

COOKING SCHOOL

A Taste for All Seasons

**Southern Season's
Richmond store
showcases its
Southern roots**

By Jan Fialkow

Dave Herman, Southern Season's president, in front of the Richmond, Va., location's cooking school.

From 1975, when it was founded as an 800-square-foot coffee roaster until 2013 when it entered the Charleston market, anyone wanting to visit Southern Season had to go to Chapel Hill, N.C. It had become such a fabric of the community that when Southern Season's president Dave Herman was preparing for his move to the area this past spring, the realtor sent him a brochure with a list of five things everyone needs to do in Chapel Hill. One of them was go to Southern Season.

Today shoppers in Charleston and Richmond can also enjoy the Southern Season experience. And from November through January, special holiday pop-up stores will be open in Charlotte and Raleigh. The current plan is to stay in the South with the goal of opening permanent stores in Charlotte and Raleigh, and expanding to Nashville, Atlanta and Chevy Chase, Md.

Herman says future growth will be governed by getting the right sites in the right cities and then hiring the right people with the right attitude. This is how to recreate the Southern Season culture, which he says offers shoppers a world-class experience every time. "We want to be as busy as a Macy's on a Saturday afternoon," he explains, "and to offer the service level of a Nordstrom. We want to combine an educational element and a social environment. For most folks, grocery shopping is a chore. Grocery shopping at Southern Season is a reward."

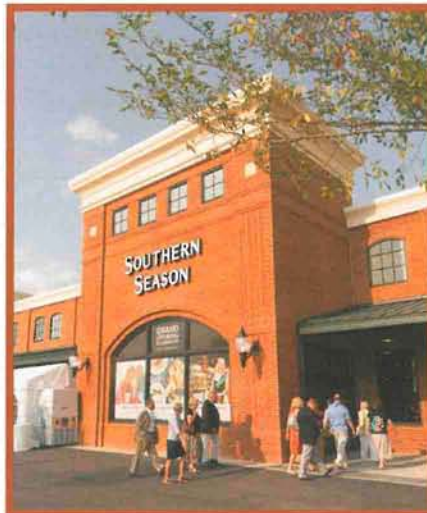
Each of the three stores carries more than 4,000 gadgets, 5,000 wines, 800 artisanal chocolates and 500 cheeses. And each store has

its own Facebook page and Twitter and Pinterest account. "When you have a good story to tell, these are great tools," adds Herman.

The Richmond Experience

In September, *TGR* met with Herman in the Richmond store, which opened in July. The 50,000-square-foot store was built from the ground up for Southern Season. Like all the stores, it has aisle upon aisle of foods, beverages, cookware, gadgets and tabletop items, as well as a restaurant and cooking school. Of the 80,000 SKUs that each store typically carries, 10,000 of Richmond's SKUs are products made in Virginia. "We're proud of the 10,000 Virginia items," says Herman. "It says what we're trying to do." Peanuts are front and center, of course, but the assortment also includes drink mixes, pickled okra, pasta, vinegars, cheeses, chocolates and locally roasted coffees.

"The local department managers have to have input," he adds. "We want them to listen to their customers and take requests. They have a say in the assortment." And since most of the store's



AT A GLANCE

FOUNDED: 1975 by Michael Barefoot

OWNER: Since 2011 Clay Hamner

LOCATIONS: 3 stores — Chapel Hill, N.C.; Charleston, S.C.; Richmond, Va.

SIZE: Chapel Hill: 59,000 square feet

Charleston: 44,000 square feet

Richmond: 50,000 square feet

Ecommerce/Distribution Warehouse: 94,000 square feet

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 750

PHONE: 866-253-5317

WEBSITE: www.southernseason.com

Retailer Profile



▲ Southern Season gift baskets, available year-round, are big sellers in-store and online.

