

**FISH CAMP  
MANAGER JOHNNY  
BARNES BELIEVES  
LOCAL IS BETTER —  
WHETHER IT'S  
PRODUCE, JOBS,  
ART OR SEAFOOD**

# LOCAL HERO

**BY KARA POUND  
PHOTOS BY ERIK TANNER**

Johnny Barnes sits in a wooden bait-and-tackle shack on the Matanzas River in Crescent Beach. The air is cold and the shack is filled with the smell of coffee. Behind the counter, peanuts boil on a makeshift burner. The chilly weather doesn't seem to bother the 58-year-old, who — in black cotton shorts, baseball jersey and Crocs with socks — looks more like a T-ball coach than a fish-camp manager. But Johnny's appearance is just one of many quirks that make this native-born entrepreneur an atypical local. He's a business owner who scoffs at planning and schedules, a liberal born of Klan sympathizers, a hometown boy with a global perspective.

Inside Genung's Fish Camp on the Matanzas River, he sells live and freshly frozen bait, pickled eggs, smoked alligator 'n' pork sticks, local honey and Datil sauces, lures, hooks, supra spoons and, of course, cold beer. He also finds plenty of time to read *The New York Times* (daily) and enjoy a whiskey or two (or more), watching the sunset in front of the fire pit with friends.

Barnes is a big guy, with a jolly belly, white mustache and a Northeast Florida twang. Just a few months ago, he was the owner of the popular down-home restaurant Johnny's Kitchen in

Hastings, a place that was simultaneously as common as any small town restaurant and a local anomaly. The menu was whatever Johnny was cooking — catfish, greens, fried tomatoes — and the atmosphere inspired by the local potato art that adorned the walls (a tribute to that region's agricultural staple). In just five years, aligned with a handful of other forward-thinkers, he helped turn tiny Hastings into a progressive bastion, where art and community services united in common cause, where food was fuel for social change. It was a small movement, but also very real — and all the more radical for happening in a town that many thought had expired years ago, and seemed to exist only in vacant storefronts and the lone Huddle House.

But in January, Barnes embarked on his new endeavor on the Intracoastal Waterway and already seems ready to begin stitching together a similar sense of community. Genung's Fish Camp is now home to the first community-supported fishery in the region — and possibly the state. It's similar to the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) movement, in which local produce is distributed on a regular basis to participants, and Barnes provides fresh, locally caught and sustainable seafood to

the hundred or so members of his fish co-op. The goal of the program is to provide great seafood, of course, and aims to reward local fishermen who work in concert with the environment. But Barnes is also as interested in making locals see the interconnected nature of community. And he's living proof that social responsibility doesn't have to be a chore.

"I want to bring the local product to the local people," explains Barnes. "[But I also want to] hang out here at the beach, and do some things I'm supposed to — and some things I'm not supposed to."

Barnes was born in 1951 in Hastings (pop. 521), a two-square-mile town surrounded by a landscape of sod and cabbage fields, livestock, tattered billboards and businesses selling farm equipment. He was one of five kids in a complicated family. His parents married when his mother was just 13; by the time she was 20, she had five small children. His father, Barnes explains easily, "was actually married to two women at the same time," and when he left for

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work in the morning, “my mother did not know if he was coming back that afternoon or three days later.”

Barnes describes his father as a hard worker and also “a real bad man” who drank a lot. As a child, growing up in the ’50s and ’60s, Barnes thought this was normal.

“I didn’t know what the rest of the world was. I didn’t know anything outside of our little world, but along the way, there were times when certain things just didn’t feel right — that you saw or heard or experienced — that just didn’t feel right.”

There was one such time in the early ’60s, when Martin Luther King Jr. came to the area. Barnes accompanied his father, a Klan sympathizer who owned a sawmill, to a site on C.R. 207 to drop off wood. The Klan planned to use it to build and burn three crosses. It was just one of many experiences that made Barnes determined to shatter the notion that you’re destined to become your parents.

