

# DELAWARE Beach Life

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HOLIDAY 2018

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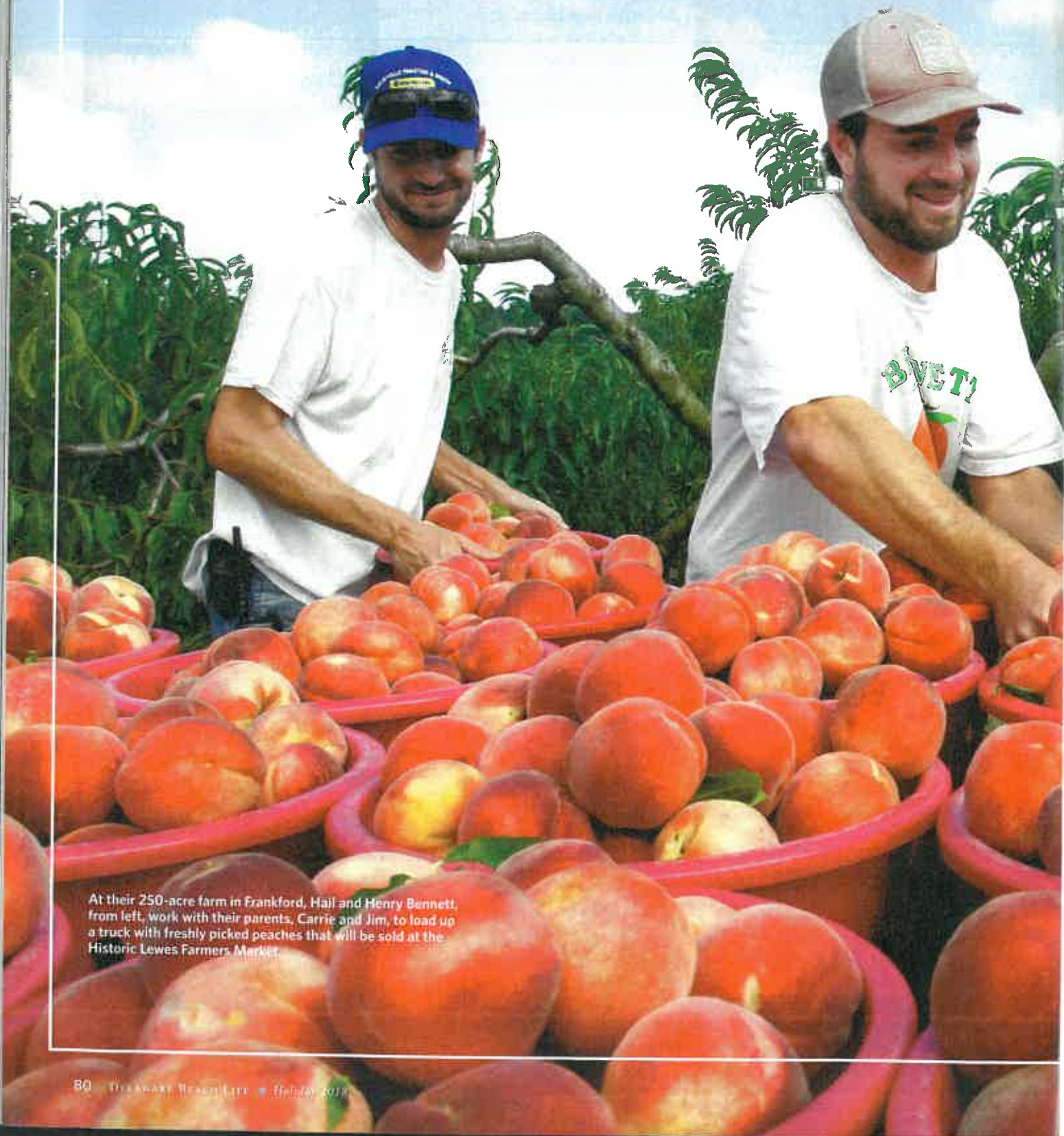
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# Deeply Rooted

By CHRIS BEAKEY | PHOTOGRAPHS BY CAROLYN WATSON



At their 250-acre farm in Frankford, Hail and Henry Bennett, from left, work with their parents, Carrie and Jim, to load up a truck with freshly picked peaches that will be sold at the Historic Lewes Farmers Market.

