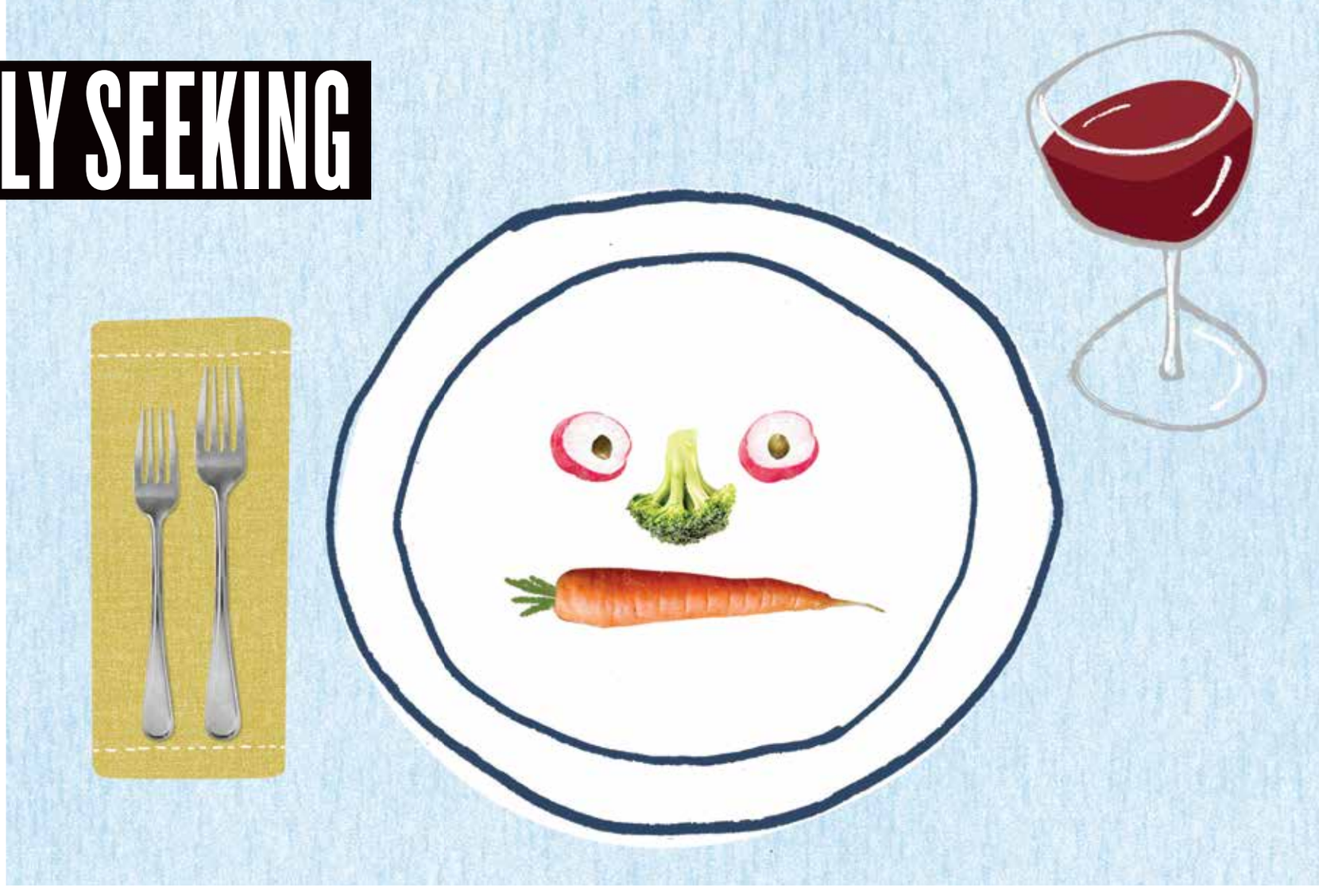
DESPERATELY SEEKING SEEGER

What happens when critic turns unreliable narrator?

by JOHN KESSLER



Natalie Nelson

THE RESTAURANT WAS CALLED SEEGER'S, and for the first nine years I reviewed restaurants for *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, it was the best one in town. I knew this because the simplest dishes captivated me, time and again. I knew this because the restaurant's chef-owner, Günter Seeger, not only trained many of the city's top chefs, he built its first network of local farmers. I knew this because I often declared it the best with that obnoxious unilateralism a restaurant critic can employ. I never minded that a chunk of my readership couldn't disagree more. I had no problem arguing my case. Nobody in town cooked with the stripped-down purity of Günter Seeger. No one in the country did.