Kevin Goolsby, ▶ lead cookware and cutlery associate in the Richmond store, carries a magnet in his pocket to demonstrate which items work with an induction cooktop.

employees are drawn from the local workforce, they understand the customers and know what works in the area. Herman explains that this policy extends to managers in all stores and that both Chapel Hill and Charleston carry a similarly wide variety of local artisan specialties.

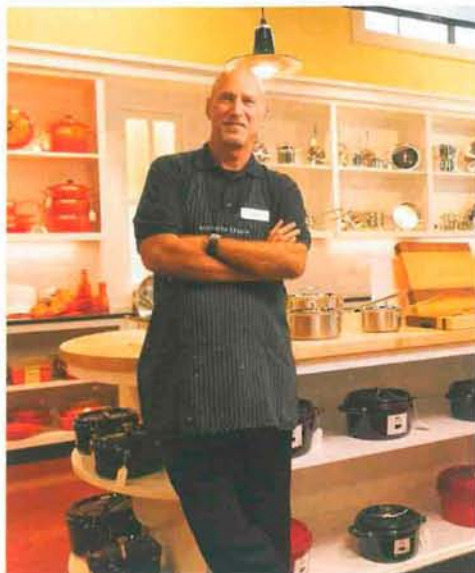
Shannon Ely is a wine & beer associate and Richmond's resident beer expert. She so impressed the powers that be at a local job fair with her love for and knowledge of beer that she landed a position in the department. When she decided that Ace Pumpkin Cider would work at the wine bar (We sampled it and it's delicious.), she presented it to her department manager, Sergio Pinzon. It's been such a successful seasonal treat that Pinzon decided to stock it in bottles as well.

This is an example of the Southern Season push-empowerment-down, push-information-up philosophy that allows local managers to bring in their favorite items. "This is a two-way street," says Herman. "We learn from the department managers as much — often more — than they learn from us."

It's also an example of the enthusiasm that drives everyone who becomes a successful part of the Southern Season family. According to Aaron Brooks, general manager of the Richmond store, "The people we hire have to be passionate, especially about customer service. We hire passion. We train for skill."

Staff training is handled by the department managers. "We don't have formal staff training classes right now," says Herman. "The department managers ... share that passion."

Richmond's 300-seat Southerly Restaurant and Patio is under the command of Chef Joseph Durante III — aka Joe — whose menu highlights local ingredients and country Southern cuisine. The restaurant serves breakfast, lunch and



dinner in the dining room and on the patio.

A particular draw is high tea in the private party room. The room had been booked for high tea on the afternoon TGR visited. "High tea gives me an opportunity to integrate products from the store — like pots, teas, etc. — with the restaurant experience," Durante explained as he pointed out the accoutrements on the beautifully set table.

"I didn't know he was doing that," chimed in Herman. "This is an example of empowerment."

Durante works closely with Cheesemonger Dany Schutte, who creates the Cheesemonger Plate for the restaurant. An American Cheese Society Certified Cheese Professional, she meets with the restaurant staff each Monday to teach them about the plate they'll be presenting that week. She chooses three selections for the plate; the main criterion: "Whatever is great. It creates exposure for the department," says Schutte. "Great cheeses tell the story."

Local Virginia products shine in the cheese department. Among the customer favorites that Schutte has championed are the Bonnyclabber Cheese Co. farmstead goat cheeses from goats raised on Sullivan's Pond Farm in Wake, Va. Rona Sullivan makes clabbered cheeses — cheeses made without starters or rennet. Sandy Bottom is semi-soft goat cheese with a black pepper rind; wrapped in white lightnin' macerated corn husks or leaves. Tide-water is flavored with Old Bay seasoning, garlic and parsley; dry-rubbed or wrapped in macerated corn husks or leaves. Chesapeake Blue is a blue-veined chevette with a



All three stores have sit-down restaurants that serve Southern fare. ▶

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natural salted rind; crumbled fromage blanc is lightly pressed after the blue mold develops. Sullivan makes her own vegetable ash for Lachevriere Cendre, a charcoal-coated bloomy rind cheese. The charcoal coating is made on the farm from grapevine prunings fired in a retort, then ground with kosher salt.