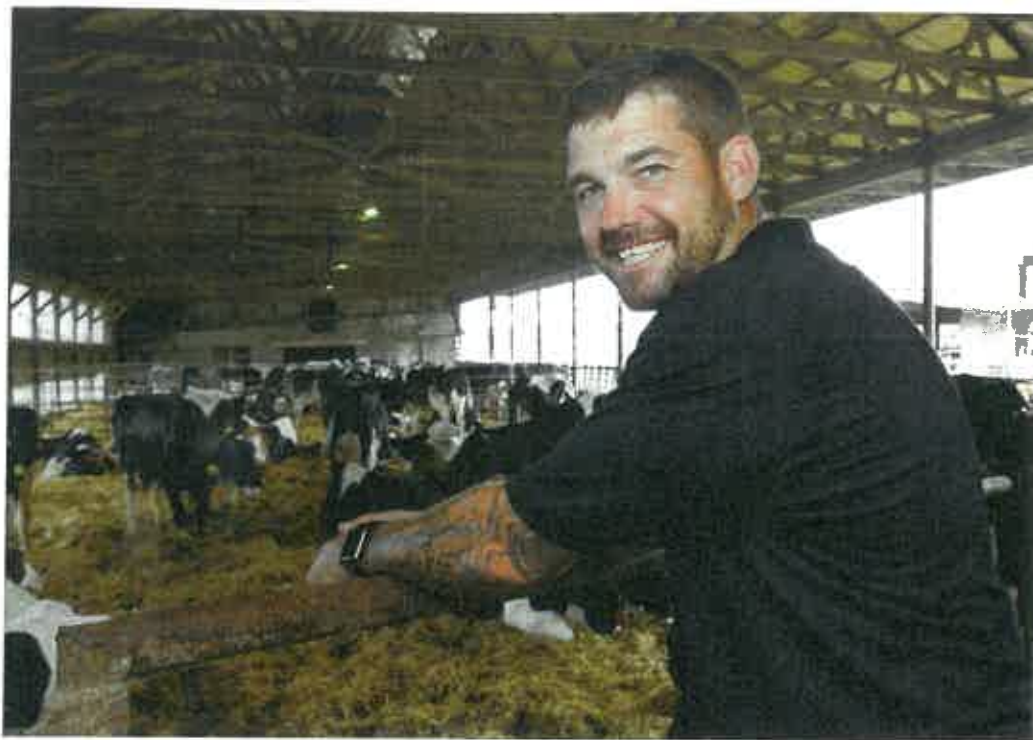


Despite developers' offers, tenuous economics and unending chores, family farmers in coastal Delaware say they'll provide locally sourced food till the cows come home

**H**enry Bennett grew up on his family's farm just outside Frankford, about 10 miles from the beaches where he loved to surf with his high school friends. Early on, those friends learned there would be days when Bennett couldn't join them. As they headed east to catch the morning waves, he'd stay behind to collect eggs from the chicken house, haul

pruned branches from the orchard, and chop firewood for the woodstove that served as the main heat source for the family home.

"I'm not going to sugarcoat it," he says, reflecting on those days as he sits at the kitchen table in a house built by his grandparents. "It was always hard, and there were a lot of days when I just hated it." >



Burli Hopkins, a fourth generation dairy farmer, checks on the cows that are responsible for the rich ice cream produced by the Hopkins Farm Creamery near Lewes. Hopkins and his staff conduct frequent tours of the farm in an effort to spread awareness of how important agriculture is to the culture and economy of Sussex County.

Seated behind a desk in a small office at his dairy farm just outside Lewes, Walter “Burli” Hopkins has similar childhood recollections of baling straw and working in a hayloft where the temperature regularly reached 120 degrees in the summer.

Then, as now, “it’s hard to find anyone who wants to do that kind of work,” he says.

Both men describe these experiences in a tone that conveys grudging appreciation for the lessons they’ve learned as lifelong farmers. With some prompting, they also talk about the small profit margins, losing crops due to increasingly volatile weather, and the lack of leisure time for most of the year.

