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Local food proves its worth, but do people care?

By Yvona Fast

Part 1 of 2

PAUL SMITHS — Held at Paul Smith's College and sponsored by Adirondack Harvest, Local Food Connections brought together more than 100 farmers, restaurant owners, and cooperative extension personnel from several counties for a conference Wednesday.

The theme of the day-long conference centered around how local farmers can promote their products by interacting with the community and connecting with the public.

In the 21st century, most people no longer know where their food comes from or how it is grown. We have become used to products that are always available, affordable, convenient and instantly gratifying. We eat in restaurants and buy prepackaged instant dinners or ready-to-eat convenience products: meat that is precooked and salad that is prewashed. Spring has ceased to be a time when we look forward to fresh greens because we can buy greens that are washed, sorted and cut up all year long. We can just open the bag and pour on bottled salad dressing. Neither do we look ahead with anticipation to berries in the summer, fresh tomatoes in August or apples in October.

The trade-off is that food is not grown for taste or nutrition but for shipping, storage, and appearance. Vegetable varieties that ship well have replaced varieties that taste good. So in the supermarket, we can purchase California strawberries that are tough and white on the inside rather than sweet, juicy and red all the way through. Tomatoes, too, have lost most of their flavor.

Dr. Nancy Loman Scanlon, dean of the Hospitality, Resort and Culinary Management Division at Paul Smith's College, brought up the question early in the day: Do customers really care? Statistics show that more than 40 percent of customers will buy local food when it is convenient and affordable — but won't go out of their way to find it.

But locally grown, seasonal products are making a comeback. People are realizing that the value of food is in taste and nutrition rather than in convenience or length of storage. Many are willing to pay more for the better value of fresh local products. In a day of tainted peanut butter and pet food laced with rat poison, we want to know where our food comes from — who grew our lettuce and who slaughtered our meat. It is about community, about the relationship between producer and consumer that has been lost in our modern agri-business industry.

The day's speakers spoke of various ways to increase customer appeal for agricultural commodities and draw in clientele to local farms. These include fresh value — added products such as premixed

salad greens, herbs, fresh-cut flowers or condiments; products with a local twist; agri-tourism; and building relationships between farmers and food shoppers or restaurants.

Sam Hendron of Clover Mead Farm in Keeseville said customers who come only for price and convenience are the worst customers a farmer can have and the most easily distracted by cheaper prices elsewhere. Sam works hard to cultivate relationships with customers who are interested in what he sells, interested in healthy food and interested in supporting the local economy. He gave examples of customers who came to his farmer's market stand week after week, for several years, to buy his cheeses.

One way to bring local food to the consumer is by developing relationships between local restaurant chefs and area farmers. Steve Tucker of Tucker Farms and Kevin McCarthy, a chef at The Point in Saranac Lake, both spoke about their relationship. Mr. McCarthy stated that he is well aware of the difference in flavor when produce comes directly from the farmer rather than traveling for a couple weeks from somewhere like Chile. He wants to pass on that quality to his customers.

The Point was the first restaurant the Tuckers worked with. They sit down in the spring, look through seed catalogs and decide what vegetables Steve will be able to supply to Kevin. This year, Mr. Tucker will grow 88 items specifically for The Point. The challenges include the small quantities a restaurant such as The Point can use: just eight bunches of beets, or 30 zucchini blossoms, or six pounds of mesclun salad greens. Since both farmer and chef are quite busy, another challenge is delivery. In restaurants where the menu changes daily, prime cuts of meat are popular, but using minor or tougher parts if buying an entire cow or pig from a farmer can present a challenge. One solution could be for schools such as Paul Smith's to teach chefs how to utilize these parts of meat to create signature dishes. But Kevin McCarthy is hopeful: "Last year, I spent \$50,000 with Sysco just on vegetables," he said. "Hopefully, there will be a time when nothing is bought from Sysco."

Farmers' markets are another important means of bringing the farmer and food shopper together. Like the town square of earlier times, shopping at the farmers' market is a social activity that connects people with their community. There, the customer has the opportunity to meet and talk with the grower — an exchange that doesn't occur at the supermarket. Farmers are often rich sources of tips, recipes and stories. They can help you discover new foods you were not familiar with. And farmers' markets encourage diversity: You can find several varieties of lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers or apples. Producer-only markets, such as the one in Lake Placid, where sellers must have produced the product, ensure that everything is fresh and local and keep out wholesalers who buy cheap produce for resale.

North Country Kitchen: Adirondack food reflects its culture

By YVONA FAST, Part 2 of 2

PAUL SMITHS — As keynote speaker at Local Food Connections, a conference held Wednesday at Paul Smith's College and sponsored by Adirondack Harvest, Duncan Hilchey discussed the concept of "gout de terroir," or "romance of place."