Another local favorite is the farmstead chèvre made by Robin Dodson at Goats R Us in Blackstone, Va. This chèvre is also used extensively in the restaurant.

In addition to her department and restaurant responsibilities, Schutte also teaches cheese-related classes in the cooking school. The state-of-the-art cooking school is gaining a well-deserved reputation for its mix of education and socializing — attendees often come in pairs or groups. The night before the *TGR* visit, three birthday groups were among the attendees. Some classes are demos, some are hands-on. Classes are taught by staff, local chefs, and national and international food personalities. Twenty-six classes were scheduled in November and 28 in December and include gingerbread house decorating classes and hands-on kids' classes. Cost per class ranges from \$25 to \$75. Each location — Richmond, Charleston and Chapel Hill — offers more than 340 classes each year.

The Southern Season cooking schools offer a home kitchen environment — albeit a very large home kitchen — rather than the high-tech restaurant equipment offered by many cooking schools. After the class, attendees are able shop the store for gadgets and ingredients so they can replicate what they learned at home.

Just outside the doors of the cooking school is the cookware and cutlery department, the domain of lead department associate Kevin Goolsby. His technique, which demonstrates the ubiquitous Southern Season passion for customer service, is to ask customers what items they already have, what they cook, how many people they prepare for. “Most people need specific pieces, not a whole set,” he explains.

“Part of the job is educating people on cookware,” he says. “We get a lot of questions on induction, for example. I tell people the cookware has to be magnetic. It’s gone full-circle and now it’s back to cast-iron.” Goolsby, who carries a magnet in his pocket to



Southern Season began as a coffee roaster and coffee is still central to the product mix. The coffee department in the Richmond store is adjacent to a coffee bar.

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show whether a piece of cookware is magnetic, sometimes steers customers to seasoned steel. Because it’s lighter than cast iron, he says it’s more appropriate for some shoppers.

At the heart of store — figuratively and literally — is the tasting station. It has a monthly theme which is then broken down by week. A new event called Taste is held every Tuesday from 5 to 7 p.m. Every department in the store contributes something that represents the week’s theme. The always busy tasting station helps to create and maintain energy within the store.

View from the Top

When Dave Herman assumed the role of president last May, he was joining a company steeped in tradition, well known and well respected. With stints on both the retail side — including Bloomingdale’s — and the supplier side — including Coach and Dansk — Herman knows the industry. And because he’s spent years with high-end businesses, he’s well positioned for the helm of Southern Season.

Herman stresses that Southern Season already had an established culture when he joined and that his job is to nurture it, not change it. He’s of the if-it-ain’t-broke-don’t-fix-it school. “Day in, day out you have to offer great service and great product — that’s retail,” he says. His years in the industry have given him a very good feel for the merchandising sweet spot. “Too few markdowns means a buyer didn’t take enough risk. Too many markdowns means the buyer did a lousy job.”

The company ethos is not “corporate,” he explains. Southern



Southern Season’s showcases the best of the South at each of its three stores. The Richmond location has 10,000 local products including cheeses from area cheesemakers.

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Season employs state-of-the-art technology, to be sure, but it also retains a healthy respect for the skills of the staff. Buyers and department managers are given a great deal of freedom; they are hired for their expertise and allowed to use it. “We give our people the freedom to try. They’ll have more home runs than outs. We celebrate their successes — I send a personal note of thanks.” Maybe that’s why there’s very little turnover among the best employees.

Still, reality means not everything will succeed. “Mistakes are part of the process — you have to find out what works. We don’t want to stamp out the spirit of entrepreneurship in our employees.” Then he shares a decidedly entrepreneurial example: an employee in the Chapel Hill cheese department who makes his own bratwurst. After Southern Season made sure the brats conformed to all health and safety regulations, he was allowed to bring them into the store. The brats were sampled extensively and now they have their own place in the case.