Over those nine years, I visited Seeger's a couple of dozen times more. I wrote mash notes when he received a Relais & Chateaux designation, and when *Esquire* named Seeger's a best new restaurant in the country. I wrote about the lobster ice cream he made in a high-tech Pacojet. I re-reviewed the restaurant in its twilight, too, justifying its high prices when it was charging $160 for lunch and all of Buckhead was an abandoned construction site. My assessment of the restaurant had started to sound like a defense. Was I drifting into unreliability—not quite Humbert Humbert, but maybe Nick Carraway—when Seeger was the subject?

Seeger's closed in 2006, limping at the end. It hosted few diners during the week but enough on Friday and Saturday to tax the reduced floor staff. The chef went under the radar for nearly a decade. He moved to New York with his wife, Leslie, his former hostess and then manager, whose long legs and graceful carriage would make you guess correctly that she was a professional dancer. He worked as a consultant, developing high-end prepared meals for British and Canadian supermarket chains. He and Leslie had a daughter, Alessandra, his fifth. After years of rumors, then a build-out beset by permitting woes, he resurfaced in New York's West Village in mid-2016 at a redux restaurant called Günter Seeger NY. My wife and I planned a trip to New York a few days after it opened, ostensibly to visit our daughter but really to eat Seeger's food again.

On that June night, we endured some understandable opening glitches. The

Brian Bloom

spotlight poised above our table seemed a scant degree shy of tanning booth. And the ample floor staff, with few tables to serve, tended to move en masse through the room like a team of six-year-old soccer players. But the food! I recognized Seeger's clean touch as readily as Ella Fitzgerald's voice, that nuance that could only belong to one person. Some dishes were new and others so familiar. His foie gras with Vidalia onion jam and baked apple. His hot, tremulous egg custard served in the shell, with cream and maple. A loving tribute to a famous Alain Passard dish, Seeger served it with a salty lashing of bottarga. The flavors brought me back to his table in Atlanta and to Atlanta itself. As much as this classically trained German chef appeared, at times, to chafe at what seemed to him the provincial tastes of his adopted Southern city, he managed to change them.

BEFORE COMING TO ATLANTA, SEEGER HAD been chef at Hoheneck restaurant near the Black Forest of his native Germany, where he had earned a Michelin star in 1978 for applying the French techniques he had learned in hotel school to German dishes. The restaurant wouldn't have thrived without its twice-weekly shipments of luxury goods from Paris. Not everything was imported, though. At Hoheneck, Seeger began his lifelong work of cultivating growers and suppliers. He doesn't remember any specialties from the period, as much as I press, cajole, or flatter him. I've come to understand the recipes themselves don't matter to him. The heart of his cuisine is process—applying technique precisely to the ingredients at hand while looking for serendipity. For instance, he knows how an herb changes flavor when it flowers, and how blooming chamomile can work with langoustine or lavender with kiwi. I would bet dollars to dacquoise that a chemist would find the same phenolic compounds repeated. Longtime Atlanta dining critic Christiane Lauterbach has a simpler explanation. "He's like a Japanese chef," she says. "He coaxes the essence of something."

When Seeger talks about local produce, he never sinks to farm-to-table platitudes. "You have different climates, and you have different microorganisms in the soil," he says. "They make most of the flavors, but most people have no idea about soil. A strawberry in France tastes different from a strawberry in Germany."

"And in America...?" I prod.

"In America you have two feet of topsoil," he says with a quick, ironic German laugh. "It is what it is. I work hard to make the best of what we have here."

