SOUTHERN COMFORT

Move over, Collingswood and Princeton—there’s a new South Jersey food town on the rise. The city of Vineland heads back to the future.
You pass a sign that says "Welcome to Vineland," and you're instantly struck by the miles of lush green farmland far as the eye can see. Just when you've resigned yourself to the fact that you've found another sleepy rural town, you arrive on Landis Avenue and it's hard to believe you're still in the same place. A broad, tree-lined street, rows of storefronts new and old, teenagers passing by; there's a story here.

Founded in 1861 by Charles K. Landis* as a planned community for those looking to make a living by farming, Vineland has been hailed as one of the largest agricultural communities in New Jersey and home to the largest produce auction in the country.

It has also long been considered one of the state's urban epicenters. And, like so many urban areas, Vineland—the state's largest "city" by area, at approximately 69 square miles—has seen its share of bad times. Residents have moved away and long-established businesses have shut their doors in the face of crime, drugs, and poverty. But Vineland is rising again, and the business of food, which helped to establish this city in the beginning, is playing a pivotal role in its renaissance.

On the Avenue
The heart of Vineland's downtown business district has always been Landis Avenue, a thoroughfare that in its heyday was compared to Paris's Champs-Elysées, with its extra-wide street, small hotels, restaurants and retail shops. A great destination, it was a model of success for many other downtown areas.

In 1973, the businesses of Landis Avenue took a major hit with the construction of the nearby Cumberland Mall in Millville, a blow that was exacerbated by a skyrocketing crime rate in the surrounding area over the 1980s. The street that once boasted a popular movie theater and J.J. Newberry's department store became somewhat of a ghost town, and remained that way in the years that followed. In 2005, Vineland was designated a Main Street Community as part of the Main Street state and national revitalization program. It didn't take the redevelopment committee long to realize that attracting new food businesses was going to be key for the beleaguered Landis Avenue and the city as a whole.

One of the first new businesses to open, and one that well represents Vineland's renewed food culture, was The Sweet Life Bakery, opened by Jill McClennen and Stephen Wilson in 2007. The husband-and-wife team, both graduates of the CIA (Culinary Institute of America), had relocated to the area from San Francisco to look after Jill's grandmother. Deciding to open a bakery, they originally explored areas a little further north, but settled on Vineland because they were excited by the city's revitalization plans.

"There was certainly a lot of pessimism about the downtown revitalization efforts among a lot of the residents when we first arrived. Landis Avenue had hit bottom and was rebounding, [but] a lot of people couldn't see that... Jill and I, being outsiders, saw a lot of potential in the physical layout and the plan that the city had in place," says Wilson.

"The food scene of Vineland will be the vehicle that drives the future success of the community," he continues. "Since we used to live in San Francisco, I've always seen a parallel between Napa or Sonoma and south Jersey. We've got the farms, quiet coasts, and open spaces, in close relation to a large metropolitan area, Philadelphia. It's all here, we just need to come together to promote and support Vineland."

In addition to The Sweet Life Bakery, other establishments have recently debuted on the new Landis Avenue. Mori's, which opened in an Art Deco-inspired space adjacent to the newly renovated Landis Theater, boasts a menu featuring locally sourced, farm-fresh ingredients. In 2010, the CrêpeMaker, part of a small national chain that offers a new take on the traditional French crêperie, arrived on the street that was once compared to the Champs-Elysées.

But the one storefront poised to make the biggest difference on Landis Avenue is the Landis Marketplace. Scheduled to open in April 2011, the marketplace will occupy the former J.J. Newberry location and boast over 44,000 square feet of retail space across two levels. The lower level will be a traditional Pennsylvania-style Amish Market offering items such as meats, produce, dairy and baked goods. The second level will house a mix of separate vendors and food artisans as well as a small grocery section. Marketplace manager Gary Holloway, a South Jersey native, worked on the Bellingham Public Market in Washington State before relocating back to the Vineland area in 2010 to work on Landis Marketplace.

According to Diane Holtaway, associate director of client services at the Rutgers Food Innovation Center in nearby Bridgeton, who has been closely involved with the project, plans for Landis Marketplace have been over ten years in the making. Several surveys and focus groups were conducted to determine what Vineland residents would want from such an establishment.

"The marketplace will be very consumer driven; we will have what the people have asked for," says Holtaway. As of press time, the second level has eight vendors signed on, including a local artisan ice cream company and a seafood purveyor. The grocery section is set to offer imported hard-to-find ingredients (harissa, anyone?) as well as daily staples, cooking demonstrations and, on occasion, live musical entertainment. But, along with the food and its benefit to the local economy, the Landis Marketplace hopes to offer something more to its community.