Marketing the special flavor of our Adirondack region is a way of reconnecting the average citizen with the land and the people who grow our food. Hilchey, an agriculture development specialist with the Community and Rural Development Institute at Cornell University, encouraged the local farmers

at the conference — more than 100 farmers, restaurant owners, and cooperative extension personnel attended — to “think of yourselves not just as a farmer/producer but as a part of the culture of the region, a window into the farm community.”

He said that what we eat is not just a result of plants, soil, sun and climate but also of culture, history and tradition. Examples of this outside our region are the blueberry barrens of Maine, the Rio Grande hot pepper valley, Great Lakes wild rice and, closer to home, Phelps, N.Y., which is America’s sauerkraut capital. In our region, maple syrup and other maple commodities are hand-crafted, value-added, artisan and local products. Other Adirondack signature foods might include fiddleheads, ramps (wild onions), blueberries and mushrooms. They could also include locally made wines and cheeses and other heirlooms or exotics. Signature foods capture the essence of the Adirondacks and reflect the historical, wild roots of our region — simple, rugged, Adirondack camp cuisine with natural elements such as venison or blueberries.

Another way to bring the farm to the community and the community to the farm is through agri-tourism. Agri-tourism includes neighbors, restaurants, local food, farmers and consumers coming together to connect with the region. It is important to tell the story of your farm and create a positive experience for the visitor to the farm. Cooperative extension personnel can help farmers with promotion of greenhouse tours in May, farmers’ markets in summer and food festivals in the fall.

Mr. Tom Tucker from Tucker Farms in Gabriels discussed how they have used agri-tourism to bring the community into their farm. They started with pick-your-own strawberries, where customers come to pick berries and can see the farm in operation at the same time. They have also given tours to kindergarten classes from the local schools and to Paul Smith’s College students. Their Corn Maze creates a family fun activity on the farm each year from August through October. One participant at the conference thanked them for their efforts to reach out to her family and the community.

Laurie Davis spoke of how she has used her small, two-acre farm in Willsboro to feed and connect with the community through farmers’ markets and her farm stand. She grows flowers, vegetables and fruit and uses her greenhouses to extend the season. She’s able to have fresh tomatoes by mid-June, long before other local tomatoes are available, and has grown artichokes which bring many questions from visitors unfamiliar with the thorny plant.

Buying local conserves resources, is less wasteful and supports our regional economy. Fruits and vegetables often travel between 1,500 and 2,500 miles from their farm of origin to the supermarket, wasting fuel and creating pollution. In contrast, a meal based on local food uses 17 times less fuel for transport.

By your support, you contribute to the livelihood of the farmers and the existence of small farms in our region. A century ago, there were 150 farms in Keene Valley. When we moved to this area, there were two dairy farms on our road; they are no longer in operation.

Locally grown food from small, sustainable farms is often more expensive. It is not efficient to produce food in the North Country. For example, Sam cannot compete with the cheese factory that makes 300,000 pounds of cheese per day. Although his cheeses cost more, they are unique and tasty. They cannot be mass-produced. The Tuckers, who grow vegetables in our cool, short growing season, cannot compete with California farmers who can grow crops all year long on fields irrigated partly through your tax dollars.

Good cooks have always known that “fresh is best.” While more expensive and not as convenient, locally grown fruits and veggies are tastier and more wholesome because they’re picked fresh and ripe. Once picked, produce begins to lose moisture and nutrients fade away. For example, broccoli loses one-third of its vitamin C content in just two days. The sugar in sweet corn and peas begins turning to starch as soon as they’re harvested. Most vegetables and fruits lose both flavor and nutrients when shipped across the country.

When Mr. Steve Tucker approached another restaurant and was told, “Meet the Sysco price, and I’ll buy from you.” He replied, “OK, I’ll keep my greens in the cooler for two weeks and then sell them to you at the Sysco price.” This brought a roar of laughter from the audience.

Some challenges to using local products in our northern region are the short growing season and finding cold storage space for root crops such as parsnips and salsify in winter. There is also a need for a central location where people can buy local farm food year-round.

A highlight of the day was lunch when attendees could exchange ideas while feasting on local food. The menu included more than a dozen locally produced cheeses and freshly baked bread, a salad of fresh greens with maple Dijon dressing, sausage, maple-glazed winter squash, enchiladas with local beef and celeriac, a variety of potatoes and, for dessert, apple crisp from local apples and ice cream.

By connecting with the people in our community through farmers’ markets, working closely with restaurants, bringing people to the farm through agri-tourism, developing signature products and local cuisine, and educating the public about the benefits of fresh local food, local small farmers can thrive and compete with the agri-business industry.

In addition to this two-day special report on the Local Food Connections conference, Yvona Fast’s North Country Kitchen column appears every Thursday in the Enterprise’s Weekender. She lives in Lake Clear.