That attitude infuriated some in Atlanta and galvanized others.

Seeger was thirty-five when the Ritz-Carlton brought him Stateside in the mid-'80s to make The Dining Room restaurant in the hotel's flagship Atlanta property a destination. It was the heyday of gourmet hotel restaurants, when the Ritz-Carltons and Four Seasons promoted name chefs. Washington's Watergate Hotel was famous for burglars in the 1970s and for chef Jean-Louis Palladin in the 1980s. Seeger was in that cohort of young Europeans poised to make over America's notion of fine dining.

"He introduced the philosophy of seasonality as a linchpin of menu writing," says Shaun Doty, the chef-owner of The Federal in Atlanta, who was one of the talented young trainees in Seeger's Ritz kitchen. "He tried to cultivate this network of people locally who would grow things for him. It wasn't all about luxury ingredients."

It was, instead, about finding everyday vegetables. Clay Calhoun had been farming in northern California, where he sold produce to Chez Panisse and Greens,

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the Bay Area restaurants at the heart of the 1970s food revolution. Now he and his wife, Lucy, were trying to get their family property, Ashland Farm, up and running with a ten-acre vegetable farm. They asked their distributor to show the vegetables to Seeger, who found them unremarkable. Time had robbed them of flavor. But he wanted to see the farm.

The distributor brought Seeger to Ashland, about an hour east of Atlanta, where he pulled a runaround. He said he'd use the Calhouns' vegetables if they sold directly to him. He told them to drop his name when looking for other chef-clients and, says Lucy, "It was magic. The world opened up when I said Günter Seeger.'" Greens from Ashland Farm became the first locavore signifier on Atlanta menus, a promise of lively salad, of mineral flavor, of respectful restraint from the kitchen.

Seeger began bringing his kitchen crew to the farm to prepare dinners for other farmers and patrons. They toured the gardens, they cooked, they went skinny-dipping in the pond. Lauterbach, a sometimes guest, remembers the naked swims fondly, as well as Seeger's delight at being in nature. "I saw Günter break a small watermelon on his leg and the juice run down his thigh."

At the Ritz-Carlton, Doty says, the menu was a nightly experiment. Seeger never consulted cookbooks. When he and the other young chefs would go to Seeger's house after service to walk his dog, they expected to find a stash of cooking reference manuals, but there were none. (The only book Doty saw in the house was Madonna's *Sex*.) To him, Seeger seemed half creative genius, half autodidact. He invented dishes when he saw the ingredients.

Seeger began incorporating Southern vegetables while he was still at the Ritz-Carlton. Poke sallet showed up. Squab came plated with a hair-thin chiffonade of barely cooked collard greens in bacon jus. (In his mind, Southern agriculture and Southern culinary tradition were...divorceable.) Critics and epicures cherished him. In 1996, he earned the city's first James Beard award for best chef in the Southeast. For everyday Atlantans, it was a different story. "They didn't like it at all," Seeger recalls, saying clients expressed disappointment at not having their familiar salads and steaks.

To Lauterbach's recollection, Seeger never spoke ill of his clientele; it was a learning curve, after all. But he had choice words for some of his colleagues. "He used the word 'shoemaker' to describe them and their sense of luxury. To associate fresh with luxury wasn't a thing before Günter."

When I asked Seeger about this, he laughed and demurred. "It can be a highly regarded art to make shoes."

By 1997, he was a local celebrity and an important part of the city's civic life, ready to parlay it all into his own restaurant. His then-wife, Laureen, a high-powered Atlanta lawyer with whom he had two small girls, put together the financing for Seeger's. This jewelbox occupied a pointy-roofed house on the commercial edge of Buckhead, just beyond the mansions Tom Wolfe lampooned in *A Man in Full*, with their lawns "rising up from the street like big green breasts."

