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A Roadie With a Whisk

By JEFF GORDINIER

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J.

RUSTY HAMLIN, a sunburned bear of a chef, held out a fragrant bowl of liquid and waved his hand over it theatrically, in the universal gesture for “take a whiff of this, pal.”

“Moonshine vinaigrette,” he said.

Even though [Mr. Hamlin](#) was in the midst of preparing a massive feast for roughly 150 hungry country-music fans, all of whom were set to show up very soon in a muggy parking lot outside the New Meadowlands Stadium here, his grin was impish and huge.

He and his cooking team were crammed into a long, narrow kitchen that looked like the interior of a tractor-trailer, because that’s what it was. Mr. Hamlin is the executive chef for the [Zac Brown Band](#), a rootsy Georgia-based sextet, and he regularly assembles his mise-en-place inside a 54-foot-long, 26-wheel, silver-and-blue highway behemoth called Cookie.

Midway through 2009, in an effort to reinvent the awkward preconcert ritual of a “meet and greet” with moon-eyed disciples, the Zac Brown Band decided to try something different. Now, before each show, Mr. Hamlin and the musicians dish up an “eat and greet” for a few quick-on-the-computer-keyboard members of their fan club.

There have been more than 120 of the gatherings so far. They are unexpectedly elegant affairs, as well as reflections of some of the new agrarian-centered, fresh-instead-of-deep-fried thinking that is cropping up in Southern kitchens. Across the region, young chefs are cooking in a way that “evokes the history of Southern food through really bright interpretations of what that food is,” said [Hugh Acheson](#), a Georgia chef and the author of a forthcoming cookbook called “A New Turn in the South.”

“Southern food needs to be a celebration of the bounty we have around us,” he said.

Bounty indeed. Any fans who expected to chow down on stale nacho chips and watery salsa were in for a pleasant shock.

“They have no idea,” Mr. Hamlin said. “I’m going for it. People don’t know what they’re coming to — they probably think they’re going to get hamburgers and hot dogs. And it’s like, bam, I’ve got you!”

Take Mr. Hamlin’s neo-hillbilly vinaigrette: whisked with dark molasses, pickle juice and eight ounces of Junior Johnson’s Midnight Moon whiskey, it was destined to douse a brightly colored and bracingly fresh [salad](#) of heirloom [tomatoes](#), smoked corn, edamame and the same house-pickled (or perhaps we should say truck-pickled) cucumbers that had produced the juice.

Mr. Hamlin, who is 37 and went to culinary school in Louisiana, collaborates with Mr. Brown, a longtime friend, on any band event where food is involved.

When the tour bus hits a new town, Mr. Hamlin heads out on a quest to track down as many ingredients as possible that come straight from local soil. That Saturday morning, he had scouted a farmers’ market in Paterson, N.J.

“Right now I’m sitting at around 50 percent local,” he said, surveying the afternoon’s dishes. “I’m very excited about that.” (Then again, some things you can find only in the South. Mr. Hamlin stocks Cookie with “a couple tubs” of Duke’s mayonnaise for the band’s signature coleslaw. “I just remember Zac saying, ‘Always use Duke’s,’ ” he said.)

The heirloom tomatoes were the opening chords of what was shaping up to be an epic culinary jam. On the way were slabs of beef tenderloin promiscuously packed with Mr. Brown’s own “Georgia Clay” rub and cooked fast on a scorching grill, pork tenderloin simmering in “Zac’s love sauce,” a veritable hillock of coleslaw, and Atlanta-baked bread rolls with agave-fig butter.

There would be braised brussels sprouts with country ham and red-eye gravy. Creamy polenta injected with smoked gouda and garlanded with wild mushrooms and snap peas. Platters of grilled cauliflower, broccoli and okra laced with saffron-chardonnay butter.

“Every day I know I’m going to have 150 guests, and I get to make whatever I want to make,” said Mr. Hamlin, who is also a partner in an Atlanta-area restaurant called Atkins Park Tavern. “And believe it or not, I make something new every day.” The moonshine vinaigrette was something he had conjured up on the fly.

That improvisatory spirit synchs up well with the ethos of the Zac Brown Band itself, which has forged a career out of thwarting expectations.

Although they got their big break with “[Chicken Fried](#),” a shout-along-to-the-jukebox blockbuster that paid tribute to the virtues of “sweet tea, pecan pie and homemade wine,”

their musical and philosophical approach has more in common with shaggy, consciousness-raising renegades like the Allman Brothers and Willie Nelson than with the latest Nashville robo-star.

The eat-and-greets are one way of shaking up assumptions.

“I want to blow people’s minds,” Mr. Brown, 33, said. “If I were somebody coming to a show, I would want food at that level. The secret to it being good is getting fresh produce — getting stuff that’s right out of the ground.”

Although the team declined to reveal the budget for each eat-and-greet, it’s substantial enough that sponsorship from brands like Kingsford charcoal, Creekstone Farms beef and Land Shark lager has been more than welcome.

When it comes to food, Mr. Brown isn’t flying blind. He and his father used to run a restaurant on the shore of Lake Oconee in Georgia. But as he began to hatch the idea of a transcontinental pop-up restaurant on rubber tires, a few allies had their doubts.

“When this whole idea came up, I thought, Oh, my God, this is going to be a disaster, because people are going to be nutso, climbing all over him,” said [Sonia Leigh](#), a singer-songwriter who often tours and performs with the band.

In time, Ms. Leigh became a believer. “It turns the locals on to what’s happening in their communities,” she said. “Now it almost seems like a no-brainer, like why didn’t anyone think of this before?”

When mealtime arrived on the afternoon of Aug. 13, fans were led into a tented area by Jennifer Gabriel, known as T Bird, the walkie-talkie-wielding leader of the “Zamily.” After shaking hands with the musicians, they took their seats among rows of picnic tables and waited for a sign that they could get in the chow line.

“My name is Chef Rusty,” Mr. Hamlin said into a megaphone. “Everybody hungry?”

Roadhouse cheers and hoots burst out. Once they had had a chance to dig in, though, many of the fans seemed mildly stunned.

“This is like top-notch Southern comfort food,” said Alicia Plaag, 39. “And I love that they bought local produce. That speaks volumes about their character.”

Many of them winced and begged off when they saw the coleslaw, but Clay Cook, the band’s guitarist, who was spooning it out in the buffet line, gently forced them to try it. “I tell them they have to have it,” he said. “I’m a slaw pusher, really.”

Mr. Brown conceded, “There’s a lot of bad slaw out there.” He and Mr. Hamlin counter problems of taste and texture by cutting their mayonnaise with mustard and horseradish, shredding the cabbage down to nibbles smaller than a Chiclet, and mixing in the dressing moments before the bowl hits the table so that the slaw doesn’t become soggy.

As the crowd ate, band members hopped from table to table. At one point Mr. Brown squeezed in next to Alec Quintalino, a 17-year-old fan from Scarsdale, N.Y.

This was the first concert he had ever attended.

Someone at the table pointed out that, alas, concerts don’t usually involve the luxury of sitting down with the band for farm-fresh food.

“But that’s what we want,” Mr. Brown said. “We want everyone from this point on, when they go to other shows, to feel like they got cheated.”

He took a look up and down the table, nodding and smiling.

“People remember when you feed them,” he said. “They do.”