

Frozen economy

New project seeks to freeze locally grown produce for sale

by Mala Hoffman

It was as his seasonal membership in the Huguenot Street Farm CSA [Community Supported Agriculture] was drawing to a close that Jim Hyland had a revelation. "I thought, now I can't get any locally grown products anymore," he recalls. "Which led to the question, how can we support the local farming economy by buying food all year round?" The answer was to devise a system through which local produce could be frozen and used during the winter months.

Hyland began pursuing this idea, first by going to Hudson Valley Foodworks in Poughkeepsie, which is a non-profit company that assists local food purveyors through providing services, such as a commercial kitchen and co-packing. "Co-packing is basically giving them the raw materials and they produce the packaging for you," Hyland explains. He also applied for and received a \$59,000 grant from the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets for a feasibility study for the project.



Clockwise from top left: Jim Hyland, his wife Julie and sons Ryan, James and Jack.

"We're trying to create a regional label that small farmers can use," Hyland says of Winter Sun Farms, which is what the company will be called. "Our tagline is 'A local bounty all year round.'"

The next phase, which will begin in the fall, is to create the product and distribute it at local CSAs and farm markets, along with a questionnaire. "We'll give out free product with a follow-up survey. There will be questions such as what pricing should be used, how would you like to buy it, do you like the product," Hyland adds. "With the information we receive, we're hoping that next year we can start to run the project."

Hyland says he already has eight local farms that are participating in some capacity, and that he has spoken with local health food stores and food coops to determine the level of interest. There are still a lot of variables to be worked out, however. "The main thing is whether we can get product from farmers, produce it and sell it for a profit," he says. "That's what the study is for." The grant, he notes, is essentially "R&D [research and development] for small farmers. At other big companies, they have a specific department to test products." Hyland adds that eventually, Winter Sun Farms will be a for-profit company. "It's not just going to be grant-driven. We want there to be incentives to move it forward."

The potential for success is great, he points out. "Right now no one is doing any kind of organically grown frozen product in New York State," Hyland says. And even more importantly, interest in eating locally produced food continues to grow, he adds. Hyland notes that he has met with representatives from SUNY-New Paltz, who are very anxious to feature local produce in the new Huguenot Cafe that's scheduled to open on campus, and that students in the school's Sustainable Agriculture Club are interested in the project as well.

"Student chefs at the CIA [Culinary Institute of America] who are involved in sustainability also want to see more of this, a local sustainably grown product," Hyland says.

Hyland, who moved to New Paltz a year ago and actually lives adjacent to the Huguenot Street Farm, is a former equities trader who has now embarked on several independent projects. In addition to Winter Sun Farms, Hyland is also working on developing a six-lot solar home cluster subdivision in Vermont. "I'm now doing other fun things and hopefully, they'll be successful," he adds.

As far as Winter Sun Farms is concerned, Hyland says, "I'm keeping my fingers crossed. There's a lot that still needs to be worked out. The demand is there, but there's a price where it has to come in at. We do like the idea. Obviously New York State likes the idea, so we're moving forward."

For more information about the project, go to www.wintersunfarms.com, or write to Hyland at jim@wintersunfarms.com.