

# TRUE & ESSENTIAL

Harrisonburg's T&E Meats was struggling to stay in business.  
Then Joe Cloud and Joel Salatin made it a vital partner for  
the Valley's producers of naturally raised meat.

BY STEVE RUSSELL • PHOTOS BY CAROLE TOPALIAN



An old maxim says that you don't want to see how sausage gets made, and indeed, even the most committed eat-local carnivore shouldn't feel obligated to tour a slaughterhouse before heating a skillet. That said, if your sausage is made by T&E Meats in Harrisonburg, you can at least know *where* that sizzling, enticingly seasoned pork came from—and that it was made using humane practices.

"We're an important link in the chain for people who want to know the exact origin of their food," says Joe Cloud, a Harvard-educated urban planner who became the unlikely new general manager of the modest, brick-front meat-processing facility located north of Courthouse Square on Charles Street last July. Opened in 1939 and operated by the May family from 1974 to 2008, T&E's dwindling business in recent years threatened its closure until purchased by Cloud and longtime customer Joel Salatin, whose Polyface farm in Augusta County is nationally renowned for its natural methods of raising livestock.

"If the only federally inspected slaughterhouse in the mid-Valley had gone under, producers like myself would have had to travel hundreds of extra miles for processing," says Salatin, who needs USDA inspection for his restaurant trade and direct-to-consumer buying clubs. "That would have been a logistical nightmare."

T&E occupies an important niche between tiny, non-USDA custom processors and mega-plants that have become synonymous with America's labyrinthine, faceless, and potentially hazardous industrial food system. Cloud and Salatin hope to capitalize on that niche by catering to the growing demand for local, natural meat. "I'd like to be the premier meat processor helping drive the local-foods movement in the mid-Atlantic region," declares Cloud. "That's my goal, and so far I see enormous interest from producers, restaurants, and institutions."

Before the change in ownership, T&E stood for the first names of proprietors Tom and Erma May. The initials have been preserved, but now they officially stand for True & Essential, highlighting how the new owners are straddling tradition and innovation. A walk through the facility reveals a business at the crossroads, maintaining the rural character of the nearby Shenandoah countryside and riding the modern locavore wave.

In a back room, 78-year-old former T&E owner Tom May still oversees the making of pon hoss, a scrapple-esque mixture of ground pork parts and cornmeal that is sliced and fried as part of many area breakfasts. "If I didn't have Tommy cooking the pon hoss, I don't know what I'd do," says Cloud. "Nobody else has learned yet."

Through a door, a worker snaps lids on containers of Chow Now, a new upscale dog food made from grass-fed Virginia lamb, organic mixed greens, organic apples, and other organic ingredients. And in the cutting room, Ronnie Whetzel and Dale McCusker, butchers with 60 years of experience between them, expertly carve up thick grass-fed

steaks that will soon be on the menus of restaurants such as the acclaimed Staunton Grocery and those of a select group of D.C. chefs.

"There aren't a lot of good butchers left," says Cloud, "guys who can take a hog apart in their sleep. Ronnie and Dale can both break beef starting from a whole carcass and turn it into beautiful cuts every time, with pride and care."

Whetzel, who resembles Santa Claus despite his blood-smeared white apron, chimes in, "Most meat cutters now just open a box. If they had to start with a whole animal, they'd wallow around for half an hour before figuring out what to do." His point is emphasized by the artful flash of his razor-sharp knives, which never stop slicing flesh from bone while he speaks. "I was retired from this, but Joe gave me health benefits and talked me into coming back."

"Fifty years ago when slaughterhouses moved west from Chicago to the Great Plains," says Cloud, "workers went from possessing a real skill that could support a family, like plumbers and electricians, to having one of the most miserable jobs in America. Big factory plants have a very high employee turnover rate, and workers perform repetitive tasks that don't teach them an overall skill."

Of course, even at T&E, the killing floor is just that. Cows, pigs, and lambs enter the room alive, are "knocked down" by either a .22 rifle bullet or a bolt fired by a handheld stunner device, and by the time a few bluegrass and country tunes play on the radio, exit as slabs of meat dangling from steel hooks. But what happens between is also an important part of the T&E mission. Salatin notes that because T&E is small, animals are slaughtered one at a time, without automation, greatly reducing the chance for abuse and mistakes. >



Photo: Brydie Regan

T&E Meats' Joe Cloud (above) is finding new markets for Valley-raised meat, including more local lamb (opposite page) than in past years.



Longtime butcher Ronnie Whetzel (above) had retired until Cloud talked him into picking up his knives again.

