



The Taste of Place

Local and Regional Foods Transform the Northeast

by Roger Doiron

Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group

“We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.” Those words, spoken by Benjamin Franklin at the signing of the Declaration of Independence more than 200 years ago, could very well be the modern-day motto of the Northeast farm sector and its supporters as they look toward the future. Despite the common misperception that the Northeast is a marginal agricultural region, Northeast farmers—and consumers—are finding new ways to hang together to keep the region’s agriculture literally on the map.

The challenges are formidable. Farms and farmers continue to disappear from the Northeast landscape at an alarming rate. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s last Census of Agriculture, the Northeast—defined as New England, New York,

New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, and West Virginia—lost 4.9 percent of its farms between 1997 and 2002.

When farms disappear, so do precious resources, both natural and human. During this same census period, the Northeast saw its total farm acres decrease by 6 percent, much of it gobbled up by suburban sprawl. At least as worrisome is the loss of expertise as farmers quit the business or retire without a successor.

In many ways, the challenges facing Northeast agriculture are not unique to our region. Communities across the nation are grappling with many of the same issues. What is unique to the Northeast are the solutions that are currently being put in place and the opportunities for the future.

Small Is Beautiful

It was Earl Butz, former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, who famously offered his own success formula to farmers back in the 1970s: Get big or get out. For many farmers in the Northeast, however, getting big is simply not possible, given land values and the nature of the landscape. So farmers are developing alternatives to getting out.

A growing number of farmers in the Northeast have done well for themselves by taking Butz’s advice and turning it on its head. Rather than trying to get big, many have succeeded by purposely staying small—in scale, in production methods, and in how they market their products to customers.

Similarly, rather than getting out of agriculture, many farmers from the

region have gone into their communities to restore the farm to its rightful place at the center of a healthy society. For example, the Northeast leads the way in the growth of community-supported agriculture (CSA). With CSA, a farm and a community of supporters create a partnership of mutual commitment. In the CSA model, farm supporters share both the benefits and the risks of the farm's operations by agreeing at the start of the growing season to buy a certain quantity of farm products per year.

When in 2004, a CSA farmer in New York was awarded a prestigious MacArthur Foundation fellowship for her work on the development of local food systems, Cheryl Rogowski contended that it validated everyone in the CSA movement. "Farmers are often the economic engines for their communities," she said. "They provide a quality of life to the community by retaining the open spaces and rural character that so many people are seeking."

While Rogowski and her CSA colleagues have been redefining what a farm can be, Tod Murphy of Barre, Vermont, has been working to sustain local agriculture by reinventing the restaurant. Murphy is the founder, owner, and operator of the Farmers Diner, a 60-seat eatery that has attracted national attention by doing something unusual for a restaurant: It makes local and organic foods not only delicious but democratic.

No foie gras or truffles are mentioned anywhere on the menu, which instead features ordinary foods like omelets and milkshakes made from local organic eggs and milk, pancakes, bread and pastries made with local grains, and meats raised and cured in Vermont. Murphy wants the diner ultimately to source 100 percent of its ingredients from farms located within 50 miles of Barre. That's an ambitious goal. According to the WorldWatch Institute, the ingredients that most restaurants use travel on average 1,500 miles from field to fork.

Murphy enjoys seeing the steady flow of satisfied customers passing through his restaurant's doors, but his

The Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group

The Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (NESAWG) is a network of organizations and individuals representing farm, environmental, consumer, food-security, government, education, and other constituencies.

The organization believes that building a food and agriculture system that is regionally focused—and truly sustainable and secure—calls for a systems approach. The members work toward food-system transformation through dialogue, mutual learning, and shared initiatives that link many sectors and stakeholders.

The Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, www.nesawg.org, focuses on the six New England states, plus New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland, Delaware, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia. It partners with the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture and other organizations on specific initiatives.

favorite part of the job is writing checks to farmers. He writes a lot of them. By 2003, the diner was buying \$15,000 per month from local farmers and spurring local economic development and innovation. Murphy wants the diner to be the catalyst for farmers and food businesses to take chances with new products. "There's a lot of support in the community when the community understands that this is about the people they know and the places they drive by on the way to work in the morning," he says.

The success of private initiatives like the Farmers Diner is inspiring other food-serving establishments—schools, colleges, hospitals—to follow suit. In New England, colleges such as Bates, Middlebury, Yale, and Hampshire have attracted notice for their farm-to-cafeteria programs. A growing number of these programs use produce grown by the students themselves on educational farms that serve as training grounds for the next generation of farmers.

The momentum of the Northeast's



Photographs in this article are of Hanson's Farm in Framingham, Massachusetts. Julie Weinstein, photographer.



local food sector is unmistakable, whether it's measured in the growing number of farmers' markets, CSA farms, or "buy local" campaigns. Such energy is essential for powering the region's diverse agricultural base in the face of growing national and international competition—but is it sufficient?

Ongoing Food-Supply Challenges

Food and agricultural professionals and advocates recognize that ensuring the long-term health of the Northeast's agricultural sector requires stronger regionally scaled cooperation among all the main actors in the food chain—producers, processors, distributors, retailers, and consumers—as well as support by policymakers.

Consider the beef sector. Telling the region's cattle farmers to think small and local may work for a few well-situated farms, but not most. Like other commodity farmers in the Northeast,

beef producers are seeing their margins squeezed by larger farms from outside the region that have lower production costs. Some of the largest Midwestern feedlots have as many as 50,000 cattle each, more than all of Maine's beef farms combined.

Rather than racing Midwestern megafarms to the bottom through lower costs, more and more farmers in the Northeast are looking at new ways of rising to the top by offering premium products and by participating in innovative cooperative arrangements that give them better bargaining power with wholesale buyers. One example of the latter is Wolfe's Neck Farm in Freeport, Maine. Wolfe's Neck Farm built a natural beef business from a single herd to 60 different family farms cooperatively selling beef to retail outlets across the region. The assets were transferred to Pineland Farms Natural Meats Inc. of New Gloucester in June, and the endeavor has continued to flourish under the new auspices.

Whether new forms of cooperation like this emerge will depend in part on the changing food policy landscape. There are still many state and federal regulatory barriers hindering the development of regional-scale agriculture and food enterprises. Regional policy networks like the Northeast States Association for Agricultural Stewardship are working to examine such barriers and create a regional identity among state-level lawmakers.

Similarly, members of the U.S. Congress from the Northeast have started thinking regionally through an

informal policy coordination group known as the "Eggplant Caucus." The caucus has a big task ahead of it with a new federal farm bill expected in 2007. Historically, the Northeast has been more of a policy taker than a policy maker at the national level.

A rising tide of pressure is coming from farmers in the region to make federal policy more relevant for their farms. One way this pressure is exerting itself is through a louder and more concerted push for reducing the size of government payments to the very largest farms, few of which are located in the Northeast. A new policy approach that rewards farmers for how they farm, not what or how much they farm, would be a transforming advantage for Northeast farmers.

Intelligent policies and new forms of regional cooperation can help ensure the future vitality of Northeast agriculture. In the end, though, the type and scale of our food system will depend at least as much on consumer choices. If there are enough eaters voting with their forks in support of locally and regionally based farms, then those farms will not only survive but thrive.

We are well on the way to developing a sense of Northeast "food citizenship." Many eaters express loyalty to locally grown products, and "eating regionally" is emerging as a highly marketable concept. With Cape Cod cranberries, Northeast beef, and restaurants that feature local produce, hanging together has never been so easy.

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