“That’s bullshit when you say, ‘I’m this way because my daddy was that way,’” he says. “Most men, their goal in life is to pass themselves onto their son.” It’s one reason he’s relieved to share his life with a daughter and two granddaughters.

Barnes’ musings are interrupted when a pair of middle-aged snowbirds walks in. “Good morning!” Barnes greets them with a big smile. “How y’all doing? It’s a delicious day in the fish camp.”

“I heard you have some clams?” the woman queries.

“I have some beautiful clams!” he tells her. “They just came out of the water about an hour ago.”

The clams, plucked from a local farm a quarter-mile down river, are part of Crescent Beach Fresh, the community-supported fishery Barnes launched a few weeks ago. At only \$1.44 profit per dozen clams, it’s not about the money. As with most things Barnes has a hand in, there are much larger issues at stake.

“I got a hundred people to give me \$300 apiece — no contract, just an agreement that I’ll give them fresh seafood,” he says proudly. It’s not cheap food, but Barnes insists it offers value in a variety of ways. “We should support local people. We get a better product at a



**“I just cooked whatever I wanted,” says Barnes of his Hastings restaurant. “And if you wanted to come there and eat, fine. If you didn’t, go somewhere else.”**

cheaper price. The shrimper isn’t in it to get rich, but he needs to support his family.”

“We’ve really bought into cheap, cheap food,” he observes. “If we can pay \$150 for a damn pair of tennis shoes, we can pay a little bit more for better food.”

**B**arnes is a natural-born foodie. Hastings may not be much to look at, but historically it was St. Johns County’s breadbasket, a town created as an agricultural extension of St. Augustine. (Henry Flagler’s cousin, Thomas Hastings, founded the area in 1890 to grow produce for Flagler’s hotels [not to be confused with the architect Thomas Hastings, who designed Flagler’s hotels].) Growing up surrounded by farmers and cooks, Barnes developed powerful food passions and memories.

**GROWING UP SURROUNDED BY FARMERS AND COOKS, BARNES DEVELOPED POWERFUL FOOD PASSIONS AND MEMORIES. “I HAD A BIG FAT GRANDMOTHER ... AND THIS WOMAN COULD JUST COOK.”**

“I had a big fat grandmother ... and this woman could just cook,” he says, recalling favorite foods like peach pie and pot roast. “I’d always say, ‘Grandma, you put your foot in that’ — an old Southern saying that Barnes says translates to “incredible food.”

“She cooked all day, every day. And she butchered hog, she made sausage, she worked a garden, she’d go out and kill a chicken — she’d wring its neck,” he says.

The memory of his grandmother has given him an ingrained bias. “I can trust a skinny cook — but I like a big fat cook,” he says. “I like a big fat woman that can cook. Really into big fat black women that can cook. That’s the best cook in the world. The funny thing about Southern food is, if you go way back, most Southern food came out of the black culture.”

After graduating from Hastings High School, where he was captain of the football team, Barnes joined the Navy. He spent a lot of time in Asia — the Philippines, Hong Kong, Singapore — and Asian fare remains his favorite. “Eating that ethnic food on the streets was, like, one of my favorite things,” he says. “While my buddies wanted to go get steak, I wanted to try new things.” Including barbecued monkey and a palm leaf piled high with fish eyes. “I’m one of these people that has no issue with food,” admits Barnes. “There’s nothing I don’t eat.”

After his stint in the Navy, Barnes returned home to Hastings. His father had died in the mid-’60s, but his mom and four siblings were still here. He got married and had a baby girl he named Letti, but divorced after seven years (the relationship “simply didn’t work”). At that point, Barnes decided to move to San Francisco. He’d always wanted to live on the West Coast, believing the forward-thinking lifestyle more fitting for the self-described “way far to the left liberal” than small-town Florida. While there, he indulged his food curiosities, working in catering and several restaurants, while exploring the city’s famed restaurant scene (including Chez Panisse, the restaurant owned by Slow Food founder Alice Waters).