“Our people make a living doing what they love, what they’re passionate about. What could be better than that? If you love food, wine, whatever, this is a dream job,” Herman says.

The Store’s the Thing

Although each of three Southern Season stores is unique in that it carries roughly 10,000 SKUs that represent the artisans in its particular location, all three have a cooking school, restaurant, tasting station and core group of departments — kitchen & housewares, specialty grocery, bakery, cheese, gifts, floral, coffee & tea, beer & wine, candy, and deli & prepared foods. In addition, Chapel Hill and Richmond have an ice cream parlor. A core of merchandise appears in every store, but the managers in each store are encouraged to find out what the local shoppers want.

The product mix, minus beer and wine, is approximately 10 percent candy, 65 percent house and home, 6 percent coffee and tea, and 20 percent grocery. Beer and wine has not been included in the mix since the category tends to shift frequently depending on the season.

Each store has its own visual merchandising specialist who oversees tables, end caps and displays. He or she works with the



Each store’s visual merchandising specialist creates table displays. This one focuses on DIY beermaking.

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▲ The tasting center is the literal and figurative heart of the store.

Aaron Brooks, ▶ general manager of the Richmond store, is a firm believer in hiring for passion, training for skill.

buyers and the department managers so they can tell a story that appeals to that store's shoppers. "There are 36 end caps within grocery," says

Herman, who uses the term to refer to specialty foods. "We tell them what to do with 24 — the rest are what the store wants."

The quintessential Southern Season visit combines education with enjoyment. The tasting station is a great place for customers to sample new items and to learn about them. Often the artisans who make them are in the store sharing their stories.

"Sampling, testing, that's our promotion," says Herman. "An item doesn't have to have a vendor tie-in, but that helps, of course. First it has to be a great product. Our marketing spend is on sampling and tasting." This is how to share passion and build relationships, he adds. "No one is on commission, it's not about transactions." When buyers have passion for their products and when department managers have the freedom to bring in something they really like, everyone wins.

Not all customers know what they want when they walk in the door and not everyone has deep pockets. The staff is trained to help all customers, leading them to appropriate products by talking to them and finding out what they're thinking about. "We want staff to be down to earth and never talk down to a customer," says Herman. "If a customer wants a \$10 bottle of wine, we'll help them find the best \$10 bottle of wine."

'Tis the Season for Gift Baskets

The Richmond store will experience its first holiday shopping this year, notes store manager Brooks, so "this is going to be a growing experience for all of us." After the store first opened, its hours had to be extended because "traffic said be open until 9 p.m. Traffic will determine whether we extend our hours"



during the holidays. The store began to transition to seasonal items in mid-September. When fully stocked for the holidays, the Richmond store will carry decorated trees, ornaments, table settings and seasonal gifts and foods.

The two established stores are ready to take on the holiday rush. "Holidays are important times for gift giving, family and entertaining, and Southern Season does healthy holiday business," says Herman.

"Some of the popular specialty foods are available just for the holidays. Gift baskets do very

well. Just about every department has something for the holidays."

This year Southern Season launched a line of gift baskets co-branded with Chef Vivian Howard, the star of the PBS series "A Chef's Life." Howard is a North Carolina native and her restaurant, The Chef and the Farmer, is in Kinston, N.C., so there is a synergy in the collaboration with the North Carolina-based business. The seven gift baskets that carry her name range in price from \$39.99 to \$289.99. They include collections such as Christmas Morning, Childhood Memories, and Pimp My Grits.

The shelves of all the stores display traditional pre-designed Southern Season gift baskets, available year-round; many of them are themed and often highlight local products. Custom baskets can also be ordered. "We can do individual baskets in store and we can also do corporate, one-offs, anything," explains Herman. "Getting a gift box from Southern Season in the South is like getting a box from Tiffany's in the North." **TGR**

Southern Season's "down-to-earth" approach includes carrying wines in all price points — \$10 and up. ▶

