

Hudson Valley Business Wed 25 April 2007

Eat-local initiative growing

By BRYAN F. YURCAN

In Europe, the phrase “eat the view,” which refers to consuming locally grown food products, has become a somewhat common one.

The phrase comes from a United Kingdom government program called Eat The View, which was designed to show the link “between sustainable local products and the countryside,” according to U.K. Countryside Agency.

In the Hudson Valley, awareness of the benefits of buying and eating local products has increased in the past several years but can get better, some farmers, business owners and agriculture advocates say.



Ric Orlando, chef and owner of New World Home Cooking in Saugerties, cooks a stew of local produce.

Buying locally grown products helps the agricultural economy flourish, which in turn keeps farmers on their land, said Dina Falcone, a steering committee member of the Hudson Valley chapter of Slow Food International.

“A big theme (of Slow Food) is community building, food sharing, and reconnecting to a floral way of life, one that is antithetical to the fast-food industry,” she said.

She said Hudson Valley Slow Food focuses on connecting growers with restaurateurs, food market owners and consumers.

The organization sponsors several events in the area, including an annual family farm festival in September, which Falcone said routinely draws more than 1,000 people.

The event “is a big day to connect the consumer with the farmer,” she said.

As more developers come to the Hudson Valley looking to buy open land, it’s important to keep as much of that land as agricultural as possible, Falcone said.

“The Slow Food movement is really about taking care of the soil, the earth and the people who are taking care of the earth,” she said.

BUY LOCAL

Kitty Sherpa, co-owner of Beacon Natural Market, said buying locally can be a political statement.

“It’s a political issue on how you’re spending your dollar, if you are supporting the local economy,” she said.

In addition, Sherpa said buying locally helps reduce fuel usage in the world.

For example, when an American family sits down to eat dinner, their food has traveled an average of 1,500 to 2,000 miles if it was bought at a typical chain supermarket, according to the Worldwatch Institute, an environmental and social policy institute based in Washington, D.C.

“I spend lots of extra time to find local products for my store,” Sherpa said. “I feel the hassle is worth it, and my customers feel that way, too. Customers do ask about local foods, and where (the products) come from.”

However, she said, sometimes it can be difficult to find local products.

“The distribution of these products needs to be worked on, how to get them from the farm to the store.”

Richard Biezynski, who owns Northwind Farms in Tivoli, has been selling his beef and poultry products in the Hudson Valley for 25 years.

He would like to distribute his meats to more stores than he already does, but that becomes difficult with increasing fuel costs.

"It's all fuel," he said. "How do you deliver to a place that's very far away? I set up my delivery routes (for markets and restaurants) and it must be in route to make sense."

Biezynski does sense more of an initiative to buy local products in the Hudson Valley in recent years.

"Some of it is weekenders, they come up here for specialty and local products," he said. "They are willing to go the extra dollar."

Biezynski said a continued increase in purchasing locally will not only help the producers, but the consumers as well.

"The farther you are from the source of your food, the less likely it is you are getting what you think you are getting," he said.

EAT LOCAL

Another organization attempting to bring people closer to the source of their food is The Valley Table magazine.

The publication spotlights chefs, restaurants, farms, artisanal foods and specialty markets in the Hudson Valley, Publisher Janet Crawshaw said.

"The connection to local food, and what farmers do for our region, is largely under acknowledged," she said. "Farms, and food in general, is a big part of our local economy."

The magazine, in conjunction with Slow Food, recently sponsored an event that brought together farmers and chefs at New World Home Cooking in Saugerties.

Chef Ric Orlando, who owns New World, said the Hudson Valley is "leading the charge" of buying local, sustainable food.

"This market is really astute," he said. "We opened 14 years ago; we have a real dedicated following."

Orlando said buying ingredients from local farmers helps the sustainability of the region.

"We need to keep the agricultural aspect of the Hudson Valley," he said. "I love the landscape, the look and the feel."

And the Hudson Valley is a prime area to find good local produce, said Jim Hyland, president of Winter Sun Farms in New Paltz.

Hyland had the idea for Winter Sun Farms in the fall of 2005, when he wondered how he could still buy and consume local produce in the winter, when it isn't being produced in the Hudson Valley.

"The only option was buying food that was shipped from thousands of miles away," he said.

So he decided to freeze kale and sweet spinach to have it available during the winter. He later partnered with some local farmers and a processing plant in Poughkeepsie, and the group received a grant from New York State to further study the idea of making local vegetables all year long.

The group is now seeking to create a regional label for a line of frozen vegetables.

"One of our goals is to regionalize the food system," he said. "To have more pocket plants and less centralized plants."

Agnes Devereux, owner of The Village Tea Room in New Paltz, said perhaps the most important aspect of using local products in food preparation is the taste.

"We want our food to taste like old-fashioned, highly flavorful food," she said. "To get that you need products that are made in an old-fashioned way."