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“Take those lambs,” Cloud says, pointing out a trio of slender carcasses hanging in the cooler. “From the time they were born to the time they were loaded onto a truck to be brought here, they lived their whole lives on a pasture with their fellow sheep, drinking clean water and eating grass, and growing naturally. Once they were in our barn, nobody kicked them, nobody beat them, and then the next morning we very quickly and humanely slaughtered them. A few days later they’re available to you at a farmers’ market or local restaurant. They don’t go through a bunch of different warehouses or industrial facilities, they don’t get commingled, and they will never be subject to a massive meat recall.”

So how does Cloud, who participated in Al Gore’s project to green the White House and who planned overseas military bases for an international architecture and design firm for 20 years, now find himself manning the retail counter cash register on winter mornings when an employee calls in sick?

“This is a major midlife shift for me,” he says, leaving the kill floor to check on several pigs just unloaded into the small barn behind the plant. Raised on a sheep farm in southwest Pennsylvania, Cloud earned a biology degree from Oregon’s Reid College and a landscape architecture degree from Harvard. Not long ago, though, he became frustrated at not being able to make sustainable building a focus of his large design and planning projects. In 2005, he decided to pursue a unique MBA in sustainable business at the Bainbridge Graduate Institute, located on an island 30 minutes by ferry from downtown Seattle.

Cloud was also helping his parents manage their retirement farm in Augusta County, and was unhappy with how some farmers renting his family’s acreage were treating the land. In 2006, he attended a farming seminar given by Salatin, who subsequently leased the land for his own expansion. “I think we felt a certain understanding for each other’s world visions,” says Cloud of that fateful meeting.

Last year, with Cloud thinking about relocating from Seattle to be closer to his parents and with T&E in dire straits, Salatin saw a chance to join forces again. Cloud, who had left his job and sat at a major turning point in his own life, recognized a unique opportunity to apply his sustainability expertise to a family-run slaughterhouse.

“Mid-career professionals like myself are seeing real possibilities in this movement. My family has always been into food,” says Cloud, pinpointing the connection that narrows the gap between his pursuits. “I love to cook and even considered becoming a personal chef. Plus, I grew up hunting, so the blood-and-guts aspect isn’t a problem for me.”



Dale McCusker knows his way around a side of beef, but a mesh glove helps ensure he keeps all 10 fingers.

Cloud and Salatin have been refocusing T&E as an active proponent of the eat-local scene. “We want T&E to cater to local, green, and artisanal producers,” says Salatin. “From day one, Joe clearly wanted to put those relationships together. His whole thrust has been to serve Valley farmers.”

Cloud even goes so far as to seek out new buyers for his clients. “I do a lot of hand-holding with new producers to walk them through the regulatory aspects, packaging, labeling, even marketing,” he says. “Some of the new smaller farmers focusing on natural and organic meat couldn’t do what they are doing without us.”

Other goals include starting T&E’s own label of antibiotic-free, hormone-free local pork. First, however, Cloud must concentrate on the fundamentals of his operation. “There’s no lack of consumers right now, but the economics are tough,” he says. “It costs a lot more to do it this way.”

A loudspeaker announces a call from a local producer, not the first or last such conversation Cloud will have this day. “If we’re trying to build local, sustainable communities, this is a better model than big factory operations that are tough on communities and the environment,” he says as he walks back inside the T&E building. “We’re talking to so many people around here who are also trying to do good things.”

**WITH HELP FROM T&E...**

## **Pet Food Goes Local, Too**

The massive recall of tainted pet food in 2007 caused many humans anxiety over the source of the dinner they spoon into Fido’s and Socks’ bowls. For Carole King, maker of the new Chow Now line of local, natural pet foods, however, the wake-up call came several years earlier.

“I had a dog that became acutely ill, and that caused me to become more holistic with animal care,” says King, whose Marshall, Virginia, venture started selling a raw lamb formula dog food through veterinarians and pet-food stores in Charlottesville, Harrisonburg, Middleburg, and Vienna in early January.

Further research convinced King that conventional pet foods contribute to many pet health problems, and she wasn’t satisfied with alternatives that source protein from as far away as New Zealand. Working closely with T&E Meats, King, a certified veterinary assistant, created an ultranatural dog food made from antibiotic- and hormone-free ground lamb from Tazewell County, Virginia, and organic tomatoes and greens from Virginia farmers. “Eating locally is very important to me, and I feel it’s equally important for animals,” she says.

Though Chow Now is more expensive than conventional pet foods, King believes it’s worth the price. “This is such a nutrient-packed food that you don’t have to feed a lot,” she says. “Plus, you’ll have lower vet bills. You’re paying for your pet’s health, and to support local farmers.”

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