**When my grand-kids are in college I want to know there’s still enough land to produce enough food to feed every Delawarean.”**

It isn’t long, though, before the conversation meanders into familiar territory for virtually anyone working farmlands in eastern Sussex County: the possibility of selling their property to developers.

And why not? Throughout the county, vast stretches of rural acreage are being transformed into suburban neighborhoods, bringing big profits to the landowners. With nearly 2,000 new homes approved by Sussex County officials in 2018 alone, residents and visitors who’ve grown accustomed to seeing more houses than livestock alongside country roads may assume that the region’s agricultural heritage will soon be relegated to the past.

Not so, say Bennett, Hopkins and several others who are part of the region’s contemporary farming culture. Thanks to prudent economics, sustainable practices, and their abiding love for working the land, they are determined to protect and strengthen Sussex County’s family farming culture for years to come.

### Striking the right balance

Delaware Agriculture Secretary Michael Scuse is on a first-name basis with these farmers and many others. He grew up in a farming family and now lives on a farm where he and his wife grow soybeans, corn and wheat, so he understands the struggles and triumphs faced by state farmers on any given day.

“Agriculture is Delaware’s number one industry and is responsible for \$8 billion worth of economic activity every year,” he notes. “That’s because we’ve got a good climate and good soils that grow a multitude of crops. But we have to protect a land base that’s big enough, because you can’t support the agriculture if you lose the land.”

He describes a variety of ways the Department of Agriculture collaborates with landowners and others to ensure that sustainability. In 1991 the agency established the Agricultural Lands Preservation Program, which exempts landowners from real estate transfer, county and school taxes when they agree to preserve most of their land

for farming for 10 years. Under the program, one acre



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of land can be sold for residential use for every 20 acres of property enrolled for preservation, maxing out at 10 acres for homebuilding.

Another initiative, the Young Farmers Program, offers 30-year, no-interest loans for the purchase of farmland that then becomes protected from development. The loan can be for as much as 70 percent of the value of the land’s development rights.

Although 99 percent of Sussex County’s farms are family-owned, many are operated on land leased from others. That was a concern for Chris Magee, a fifth-generation farmer who became worried when much of the land his family leased near Selbyville was sold to developers. In partnership with his brothers, he worked through the Young Farmers Program to buy 40 acres as a step toward ensuring economic security and sustainability.

He's quick to assert, however, that many large landowners, including those his family rents from, *want* to protect the rural status quo.

"A lot of the people who own the land are committed to keeping it for farming, and even for the same farming family," Magee says. "If the farm doesn't make money they'll probably look for another farmer before selling the land for something else. At the end of the day, a lot of them decide the best way is through farmland preservation."

Locals who are worried about losing farms will be happy to know that public-private partnerships are making a difference. About 16 percent of the available farmland in Sussex County has been protected by preservation. That's because officials and farmers have stayed true to a long-term vision, Scuse says.

"We had a few years with some tight budgets, but with the help of our governor and a legislature that provided full funding, I foresee Delaware being the best at preserving agriculture as our most valuable resource. When my grandkids are in college I want to know there's still enough land to produce enough food to feed every Delawarean."

### Too close for comfort

That preservation ethic doesn't stop development from occurring immediately adjacent to vast farming operations, however, which can bring headaches to farmers and new neighborhood residents alike.

"Some people say subdivisions and farmers don't mix," Scuse says. "You should see the volume of complaints we get on a regular basis about homes in agricultural communities about dirt, dust and odors ... calls from people out in the country about poultry houses or aerial spraying. People like their fried chicken but they don't understand it has to come from someplace."

Another problem, Magee believes, is that too many farmland-hugging neighborhoods are being built with insufficient infrastructure and planning.

"Developers can take a lesson from farmers because we always deal with infrastructure first," he says. "If we haven't figured out how our crops are going to get watered and haven't prepared the soil, there's no way the crops are going to succeed if we just plant anyway. >

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"A lot of people who are building these neighborhoods aren't thinking about infrastructure because they just want to make a quick buck. That's why you hear so many people complaining they can't get out of their neighborhoods. Last July 4th weekend, the road alongside my mom's house [in Selbyville] had traffic backed all the way up from Bethany Beach. As a volunteer firefighter, I saw it and thought, 'What if someone has a heart attack? How am I gonna get there?'"