I had arrived in Atlanta the year Seeger's opened. My opinion would count as my first major test as the local critic. The restaurant showed world-class ambition, with tables clad in Frette linens and waiters in Armani suits. I went the first time with newspaper colleagues who loved their few bites of half-smoked salmon with horseradish cream and a dessert called "Seeger's Chocolate Dream" but found the portions dainty and the stripped-down culinary style disarming. I did, too. Fine-dining restaurants were still fond of their herb garnishes and swoops of sauce, and these unadorned dishes just sat there. They did not ask for love.

When I returned the following week with my wife, it didn't take us long to surrender to the cool pleasures and syncopated rhythms of Seeger's table. I remember oysters, their salinity and temperature calibrated precisely to the shimmery gelée flecked atop. I remember a slice of warm brioche with soft butter, and a course of rare squab that I cut with a bone-handled steak knife and swiped through date purée, as the dark sweetness of one taste pushed at the other. I remember rolling over in bed after that meal and thinking that I hadn't brushed my teeth and didn't want to. Crest would have tasted like a violation.

We returned for a third visit to try the five-course menu. When beef with roasted shallots and red wine sauce came to the table, the sommelier poured a Châteauneuf du Pape, and this familiar combination of flavors tasted unlike any version I had tried. I wasn't sure why. Something about the way Chef chose, cooked, and plated seemed to harness a synergy. Seeger's was the best restaurant that Atlanta had ever seen. That was not a point of contention, it was an evident truth.

As least I thought so. Some readers who took me up on the recommendation let me know that they had to stop off at the Johnny Rockets down West Paces Ferry Road for a burger after dinner. Many were furious about a surcharge for the Evian water the waiters poured all night.

This dance went on for years. Seeger's got some laudatory national press and counted among the dozen or so restaurants that earned five stars from the Mobil Travel Guide, a North American answer to the Michelin Guide. I ate there once or twice a year. You know that feeling of pleasure mixed with anticipation that makes you feel weightless? In summer, there might be fresh tomatoes with tomato gelée, tomato sorbet, and snow-white tomato mousse made from clarified juice. In the winter, a crêpe Suzette that made you stop to consider navel oranges in season. Sometimes, things got weird. Waiters would grate hazelnuts over quenelles of avocado mousse and unwrap steaming fig leaves to reveal a custardy nugget of foie gras within.

I became a familiar customer, known by my credit card name of Mr. Chapman. That is, until I maxxed out the card and had to pull out my debit card and tell the manager, Claude Guillaume, that it had a different name on it. "Not to worry, Monsieur Kessler," he said without looking at the card.

Atlanta restaurant-goers were either on team Seeger or, increasingly, not. They tried it once, twice, then spent their blowout dining dollars elsewhere. My annual best restaurants guide motivated readers to send anti-Seeger's screeds, from emails to multi-page, handwritten letters. The restaurant's business

dropped off, particularly on weeknights. When the Mobil Travel Guide awarded Seeger's five stars, we rushed a photographer to the restaurant to show Seeger and Guillaume celebrating. They toasted with Champagne, then finished the bottle and went home. There were no guests on the books that evening.

Some rich, food-obsessed friends who never liked Seeger's took my wife and me there one evening to try and understand my passion for it. We had the Heisenberg Uncertainty dinner. They were expecting a disappointment; I feared one. Sure enough, we had the worst table in the house, slow service, an uneven menu, and a waiter who misidentified every cheese on the cart. I can still tell you that the baby turbot fillet I ate that night had a revelatory crisp-yielding texture and came dotted with slivers of picholine olive, plumped Zante currants, and teeny-tiny, Barbie-doll brunoise of crouton. But I kind of saw their point.

Others loved Seeger's with fervor. C.J. Bolster, an Atlanta management consultant whose late wife, Barbara Petit, crusaded for good food and chaired the board of Georgia Organics, thought it the best restaurant in America. For Petit's fiftieth birthday, he took her on a coast-to-coast eating tour that included much of the rest of the Mobil five-star list. Compared to The French Laundry, Chez Panisse, Charlie Trotter's, Le Bernardin, and The Inn at Little Washington, "Seeger's was by far the best," Bolster recalls. "I don't want to put down those other places, but it stood out for the intensity of the flavors, the orchestration of the different courses, the timing of the ingredients in terms of the year."