In 2001, after a dozen years on the West Coast, Barnes moved home. He planned to care for his elderly mother (now 86, and living in Palatka), but quickly realized that he



wouldn't be satisfied with his hometown's status quo.

"[It] felt normal to live in San Francisco because it's so progressive," he says. "[But] then I came back to Hastings, and I was like, 'Ewww.' So that's why I got involved and stirred up a bunch of stuff."

Food was a natural motivator. After moving home, he realized that if he wanted to go out to eat in Hastings, the only options were Subway, fried chicken at the Kangaroo gas station, or driving to St. Augustine or Palatka. After eyeing an empty building on Main Street — of which, frankly, there is no shortage — he made a deal with the property owner to turn it into a restaurant. He named it Johnny's Kitchen and opened for breakfast and lunch, Monday through Friday.

That was nearly five years ago. In that time, the tiny restaurant managed to reverse the county's culinary tide; people began driving *from* St. Augustine to get a meal. "I just cooked whatever I wanted," says Barnes. "And if you wanted to come there and eat, fine. If you didn't, go somewhere else."

He started without a menu (though he introduced one later) and just wrote what was available on a big dry-erase board above the counter. Although there were plenty of Southern staples — fried chicken, collard greens, mac 'n' cheese, white acre peas and cornbread — there wasn't a lot of choice about what to have. At first, Barnes says, people were put off by what seemed like limitations. But the food was good, it was reasonably priced and there weren't really any other options. It quickly became a focal point of the town.

"Part of his success in that business is that he understood that he was a character in that small town," says Mike Mitchell, a Flagler College adjunct art professor who runs the O.U.R. Center, a Hastings food bank and after-school program. "He did this kind of standard check-in — and I've seen him do it a hundred times. He would stop by every table and say, 'Y'all doin' all right? Y'all out for the day?'"

Not long after opening Johnny's in 2005, Barnes held a meet-and-greet for local artists at the restaurant. "He wasn't expecting the art community to mirror Nashville or New York or Atlanta," Mitchell says. "He's interested that particular places have their own culture." The two men immediately found a commonality in art and grassroots fundraising, and staged the now-annual Potato Art Show, a tribute to the town's beloved tuber.

Barnes started hosting other community events, raising money for the Willie Harvey Fund, Hastings Youth Athletic Club, Hope Pavilion, Harvest of Hope, Pie in the Sky and Slow Food St. Augustine. Barnes says those efforts are proof that a little help can go a long way. "I am just really big into fundraising. Big time. Just helping this little person here, I used to think, 'Oh, you have to have a whole lot of money to do that stuff.' Well, you don't, if everybody will play a little role in it."



**Barnes' granddaughter, Sarah, is at the fish camp at least two days a week. "They're two peas in a pod," says Barnes' daughter.**

"He's just the kind of person that if he believes something is right, he believes it wholeheartedly," says Barnes' daughter Letti Bozard. "As much as he's done that kind of stuff, over the past five or six years ... he doesn't get tired of it."

But Barnes did get tired of the restaurant grind. After four-and-a-half years of early mornings and long hours, he decided to sell the business. "I'm getting older, and this guy came along and asked how much I wanted for it, I told him, and he said OK." The man, it turns out, was in over his head, so Barnes took the business back. He subsequently offered it to Debbie Tice, one of the loyal waitresses who'd told Barnes that if the original sale fell through, she and her husband would be interested.

"I'm real thrilled that she's got it. I think she's going to do fine with it," says Barnes. "She understands collard greens, fresh local vegetables, you know, a real small-town café." Johnny's Kitchen is now called Hastings Café and will celebrate its five-year anniversary in May. "I suggested that she change it [the name]," Barnes explains, "because you can't have Johnny's Kitchen without Johnny."

But shedding the identity of the man who built the business isn't easy. As of mid-March, they were still answering the phone "Johnny's!"

One might think that Hastings would feel abandoned by Barnes' departure, but Mitchell says that's not the case. "I think everyone in town knows that that was a tough decision for him."