Magee also sees planning as the best route to ensuring that farmlands are protected even as development moves forward.

"There's only so much farmland here," he says. "We have to balance the necessity to farm and the necessity to build. If we don't preserve the land now, your produce will be coming from 300 miles away."

**There's only so much farmland here. We have to balance the necessity to farm and the necessity to build."**

### The market-forces factor

Magee's reference to the appeal of locally grown crops is top-of-mind for Henry Bennett on a hot July morning at the Historic Lewes Farmers Market. By 10 a.m., a dozen people are in line for freshly picked peaches and blueberries from the 250-acre farm he and his family have been working for decades. For the past few years, the Bennett clan has sold 25 percent of its produce through locally sourced markets in Lewes, Rehoboth and Bethany Beach.

"I still remember the first day at the Lewes market — my dad took me there with a small box of peaches that I wasn't sure I'd be able to sell," he says. "Now I can sell two or three pickup-truck loads in one day."

Lewes farmers market President Helaine Harris isn't surprised. "We had an average of 38 farmers at the market this year," she says. "At least 31 depend on sales from the market."

Such venues for sales play a direct role in preserving farmland, Harris points out, by "giving farmers an important local marketplace for their goods. We're actually part of a larger environmental movement that



Rob Dick from Totem Farms near Milton tends to fennel that will soon be en route to the plates of local diners at beach community restaurants specializing in farm-to-table offerings. A former restaurateur, Dick consults with area chefs for advice on what to grow each year.

uses a bunch of strategies to protect open land by making farming more profitable.”

Consumers seem much obliged for that vision — about 45,000 people visit the Lewes market’s two locations in a typical year. Hattie Allen, who has sold her flowers and produce there since 2006, believes much of the appeal comes from the convivial atmosphere.

“It’s more than a market — it’s a community,” she says. “My customers are interested in sustainable farming, organic farming and fresh food they can trust.” (Note that every issue of *Delaware Beach Life* includes a listing of coastal farmers markets in the Community Events section.)

Farmers working lands adjacent to the beach communities have also benefited from restaurants that have turned the phrase “farm to table” into a mantra for their brands.

Rob Dick, a partner in Totem Farms, just outside Milton, is one of them. He likewise depends on farmers markets, and plans to sell much more of his produce through Community Supported Agriculture programs, which enable consumers to receive regular deliveries of fresh produce from local farmers. Yet some of his best sources of revenue and inspiration are area restaurants such as Heirloom in Lewes,

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Cafe Azafran in Rehoboth, and Just Hooked in Fenwick Island.

"I go around in the spring and ask the chefs what kind of stuff they're looking for in their recipes," he says. "A lot of my growing decisions are based on what they tell me, and on ideas I get when I go out to eat."

Bob Yesbek of RehobothFoodie.com heralds this type of synergy.

"Cape region restaurants and family farmers are a match made in foodie heaven," he says. "As the region attracts more visitors and residents who appreciate good food, it's only natural for local chefs to seek the best ingredients from what grows, swims, grazes or flies in and around Sussex County."

### Digging in for the future

Back in the Frankford-area home of his parents, Carrie and Jim, Henry Bennett is optimistic that preservation initiatives will strengthen Sussex County's farming future. Yet certain experiences have made him wary of lurking threats.

First, there's the likelihood that more children and grandchildren of today's farmers will turn away from the hard work the vocation requires. Bennett almost became one of them in 2008 when he headed to San Diego to pursue degrees in international marketing and Spanish and a career far from Sussex County. ("I just wanted to get off the farm — I got to the dorms and thought, 'Awesome — no more hauling firewood,'" he recalls with a smile.)

His feelings gradually changed as he returned to work the farm in the summers. He came to enjoy the chores and the camaraderie of his family and friends, and realized he could direct his marketing expertise toward making the operation more successful.

But then there was another threat — proposed construction of a Route 113 bypass that would have cut a large swath through nearby farms. While it didn't affect the Bennett farm directly, he saw plenty of trouble ahead.