That's the thing. To love Seeger's food, you really have to love seasonal vegetables. Not just say you love vegetables because they're pretty and good for you, when really you'd rather have a cheeseburger. No, you have to be the kind of person who gets blown away by green leaves.

Tucker Taylor, who formerly ran Woodland Gardens organic farm in Georgia, recalls a dinner Seeger hosted for local growers. "Out came these huge white plates, and on each was one whole leaf of Swiss chard, perfectly cooked." Taylor, now the director of culinary gardens for Kendall-Jackson Wines in California, laughs at the memory. "It was such a funny sight but, you know, that's how I like to eat."

Beyond the food, Seeger's detractors complained endlessly of something Southerners abhor: "snooty service." Unsmiling women in black skirts and white lace aprons brought cloche-topped dishes out on silver trays for unisex-suited waiters to briefly identify and place before diners with a paucity of warm fuzzies. The lack of chitchat left many Atlantans cold. That attitude also played into a self-loathing narrative of post-Olympics Atlanta—that the city was trying too hard at "cosmopolitan" and failing.

For the first time, Seeger looked outside of Atlanta for marketing help, and he retained Simone Rathlé, a Washington, DC, publicist who burnished the image of national clients. She softened the interior and talked Seeger into pouring tap water for diners who requested it. She persuaded him to add a Friday lunch service and addressed the biggest Atlanta bugaboo of all: the lack of valet parking. No longer would diners park their cars out back and walk up a flight of stairs. Instead, they drove to what Rathlé called the *Marquise de la Porte* (an elaborate tent) and let a smiling hostess escort them to the front door. I went for lunch and wrote a column about the changes at Seeger's. I said that the food was exquisite, joked that *Marquise de la Porte* sounded like a French courtesan, and didn't mention that I was one of three diners in the restaurant.

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Readers responded with outrage. "How can you spend that kind of money on lunch?" "Why don't you write about restaurants that real people can afford?"

Determined to stop losing money, Seeger announced his decision to close in 2006. Suddenly, everyone in Atlanta wanted a table for one last meal. He extended the closing date by a month, and then another. Guests grabbed 9 P.M. Wednesday tables.

"I think Atlanta has been incredibly unfair to him," sniffs Lauterbach.

AFTER MY EARLY VISIT TO GÜNTER SEEGER NY last year, the New York press began weighing in, not as favorably as one would expect. Steve Cuozzo, writing in the *New York Post*, called it "pricey, presumptuous, and pretentious" in a review that came off as incurious and slapdash. Daniel Wenger wrote a brief in *The New Yorker* that dismissed the cooking approach as "club food" "for the low-key rich." I bristled when I read that: Simple does not mean safe. Pete Wells in *The New York Times* showed insight into Seeger's approach, writing, "When you're surprised by his cooking, it's because the voice of the ingredients is coming through more clearly than you're used to." Yet he found one of his three meals inconsistent and only awarded the restaurant two stars out of four.

I returned this past winter to Günter Seeger NY. I tried to not succumb to nostalgia and instead look at the restaurant and the chef with a fresh critical eye. The restaurant had recently received a Michelin star, and the house was full on a Tuesday night. The lighting was easier, and the decor of the long, deep room had softened. The gorgeous kitchen in the back looked more like a glowing workshop than an operating bay. This redux restaurant seemed to have breathed in the spirit of the old Seeger's. When Chef stopped by the table, he told me, "We have more people coming from Atlanta than anywhere else." That didn't surprise me: Once you know Seeger's food, you crave it.

My brother and I ordered the ten-course tasting menu, as did every diner in the house that night. Seeger always starts off with something in peak season. In January that meant a coupe of citrus supremes in peppery olive oil. Then it meant whole leaves of purple Treviso lettuce in a mild anchovy dressing. Some might see a fruit cup and a Caesar salad; I tasted winter, bitter and sweet.

