

*Michael Schwartz*  
**KEEPIN' IT**  
**REAL**  
By Bret Love  
**THE NEW FACE**  
*of*  
*Cayman Cuisine*



**IN THE CAYMAN ISLANDS**, Michael Schwartz may be the new kid on the culinary block, opening Michael's Genuine Food & Drink in Camana Bay last summer. But the 45-year-old, James Beard Award-winning chef is hardly a newcomer to the restaurant business.

Truth is, Schwartz has been working in kitchens since he was a teenager, learning from chefs such as Frank Crispo, Wolfgang Puck, Alice Waters and famed cookbook writer Maida Heatter. In 2007 he opened the original Miami location of his signature restaurant, and the accolades began pouring in: *The New York Times* named Michael's Genuine No. 4 of the Top 10 Best New Restaurants in the United States, *Gourmet* called it one of the nation's best farm-to-table restaurants and *Bon Appétit* called Schwartz "the hottest indie act in town."

Now Schwartz (along with Executive Chef Thomas Tennant) is testing his signature high quality, slow food style in Grand Cayman's culinary waters, working closely with local farmers to source the freshest sustainable ingredients for his signature dishes.

We recently caught up with the passionate chef to talk about his culinary influences, his passion for farm-to-table food and his plans for the forthcoming 2011 Cayman Cookout.

**When and why did you first become fascinated with food?**

As a kid growing up in Philadelphia, I remember cutting up the Strohmann white bread for stuffing with my mom at Thanksgiving dinner. So inspiration really happened for me at my first job, bussing tables at this great Italian restaurant, Dilullo's. They were really doing things ahead of their time at that restaurant. ... The food was sophisticated and they were importing things like Belgian endive and radicchio. I found all this to be really exciting.

**As you began to explore your own culinary style, which chefs influenced you the most?**

There were lots of people along the way who have taught me about the kitchen and influenced my cooking. Frank Crispo really kicked my butt when I was young enough for it to make a difference. When I moved to California in '86, kind of on a whim, I was able to land a job working for Wolfgang Puck at Chinois, right as Asian fusion was just getting hot. ... Alice Waters really inspired my approach to food by showing that where food comes from is just as important as how the ingredients are handled in the kitchen. And Maida Heatter's influence became very clear most recently in the development of my first cookbook, teaching me the importance of a good recipe.

**When did you realise cooking was something you wanted to pursue as a career rather than a hobby?**

It never really began as a hobby for me, but through work I grew to love it. Now it's something that carries through to my home life as well. My food is all about sharing, and bringing family and friends together.

**What would you say are the signature elements of your culinary style?**

Fresh, simple and pure: Anything that has more than a few ingredients is too many. We try to stay local any time we can and support small nearby farms. Even if it isn't always easy, we make every effort to do it.

**You adopted the farm-to-table and slow food concepts before they became trendy. Why do you think these ideas have resonated so strongly with people?**

Well, I think some of it has to do with it being trendy: 'Farm-to-table' has become a buzzword in the industry. Which is good, because when people are hearing about it, like the slow food movement, they want to get in on what's popular. The key is in not just talking about it, but actually living it as a lifestyle choice. If people come to my restaurant because it's popular — if that's what gets them in the door and we can show them how much better an heirloom tomato tastes than the one that's been gassed and shipped to the kitchen — then that's a win for us.

**What made you decide on Grand Cayman for your second restaurant location?**

At first I was a little sceptical when we were approached to do a Michael's Genuine in the Caribbean. I didn't think it was possible to replicate the experience, which has more to do with the process — the responsible sourcing that is so important to who we are. But when I came down and saw what was happening on the island, I realised that there was an emerging farming community there that was poised to embrace a restaurant like ours. ... We're getting a great variety of locally grown produce down there, even this past summer, including Thai eggplant, callaloo, herbs, peppers, amazing mangos and local pumpkins. Of course, there are some things we need to bring in, but overall we've been pleasantly surprised.