*Charles K. Landis also purchased the land that is now known as Sea Isle City and cofounded the city of Hammonton.
VINELAND’S FOOD VIBE
With an enticing mix of new and old establishments, offering flavors both locally and globally inspired, Vineland is a food lover’s destination. Here, a few of our favorites:

BAKERIES

Crust N' Krumbs Bakery | 1370 S. Main Road
856-690-1200 | crustandkrumbs.com
Downsized from their former location (Upper Krust Bakery) when the owner’s husband died some years ago, everything this bakery makes is absolutely delicious.

San Paolo Bakery | 13 North East Boulevard
856-213-5315 | sanpaolobakery.com
From their anisette biscotti to their oatmeal cookies, San Paolo has developed a local and national following for their baked good.

The Sweet Life Bakery | 601 East Landis Avenue
856-692-5353 | thesweetlifebakery.com
The current darling of Landis Avenue. Grab a cappuccino and sit for a spell. Gorgeous birthday and wedding cakes available, too.

FARM STAND

Muzzarelli Farms | 3460 Oak Road
856-691-2497 | muzzarellifarms.com
One of the most well-known farm stands in the heart of southern New Jersey.

GROCERS AND SPECIALTY SHOPS

Health Foods Plus | 502 E. Landis Avenue
856-691-6001 | healthfoodsplusnj.com
Looking to consult with a certified nutritionist or naturopath? This is your place. An extensive selection of vitamins and supplements along with organic and specialty food items.

Landis Marketplace | 631-633 Landis Avenue
856-794-8653 | landismarketplace.com
Opening this spring, the marketplace promises to be one-stop shopping for the culinary enthusiast and everyone in between.

Organics, Inc. | 1370 S. Main Road #8
856-205-9700
An impressive selection of natural and whole foods, reasonably priced.

“The food scene of Vineland will be the

A 2010 study released by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation cited Cumberland County, with an emphasis on the city of Vineland, as one of the unhealthiest counties in New Jersey with type II diabetes, obesity, and heart disease at an all time high. Holloway and Holtaway have made it their personal and professional goal for the marketplace to change that by reaching out to the community to promote healthier lifestyles. They plan to work in conjunction with the local school district, YMCA, and the Robert Wood Johnson program Leadership for Healthy Communities to educate residents about the importance of raising healthy children through better nutrition.

Putting the Vine in Vineland

Grape growing and winemaking have long been an important part of the area and they, too, are playing a role in its renaissance.

Grape growers from Italy found their way to Vineland in the 19th century, as did Thomas Bramwell Welch, who founded Welch’s, the company that would become world famous for grape juice, in 1869. (Welch's eventually relocated to New York State and is now headquartered in Concord, Mass.) Even though founding father Charles Landis banned the sale of alcohol in Vineland, his temperance principles did not prevent the large Italian community that settled in East Vineland from growing grapes and making wine in commercial quantities.

Today, Vineland is considered part of New Jersey’s Outer Coastal Plain, a federally-designated American Viticulture Area (AVA) due to its highly advantageous grape growing conditions: well-draining soil, a long growing season, and a favorable climate thanks to its proximity to the Atlantic Ocean and Delaware Bay. This designation, achieved in 2007, along with increased consumer interest in
vehicle that drives the future successes of the community.”

local wines, has led to a resurgence in commercial winemaking.

In 2003, Jim Quarella opened Bellview Winery in Landisville, literally a stone’s throw away from the Vineland border (most consider Landisville to be a part of Vineland). Quarella is a fourth-generation farmer who started out growing produce, including specialty items such as bok choy and bitter melons for New York City’s Chinatown markets. But in the face of increased competition from out-of-state and foreign growers, Quarella decided to give up selling produce commercially and, instead, focused on taking his hobby, winemaking, to the next level. Bellview Winery, situated on 150 acres of which 40 are dedicated to grape growing, now produces over 20,000 gallons of wine annually and its wines are distributed in retail locations throughout southern New Jersey. Bellview also boasts a popular tasting room and year-round events, such as summer seafood festivals, and participates in the Garden State Wine Growers Association’s festivals and Wine Trail activities.

Although Bellview is the only winery that produces for retail, two other vineyards in Vineland are producing grapes for commercial use. In 1982, Dante Romanini purchased Panther Branch Vineyard, his 27-acre family farm in East Vineland. Romanini’s vineyard has produced Chambourcin, Vidal Blanc, Cabernet Franc, Pinot Grigio, and Viognier grapes for about six different wineries across the state, including Valenzano in Shamong. He has no intention of turning his vineyard into a full-fledged winery, but Romanini is contemplating also selling grapes to hobbyists for home winemaking.

Like Panther Branch, Coia Vineyards also sells grapes from its 40-acre farm to other retail wineries, including Sharrott, Cream Ridge and Amalthea. Dr. Lawrence Coia has over ten different varietals growing on his 15 acres of vines, including Sauvignon Blanc and Merlot, and is currently working with Rutgers in testing the viabili-
RESTAURANTS, DELIS, CAFES

Bains Deli/Fuel House Coffee Co.  
636 E. Landis Avenue  
(609)-361-4000 |  bainsdeli.com  
Originated in Philadelphia, Bains Deli brings the real deli-catesen experience to Landis Avenue. The deli has also teamed up with the Fuel House to bring some of the best live entertainment around to downtown Vineland.

