and prepare them for another full day of fun.

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Overwhelming support came in standing orders and quick turnarounds; Taylor sold out of bottles at his own shop so quickly that he couldn't afford to fill requests from retail outlets. He recruited his best friend, Will Collins, someone who shared his vision for the product, to help him full-time. When harvest season would next approach, the two would have in their minds a plan to maximize this idea's potential.

Seaside Grown Bloody Mary Mix would be the first widely-distributed, fresh-from-the-field blend. Customers can now experience the culinary prowess behind Seaside Farm; this family is showing how far they can take God's finest tomatoes with their new brand, Seaside Grown—A Sea Island Brand.

Combined with "your favorite vodka, garnishes, and friends who know you best,"

this mix is reminiscent of everything you love about the low country.

"Nobody else is [making a true tomato-based product] on such a large scale," Taylor said. "This is a better product from freshness, taste, and nutritional standpoints.

You could even cook dinner with it."

Each jar of Seaside Grown Original Bloody Mary Mix contains two pounds of Sea Island Pure tomatoes, hand picked and bottled at harvest. "Hearty yet smooth, this family recipe is a refreshing crowd pleaser each and every time."

Seaside Grown attributes most of its success to the rich history behind it. Six generations of tomato growers and the warm sea have been cultivating its core product for over a century. In 1903, Taylor's Great

Great Grandfather, Gus Sanders, situated the East Coast's first commercial tomato farm on a pretty little peninsula across the sound from Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.

Gus discovered that tomatoes grow best in soil by the water's edge, snuggled in sand and surrounded by water. 115 years later, 25-million pounds are being distributed from that same original Seaside Farm. And although a new generation of businessmen and culinary masters have taken over, premium, fresh tomatoes are still the highest priority; picked by hand, Sea Island Pure™ tomatoes



Clockwise: Seaside Grown's Field Tasting and Brand Launching event; Tomato seedling; Ross Taylor and Will Collins; Seaside Grown's Original Bloody Mary mix.



undergo a grading selection process from the farm to their customer's tables, consistently setting them apart from brand name distributors.

Although Taylor knows his product's fresh taste gives it the ability to stand alone, he recognizes the value in its ancestry.

"This product works because it is a result of Seaside Farm and our tradition of growing vine-ripe tomatoes for over a century," he said. "If we weren't growing the best tomatoes in the world, our little farm and, now, our product, would not be able to sustain itself against all these other massive conglomerates."

After the last frost of the season, the Sanders' begin planting each year's crop at

the exact same location in Chisholm Field. In a few short months, these Sea Island fields will be plush with bright green tomatoes, ready to be harvested in June. Hundreds of workers flock to the fields to pick them right off the vine and carry them straight to

within the acre. Just as they run their distribution business, the Sanders family controls every aspect from seedling to spicing, right on their farm. The tomatoes you'll find in each bottle are hand-picked, sorted, and bottled the very same day, ensuring a sharp, fresh flavor that you won't find anywhere else.

And Will Collins, culinary mastermind behind the project, has gone the extra mile to find ingredients that are as equally fresh to help compliment the tomatoes.

"There's purpose behind finding ingredients that are pure and that which play off the ripeness of the tomatoes," Collins said. "We take its nutritional value seriously. Now, we're gluten free and a verified 95% natural product. Everything

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the farm's kitchen, where they're either distributed or packed straight into the jars of Seaside Grown Bloody Mary Mix.

Ross Taylor and Will Collins don't just claim to have made a fresh mix, they can prove it. Ask them which field a batch of tomatoes came from and they can tell you



Clockwise: A ride through the field; Nana—3rd Generation farmer and Sanders family matriarch; a tasting celebration in the field with special guests; the low country; Frogmore Manor, Circa 1810; Spicy or Original... your choice!

that goes into the product is either a tomato or a natural spice."

If you get them talking about the competition, Collins and Taylor might ask you to read the label of any other Bloody Mary mix that's on the market today.

"Unless it's \$20 a bottle or a limited run, the first ingredients are always water and tomato paste," Collins said. "This is revolutionary because it's a bottle that's under \$10 and being mass produced. Finding a real Bloody Mary mix is like coming across fresh squeezed orange juice made right off a grove."

Seaside Grown Bloody Mary Mix is available in two variations, Original and Spicy. Those who appreciate the pure taste of produce fresh-off-the-farm will enjoy the taste of Sanders' cultivated culinary delight. These certified South Carolina Grown tomatoes are sure to speak for themselves in the crisp taste behind the original mix.

Toss in a few special Gullah-inspired spices to the same Sea Island Pure™ tomatoes as the Original, and you've got a mix spicy enough to satisfy even Crazy Ole Man Gus. Created with the more daring in mind, Gus' Spicy Mix is known to pack a punch and wake you up for the crazy day ahead.

"For somebody that wants a superior quality with taste, texture, freshness, and everything else, that's us," Collins said.

Seaside Grown is garnering nationwide attention for their humble intentions, honest ingredients, and heartening lineage.

At the root of this success story is two Clemson boys with an appreciation for a decent Bloody Mary. With access to some of the best tomatoes you'll ever put in your mouth, a culinary and nutritional background, and a shared infinity for superior taste, they've "come up with something pretty badass."

"Even if the Bloody Mary mix was just halfway decent, I think the story behind it would end up selling it," Taylor concluded. "But it just so happens that it's actually better than the rest as well. You have a superior product as well as an amazing story. It's kind of a dangerous combination." ●

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