I knew what was coming: something rich to stop you cold. That night, it was a bowl of black truffle–flecked, soft-scrambled egg, tiled with black truffle slices. Sauerkraut with scallop mousse followed. Then lobster with spaetzle. The squab with date purée, a familiar thrill. A fantastic wedge of hard tomme. A lemon sorbet with the long finish of an aged chenin blanc closed the meal, mirroring the citrus at the beginning.

Was the meal uneven? I could find faults. The scallop mousse didn't offer as much flavor as the sauerkraut asked for. A raspberry tartelette dessert had a crust so firm it skittered off the plate when we tried to cut it with a fork. But I don't care about an uneven course here and there. After twenty years of groking Günter Seeger's food, I'm here to tell you he's the best cook I have ever known.

He finds the most expressive ingredients of the growing moment and presents them without an iota of pretension. He cuts right to the essence of things. To me, he is Oracle in *The Matrix*: a plainspoken conduit to a deeper engagement with reality. I think he was able to communicate that to the chefs and farmers he worked with. I suspect even his detractors in Atlanta saw this gift. He was the first chef to say, "Look what we can grow here."

Today, Atlanta goes nuts for micro-seasonality. When kale bolts, the flowers appear on menus around town. If you get me drunk, I will tell you that the best kale flowers taste like lemon pepper wings. Seeger taught us to pay attention. He made possible the kind of stripped-clean, farm-forward style of Southern cooking practiced by Miller Union's Steven Satterfield and others.

On a visit to Atlanta this May, I had a meal at Poor Hendrix, a casual restaurant and bar run by Seeger's last (and best) pastry chef, Aaron Russell. In a Seeger-esque move, Russell serves separate menus in the bar and dining room, and doesn't allow crossover. (The customer isn't always right—if you have a vision, you execute it.) After living in Chicago for nearly two years, where vegetables tend to be used as vehicles for fat and sauce, I was craving a big-ass summer salad. Russell didn't disappoint, serving a mound of frilly torn greens outfitted with peanuts, pickled green beans, and a few shavings of Manchego cheese. I recognized the guy sitting next to me as the farmer who used to sell peaches at the Decatur Farmers Market. It felt good to be back.

Seeger alums fill the kitchens of greater Atlanta, from Dave Roberts at Community Q BBQ to Daniel Porubiansky of Century House Tavern. Maybe none are national stars, but all place a premium on ingredients and technique. "He doesn't have an heir apparent, but he has had an influence on a vast number of people," says Lauterbach. These chefs prepare modest dishes with uncommon care, and in my nostalgia I taste a shadow of Seeger in their food.

ON MY LAST VISIT TO NEW YORK IN THE early spring of this year, I stopped by the restaurant one afternoon to say hi, even though I didn't have the time or budget to dine. Seeger and his team of five cooks were preparing a dinner for La Paulée de New York, an annual festival of Burgundy wine. One young chef whacked abalone shells with a knife to relax the meat inside, while another prepared meticulous brunoise dice of cucumber. Seeger's wife, Leslie, filled mint julep cups with white roses for the tables.

"There's the Pacojet!" I exclaimed, remembering the lobster ice cream of a decade ago. "It's been sitting in my parents' basement in Atlanta this whole time," Leslie laughed. I remembered how skilled she was as a maître d', how she humanized the restaurant with her good-natured Southern manners.

I asked him how the produce in New York compared to that in Atlanta. As with his early days in Atlanta, he has given up on getting it delivered because too much comes in past its peak. The only way he can get the produce he wants is to personally shop at the Union Square Greenmarket and hand-select the vegetables.

"Everything is so different here," he said. "When I went to the Morningside Farmers Market [in Atlanta], there would be five or six guys and everything was incredibly pristine. Union Square is twenty times bigger, but you have to look hard for the two or three guys you like."

"You know what, though, John," he said, lowering his voice and leaning in. "I will tell you something. It's better in Atlanta."

That doesn't surprise me. The farms are closer, the growing season longer, and thirty-two years ago a newly arrived German chef demanded the best.

John Kessler is the former longtime restaurant critic for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. *He is working on a book with The Giving Kitchen, Atlanta's lifeline to hospitality workers in need.*