

As a native North Carolinian raised just outside of Winston-Salem, Rhett Morris grew up with a passion for fly fishing and hunting. He especially enjoyed time outdoors with family and friends. Rhett's true passion for food started during a summer job with a barbecue restaurant.

"It didn't seem like work to me at all," Rhett says. "I loved being around food, and even more than eating it I loved the preparation."

Rhett worked as an engineer in a machine shop for 16 years, but always enjoyed cooking and being in the kitchen.

"It all started when a doctor friend of mine asked me to prepare some meals for him," he says.

A few dinner parties turned into personal chef and catering services that just began to grow into a full-time business seven years ago. However, the restaurant wasn't his initial plan.

"We did a lot of private events and catering, and when the economy worsened and catering declined, we opened the restaurant for lunch and after a year or so, we decided to add dinner," Rhett says.

With the restaurant growing, he became a regular at the weekly farmers market.

"I asked different farmers if they could grow this or that for the restaurant, and I would have enough that there was no reason to buy from anywhere else," he says.

With that premise in mind, Rhett began asking all of his vendors for North Carolina products instead of just focusing on fresh produce. With products like flour from the Old Mill of Guilford in Oak Ridge, Goodnight Brothers country ham in Boone, all-natural Ashley Farms chicken in Winston-Salem, Ashe County Cheese in West Jefferson combined with fresh fruit and vegetables from David's Produce in Ellerbe, Millstone Farm and Gardens in Cameron, Better Be Ellerbe Peaches and honey from Moore County beekeepers to name a few that make for the freshest offerings.

"It's our community, and the whole farm to table effort started with folks wanting to know where their food comes from and to support our local farmers, so I am never dependent on the weather in California, just the weather here in our state."

For his winning entries into the 2012 Best Dish in North Carolina competition, Rhett came up with a collard green spring roll appetizer, which has collard greens and roasted pork belly stuffed into a spring roll wrapped and fried to a golden brown, served with the house made creamy mustard dipping sauce.

His soup entry was Southern Gazpacho made with local cucumber, tomato, zucchini, bell pepper, yellow squash, and onion with chopped garlic and blended with a zippy tomato juice blend.

The salad entry, a spring vegetable ribbon salad combined local zucchini, squash, carrots, jicama on a bed of hydroponic Bibb lettuce topped with a house made strawberry balsamic vinaigrette sorbet.

A menu staple is Rhett's Southern-style chicken cordon bleu, which is a cornmeal crusted airline chicken breast stuffed with garlic, parsley and chive cheese and country Prosciutto topped with a light honey gravy and served with roasted sweet potato mash and sautéed greens.

And for dessert, the judges were treated to a corn meal cake topped with fresh local strawberries and whipped cream.

From the corn meal to the meat to all of the produce, Rhett incorporated N.C. products.

Located in the historic Belvedere Plaza Courtyard off West Pennsylvania Avenue in downtown Southern Pines, Rhett's serves lunch and dinner with dining room, bar and outdoor courtyard seating.

Rhett is honored to be in the company of previous winners in Moore County, Ashten's also in downtown Southern Pines and Elliott's in Pinehurst.

"Preparing local food and eating locally supports our local economy, and I believe you should do all you can for your state and your local community."