Genung's Fish Camp, on Cubbedge Road at the Matanzas River, has served as a spot for recreational fishing and social gatherings since 1948. It was started by Jack Genung, a local

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charter boat captain and commercial fisherman who lived in Crescent Beach. Barnes remembers coming here as a kid. His uncle had a house nearby, and he and his cousin would pop over for a soda or ice cream or to go fishing for trout, sheepshead and whiting. Genung died about a decade ago, leaving the property to a granddaughter, who put it up for sale. Neighbors were worried that a developer would buy the waterfront property and transform it into exclusive condos or a high-priced, polluting marina, and came together to discuss their options.

In the end, Pat Hamilton, a Realtor with a history of environmental activism, joined his brother Bill and six others to buy the property to protect it. The group purchased the land in a trust, so that it will always remain a modest fish camp — a small community resource that

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doesn’t compete with or harm its surroundings.

“This is one of the last stretches of waterway that is open to shell fishing,” Hamilton explains. “We’ve worked really hard to keep this water clean, and we want it to stay that way.” The fish camp’s eight owners have imposed a few restrictions — no bar and no restaurant — but other than that, they’re comfortable letting Barnes run it the way he sees fit.

“I’ve been eating these clams my whole life,” Barnes says, pointing to the river. “We need this water to be alive. We can eat out of it. It’s OK for you to go out there and catch fish. It’s OK for you to go out there and get oysters, but it’s not OK for you to go out there and fuck it up for everybody else. And I’d love it if y’all could put that quote in there: It’s just not OK to fuck it up for everybody else.”

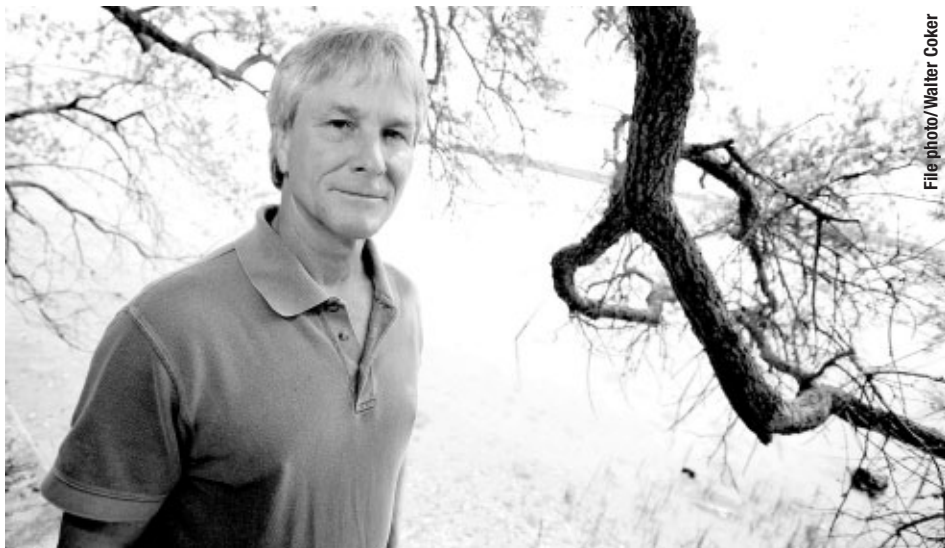
Included in the fish camp lease is a small white house, which Barnes lives in. Though modest — and lacking central heat and air — it suits him. “It’s real basic, which is kind of where I’m at right now,” he says. “I just don’t need nothin’. I got everythin’ I need. I don’t need a watch because I don’t give a damn what time it is. So I don’t understand people that walk around with a \$5,000 watch on their arm. I just don’t get it. Even if I had a lot of money, I would never buy a \$5,000 watch. I just don’t get that. That’s that American thing we’ve been sold.”