"It would have totally upset the balance of agriculture and development in our area by restricting access to contiguous farmland and making it impossible to move our equipment," he recalls.

Right away he knew he and his fellow farmers were up against powerful interests. Planning for the \$800 million project had been underway — and happening with little notice to the public — for years. The real estate and construction industries stood to benefit, and plenty of everyday voters would have been happy if the project succeeded in its goal to alleviate traffic jams in the Millsboro area, a major tourist and commuter hub.

The good news, according to Carrie Bennett, is that "I'd told Henry a long time before [that] he needed to learn how to argue at a podium."

That he did — at several town-hall meetings and sparked by old-fashioned grassroots activism that made Bennett and fellow farmers a much more vocal, and potent, political force.

"We wanted DelDOT to know that we demand a say in the transportation decisions in our area," Bennett says in a tone that conveys his concern six years later. "They don't listen to farmers the way they listen to [developers]. That has to change."

### Teaching tools

The effort succeeded. In 2015 the state Department of Transportation officially announced a new route, which preserved thousands of acres of contiguous farmland. Yet the experience left Bennett feeling certain that farmers will continue to face threats from development. One solution, he believes, is to find more ways for the public to understand the value of farming to Sussex County's economy and culture.

That's also a priority for Helaine Harris and other

farmers market advocates. The organization's website spotlights several books and organizations that promote awareness of farmland preservation. The Lewes market also features storytellers, exhibitors and other types of programming to encourage visitors to learn about sustainable agricultural practices and the link between food, nutrition and health.

Burli Hopkins, whose farm encompasses about 1,000 acres 5 miles north of the Lewes market, is also intent upon educating the public — particularly when it comes to addressing misconceptions.



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"A lot of people learned most of what they know about farming from Disney movies," he says. "That's because most Americans are at least two generations away from it. ... They'll tell me about their grandfather in overalls, milking cows at 4 a.m. by hand, but when they're talking I'm thinking, 'Actually, he probably didn't do it by hand, and the 4 a.m. thing is just kind of a magical number you heard in the stories people told you.'"

Hopkins makes an effort to change that kind of misunderstanding by offering tours of his dairy farm to several hundred schoolchildren and other interested parties every year.

"We've been doing farm tours through the University of Delaware for five years and I've got a lot of groups of schoolkids coming in — we've had as many as 100 at a time on a tour," Hopkins says. "They get to see how the cows are fed and sheltered. They get to spend time in the milking parlor and learn about vaccinations and all of the other things that keep the cows healthy."

An added bonus for many visitors: freshly made, and indescribably rich, ice cream made at the Hopkins dairy. Enjoying it after the tour is a learning moment because the students are still on the farm, with its not-so-pleasant smells and within sight and sound of lounging cows.

"That's a good thing," Hopkins says. "It helps them understand what it takes to create a dairy product they love so much."

That sentiment is well-understood by Henry Bennett, Chris Magee and Rob Dick, all of whom relish their connections with the land and everything it can produce. Back at the farmers market in Lewes, Bennett enjoys talking with customers about the arduous process of creating a perfect peach (hint: it involves three separate prunings — and prayers asking that there won't be an early frost).

"But the best thing," he says, "is seeing a little kid bite into it and watching the juice run down his face and hearing him spontaneously shout out that it's the best thing he's ever eaten."

"Being a farmer is like being a dad," Magee notes. "You get so much more out of it when you put your heart into it. I have to do so much to take care of that crop and keep my eye on it every day."

Dick, who began farming just three years ago largely because of his desire to grow food that tasted better than what he found in supermarkets, also feels a holistic connection to his new life working the land.

"I like working in harmony with nature," he explains. "I'm ready to get up every morning and ready to go to bed when the sun goes down. It feels like a natural rhythm that society has gotten away from. It keeps me rooted here and makes me feel like I'm constantly growing too. That's why we have to protect our farms and all the ways they make Sussex County such a great place to live." ■

CHRIS BEAKEY writes from his home in Lewes. His most recent novel, "Fatal Option," was published by Simon & Schuster in February 2017.

It's only natural for local chefs to seek the best ingredients from what grows, swims, grazes or flies in and around Sussex County."

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