Pascal Perrin



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Ben Fink

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**How did you choose Camana Bay?**

Camana Bay shares a lot of similarities with our home in the Miami Design District, like great shopping and a neighbourhood vibe, but in some respects we have many added bonuses down there. Camana Bay has been a great partner — very eager to grow and do right by its residents and merchants. For one, we have a brand new Chef’s Garden, which the restaurant was able to help develop, literally a stone’s throw away from our patio. They also have brought a weekly farmers market on premises, where my chefs can shop for last-minute goodies.

**What were the particular difficulties of opening a new business in a different country?**

Well, ordering has been a big learning curve for us. For things we’re bringing in from the outside, there’s a longer lead time, so we’ve had to push ourselves to be even better at forecasting our needs. We’ve been lucky, though, because our partners in this project have that knowledge on the ground that we needed in order to learn the ropes.

**How do you approach your Grand Cayman restaurant’s menu differently from the Miami menu?**

We don’t really approach the menu differently, so that means there will be slight differences in the dishes as our Caymanian surroundings — the culture and ingredients — influence them. We’ve learned a lot about Cayman culture through its farmers market, and consequently through the farmers we’ve met there. ... Patrick Panton of East End Garden is an important producer for us. ... He’s growing stuff that’s been on-island for some time, like papaya, calabaza (calabash), hot peppers, seasoning peppers and callaloo, but what my chef Thomas Tennant is really excited about is his expanding portfolio of Asian vegetables and greens. That’s an influence of his Filipino farm

director, Azon, and includes things like mizuna, Chinese watercress and long beans. His little green Thai eggplants have been a featured side item ever since we opened: We serve them sautéed with pine nuts, bell peppers, raisins and Thai basil. We’re also getting farm-fresh eggs and tropical fruits from Zelma Lee. There’s both a sense of familiarity and a newness about the menu that’s been fun for us to explore and play with.

**Using local, sustainable ingredients is a big part of your culinary identity. Why is that important for you?**

Well, to put it simply, because the food tastes better. But that doesn’t mean that it’s an easier way of doing business!

**How did you go about establishing those relationships with local farmers and fishermen?**

We were lucky in that there was at least one chef we knew from Miami, Dean Max, who had already established some relationships with local farmers and fishermen. We first got a taste of their product at the 2010 Cayman Cookout. As we got a couple of months out from opening, my chef, Thomas Tennant, arrived on the island and simply went out into the field with some leads, started talking to people in the know, and carved his own path. It’s a small island and a small farming community, so it wasn’t long before we knew exactly who would be our go-to suppliers. But, just like in Miami, it’s a constant process of foraging and forging new relationships and staying on top of the industry as it grows, while trying to help it grow in the right way.

**What, in your eyes, makes the Cayman Islands unique from other parts of the Caribbean?**

I haven’t really travelled the Caribbean that much, but what I’ve found here I like! Opening up during the summer was more key than we initially realised. It gave us an opportunity to open in the off-season, to get to know and focus on the locals, and they, in turn, could get to know us. We’ve been really lucky. We have a bunch of regulars now, and happy hour is especially a big hit. It’s going to make our first season of handling the influx of tourists go a whole lot smoother.

**You’re participating in this year’s Cayman Cookout. What are you most looking forward to?**

This year we’ve got a lot going on! Now that I have a restaurant, it’s great because we can host a dinner. My friend Michel Nischan is coming in as a guest chef, and Bo Barrett of Chateau Montelena is doing the wines. I’m also doing a course at the Gala Dinner with Eric Ripert, Susur Lee, José Andrés, Charlie Trotter and Rachel Allen, so I’m really looking forward to it. The folks at the Ritz-Carlton, Grand Cayman really do a great job.

**What are your plans for the future growth of Michael’s Genuine?**

Just to continue to make good food, hopefully in a few more places!