CrêpeMaker  |  607 E. Landis Avenue  
856-205-0027 | crepemaker.com  
A modern take on the traditional French creperie, with sweet and savory delights for all to enjoy. Perfect for a quick lunch.

Downtown Deli & Restaurant  |  705 Wood Street  
856-690-9315 | downtowndelianddeli.com  
The closest you will get to the tastes of San Juan, Puerto Rico, without going there. A local favorite, be sure to try the pastelillos and the rib belly (that's pork belly).

Esposito's Maplewood III  |  200 N. Delsea Drive  
(856)-692-7340 | maplewood3.com  
Originally a sister restaurant to the Maplewood restaurants in Hammonton and Mays Landing, this independently owned Vineland location is perfect for that special night out.

Gardella's Ravioli Co. & Italian Deli  |  527 S. Brewster Road  
856-697-3509  
The best Italian subs in Vineyard. Pick a few up for dinner tonight and some freshly made pasta for the next day.

Lucia's Ristorante  |  785 W. Sherman Avenue  
856-692-0900 | luciasnj.com  
Boasting one of the best wine and martini lists in the area, Lucia's strives to give you a real Old-World experience with its traditional décor and incredible rustic cuisine. The pollo piccata is always a winner.

Morris  |  830 E. Landis Avenue  
856-690-0300  
Catch the seven o'clock showing of An American in Paris at the Landis Theater; then head next door to Morris for cocktails and a steak.

Olympia's Restaurant  |  739 S. Delsea Drive  
856-691-6095  
Every great city needs a traditional Greek restaurant and "The Greek," as Olympia's is affectionately called, does not disappoint. A Vineyard institution.

A Taste of the Island  |  731 F. Landis Avenue  
856-691-9525  
Can't get to Jamaica? Have no fear! Here's authentic Caribbean cuisine at your service. Not the poshest place but definitely one of the tastiest.

WINERIES

Bellview Winery  |  150 Atlantic Street, Landisville  
(609)-692-7172 | bellviewwinery.com  
Taste for yourself why Vineland is great for grape growing. From their Pinot Grigio to the Jersey Devil Red, you are sure to find a favorite on their award-winning list.
once heard someone say about Italy that it is a great place to eat because the Italians don’t take their food for granted—they insist on fresh ingredients and take pride in local products. I think that has always been true in Vineland as well.”

**Back to the Land**

Since the days when the Native American Lenni-Lenape farmed its fertile lands, Vineland’s soil has also been well suited for growing corn, lima beans, pumpkins, strawberries, blueberries, cranberries and more. The Italian immigrants who settled here in the late 1800s continued that growing tradition, with many selling much of their produce to the Vesuvian Preserving Company in New York for commercial canning. The area’s big boom in agriculture came in 1930 with the formation of the Vineland Produce Auction which allowed farmers, who had previously struggled to make a modest living, to sell their produce at fair market value to businesses throughout the tristate area and beyond.

Sadly, many of those original farms disappeared as younger generations moved away from farming as a career and land was sold for suburban development. Many farms were pushed out during the 1960s and 1970s by large agriculture companies from across the country that were able to provide produce to local markets at cheaper rates, a problem that still affects our farmers today. Fortunately, a respectable number of family farms, such as Muzzarelli Farms and Flaim Farms, still thrive, and participate in the Vineland Produce Auction, sell to local supermarkets and restaurants, and run their own farm or farmers’ market stands for the public. Flaim Farms, which began in 1934, has launched into new markets with innovative frozen-produce packaging and by developing partnerships with school districts.

Even though today the Vineland Produce Auction is the largest in the country, selling to markets as far north as New England and as far south as Miami—according to Nick Semeniuk, director of agriculture studies at Cumberland County College—Vineland has made an extreme shift from produce production to nursery production. Semeniuk notes many of his students looking into nursery production and landscape design, a shift he attributes to “Big Agriculture.” Thankfully, farms like Muzzarelli, Flaim and Formisano are still doing a healthy produce business and much of the area’s remaining farmland is protected through the state’s Farmland Preservation program. Formisano Farms, also known as Borgata Farms, supplies all of the fresh local produce for the Borgata Casino and Hotel in Atlantic City.

**The Future**

One hundred and fifty years after its founding by Charles K. Landis, Vineland seems poised for a bright new future. Ask Gary Holloway what he hopes to see five years from now and his reply is full of confidence. “A bustling and progressive downtown area for the city of Vineland—and for Vineland and Cumberland County in general to be a much healthier and productive community.”

“People still come from as far as New England to visit their favorite farm stands here,” adds Nick Semeniuk. “The food culture in Vineland will never die. It can only get better.”