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From farm to freezer

Locally grown produce is packaged for winter dining

By Sarah Bradshaw
Poughkeepsie Journal

The colder months mark the end of the regional fresh food supply. Come winter, farmers markets pack up, fields become frosty and hundreds of miles are traveled before vegetables and fruit arrive at Hudson Valley households. It doesn't have to be this way, says a New Paltz businessman with a passion for local organic foods.

"There's a way to do more regionally with farmers than people realize," said Jim Hyland, who worked for the Manhattan trading firm Kepmen Capital for 10 years before beginning an innovative agribusiness project.

This year, Hyland is creating a line of frozen vegetables under the label Winter Sun Farms that will be sold based on a community-supported agriculture model. He will also host four winter farmers markets in New Paltz, featuring at least 12 local food producers.

Frozen foods markets

Hyland believes there is about \$850 million in unmet demand for local produce. He also believes he can add profitability to vegetable production by tapping into frozen food retail sales, which reached more than \$26.6 billion in 2001, according to the American Frozen Food Institute.

But he admits it won't be easy.

"No one is doing what I'm doing probably for a good reason. They haven't figured out how to make it work," he said.

Cornell Cooperative Extension agent Bob Weybright, of Dutchess County, said there's an "inner fire" driving Hyland to succeed despite the difficulties involved with freezing foods. The main issue, he said, is producing frozen foods at a cost that is competitive with the industry. To do so, Hyland needs to keep processing and distribution expenses very low.

"Some people have tried it," Weybright said. "The logistics of it and complications cause them to shy away from it."

With the help of a \$60,000 grant from the Department of Agriculture and Markets, Hyland developed a frozen food model he thinks will give New York state a return on its investment. The model relies on the community purchasing the items in advanced.

"I want customers who want a connection with farms," the founder of Winter Sun Farms said. "If I can't make it work with them, I can't with anyone."

For \$108, Winter Sun Farm members receive six to seven frozen food items - squash, beans, peppers, peas, broccoli, tomato, raspberries, corn and a kale/collard mix. Pick-ups are held four times from December to March at Deyo Hall on Broadhead Avenue in New Paltz. The indoor winter markets - featuring maple syrup, eggs, meats, baked goods and more - will be held at the same time and will be open to the public.

Shares sold in state

Frozen food shares are also being sold to people in upstate and downstate New York for between \$120 and \$130, with pickups in Albany, Long Island, Manhattan and Brooklyn.

So far, Hyland sold about 140 of the 215 local shares he hopes will be purchased by December. Hyland believes he'll meet this goal because he said, "more people care about where and how their food is grown." He hopes another 200 shares will be sold to outsiders.

"We are giving those people more opportunity," he said. In addition, Hyland said he's keeping farms in business, protecting open space and creating jobs.

Gardiner resident Laura Gharrity purchased a share last year when Hyland did a small-scale launch of his label.

"We got types of squash last year that I've never seen in the grocery store frozen," Gharrity said. "It's nice to get local vegetables in the middle of the winter."

The produce grown for Winter Sun Farms is either surplus that would otherwise decay in the fields or is specific acreage Hyland has asked farmers to grow. Evolutionary Organics, Taliaferro Farms, Meadow View Farm, Brook Farm and Phillis Bridge Farm are some of the 15 or so growers involved. Most are organic or Certified Naturally Grown.

Meadow View Farm's Bart Colucci has sold raspberries and tomatoes to Hyland. He said Hyland asked him to plant specific crops and that adds a little extra money in his pocket.

"He's a buyer, that's a benefit," Colucci said.

About 300 pounds of red peppers came from Phillis Bridge Farm, a nonprofit farm project supported by its members.

"Jim provides us with a wonderful outlet for excess produce, what we've grown beyond our C.S.A.," farm manager Gwenael Engelskirchen said. "It's a significant source of income. We'd have to work very hard to move 300 pounds, but he's able to buy it in such volume that it works great for us."

Engelskirchen said her farm doesn't have the staff or the facilities to undertake freezing or canning foods. They do teach people how to do it.

"Some of our members are really involved on their own. Some aren't," she said. "I know people are joining Winter Sun Farm to supplement what they have done themselves."

'Very convenient' pickup

Kay Stuntz, of Highland, said the Winter Sun Farm pick-ups in New Paltz aren't any different than trips made to the grocery store.

"It's very convenient," she said. "The items are ready to use as soon as we defrost them. We don't have to do a lot of processing ourselves. We can just tuck them in the freezer."

While the public seems receptive to Hyland's project, the logistics proved to be a challenge.

The first setback was the lack of a food processing plant in the region.

Fortunately there's Hudson Valley Foodworks, a 40,000 square-foot building with six large production spaces for rent. Hyland has been utilizing the City of Poughkeepsie plant to prep and freeze food. As far as transportation goes, he transports the items from the field to Foodworks himself.

Peeler rented

Hyland realized quickly that he'd have to run a much larger-scale operation to be able to purchase and pay off the extra equipment that makes processing food a lot easier, specifically less labor intensive and more time effective.

For example, a machine called a Butternut Squash Peeler cost about \$12,200. The man who holds the patent for the machine, Ron Widelo, let Winter Sun Farms rent it for much less.

Widelo said it would take someone producing 5,000 pounds of squash per week about four months to pay off the peeler. Hyland will produce about 4,000 pounds of squash this year. He is much too small to afford expensive machinery, Hyland said.

Weybright said another issue is shelf space in the supermarket. There are more frozen products than there are freezers available, creating major competition in the industry, he said.

Hyland has had success getting his Winter Sun Farms label into non-mainstream stores, like the High Falls Food Co-op.

"If ShopRite came to us, that would be pretty cool," Hyland said.

But he admits he's taking it slow for now, with the goal to add regional outlets, like stores and institutional buyers in two to three years.

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Winter Sun Farms

What: Under the leadership of Jim Hyland, Winter Sun Farms has partnered with local farms to supply frozen vegetables during the winter.

Cost: Mid-Hudson Valley cost is \$108 for a share. Albany, New York City and Long Island cost ranges from \$120 to \$130 a share.

Share: Includes six to seven frozen items - squash, beans, peas, peppers, broccoli, raspberries, tomatoes, corn, green mix.

Pick-Ups: Held from 10 a.m.-3 p.m. the second Saturday of the month from December to March at Deyo Hall on Broadhead Avenue in New Paltz.

Winter Market: Held during the pick-ups, these events are open to the public, and will feature locally produced eggs, meats, greenhouse vegetables, baked goods, maple syrup and more.

Information: E-mail jim@wintersunfarms.com; call 845-255-1699; or visit www.wintersunfarms.com

Extras: Visit www.poughkeepsiejournal.com and click on this story to watch a video and/or browse a photo gallery that explains how squash is taken from the field and frozen for Winter Sun Farm members.