Barnes believes this consumerist attitude pervades too many of our decisions, particularly when it comes to buying food. If some particular kind of produce isn’t readily available or in season, he simply doesn’t eat it. “If I can’t find a fresh tomato, I don’t have to have a tomato,” he says. “But we go to Publix or wherever else, and buy those shrimp that were



**Barnes doesn't make any decisions purely for business reasons.**

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File photo/Walter Coker

Pat Hamilton joined his brother and six others in buying the fish camp to protect it from development. “This is one of the last stretches of waterway that is open to shell fishing,” Hamilton explains. “We want it to stay that way.”

raised in Asia or wherever on some farm, and that’s dirty food. The way those shrimp are raised in Vietnam and Laos — they have these farms ponds right next to villages, and they pump the human sewage into those ponds and feed those shrimp with it. Then when they get finished, they throw in some antibiotic to clean them up, and they sell them to us in America — cheap.”

As if to draw the contrast, Barnes pulls out a large pot as he speaks, melts a stick of butter and steams some of the fresh clams he’s been selling all morning. “The whole thing is about slowing down and taking a few hours to cook fresh clams and make a salad,” he says, dumping the mollusks into a large metal bowl. He skewers one and chews thoughtfully. “Aren’t these delicious?”

The clams are in keeping with the buy-local ethos of the Slow Food Movement, which in St. Johns County claims about 150 members. “I became really supportive of the Slow Food Movement because I was already kind of doing that,” says Barnes. “I was using fresh, local products. I was buying my meat from a local meat market. I don’t buy anything from the big, corporate America food supplier. I can get everything I need here and that creates a local job,” he explains. “It’s just such a win-win situation because I get a fresher cabbage, I get it at a better price, and I’m supporting a guy I’ve known all my life. You know, a local farmer. So

**“WE NEED THIS RIVER TO BE ALIVE. IT’S OK FOR YOU TO GO OUT THERE AND CATCH FISH. IT’S OK FOR YOU TO GO OUT THERE AND GET OYSTERS. BUT IT’S NOT OK FOR YOU TO GO OUT THERE AND F\*CK IT UP FOR EVERYBODY ELSE.”**

why not? Why would you not want to do that?”

Starting in 2008, the local chapter has presented the annual John Barnes Spirit of Slow Food Award to recognize individuals or businesses that sell or produce what they call “good, clean and fair” food. The award was named in honor of Barnes for his commitment to agriculture and community development. The 2009 winners were 29 South Eats restaurant in Fernandina Beach and the Barnes Family Farm in Hastings (owned by Barnes’ cousins), for their Farm-to-School program, in which they donate fresh fruit and vegetables to the school cafeteria at South Woods Elementary School in Elkton.

“He’s one of those rare individuals who has been able to use his business savvy, generosity and commitment to service to raise up an entire community,” says Richard Villadoniga, president of Slow Food First Coast. “When he opened Johnny’s Kitchen, he not only gave residents a place to eat and gather, but he gave them hope and confidence that good things were coming to the town.”

He’s also encouraged other businesses to embrace a more sustainable model, Villadoniga adds. “He always seems to find a way to show us that you can run a successful business and help others at the same time.”

But while Barnes’ philosophy may inspire other businesses, he doesn’t make any decision for purely business reasons. Later that same day, the bowl now lined with empty clamshells, Barnes’ daughter and 2-year-old granddaughter Sarah walk up. Poppy, as he’s affectionately known, is taking Sarah overnight while his daughter goes to a Jimmy Buffett concert. “He’s the most hands-on grandfather,” Letti Bozard says. “Sarah’s at the fish camp with him at least two days a week — sometimes more. They’re two peas in a pod.”

“I’m like really happy here,” Barnes admits. “Really happy here.” Having his family nearby reminds him of his own childhood — coming to St. Augustine with his mom, brothers and sister. Though those weren’t exactly halcyon times, the memories of the river and the food that came from it are clearly golden.

“We would catch a bunch of mullet, and my mother would cook the fish on the tailgate of the truck. We’d clean them out in the water, rinse them off and she’d fry ‘em right there. We’d eat oysters and clams right out of this water.” He pauses. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been back to this water.” □