

Gleanings

A PUBLICATION OF GLYNWOOD CENTER

AUTUMN 2003



CONNECTING
COMMUNITIES,
FARMERS
AND FOOD

BY
JUDITH LABELLE
PRESIDENT
GLYNWOOD CENTER

GLYNWOOD CENTER

CONNECTING COMMUNITITES, FARMERS AND FOOD

"Vote with your fork."

The Oldways Preservation Trust and Exchange

Judith M. LaBelle has been actively involved in matters relating to the environment, land conservation, historic preservation and tax exempt organizations for over twenty-five years. Before becoming President of Glynwood Center, she practiced law with an emphasis on the environment and land use. Ms. LaBelle was a member of the Metropolitan and Rural Strategies Task Force of The President's Council on Sustainable Development. Long active in the nonprofit field, she also serves as Chairperson of the Preservation League of New York State. Ms. LaBelle received her J.D. from New York University School of Law and was a Loeb Fellow in Advanced Environmental Studies at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University.

Across the country, more and more people are working to ensure that small and mid-size farmers – and the fresh healthful food they provide – will remain part of their community's future. Both private organizations and public agencies are working to strengthen the connections between communities and farmers. At the same time, many farmers are finding new ways to take advantage of changing markets and connect with consumers in ways that benefit both.

Glynwood Center has created an annual Harvest Awards program to recognize exemplary work and to bring attention to this growing movement. The examples that follow are drawn from the Awards nominations and our other activities. They include programs that make it possible for farmers to sell directly to consumers; schools that serve local milk and produce and are introducing students to taste and quality; organizations that are creating unusual new alliances with farmers; and comprehensive efforts being undertaken at the municipal and county levels that bring to bear the resources of both the private and public sectors.

There are also things that we can each do as individuals. Some of these are suggested below as well.

STRENGTHENING THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN CONSUMERS AND FARMERS.

When the number of middlemen between the consumer and the farmer is reduced, the farmer receives more of each "food dollar" spent. Therefore, structures such as farmers markets and community supported agriculture that encourage direct contact between consumers and farmers are of special importance. Websites are beginning to serve this purpose as well.

In "community supported agriculture (CSA)" a group of consumers agree at the start of the season to pay the farmer a set amount in return for a share of whatever is produced. They share the risk with the farmer – if it is a great growing season, they share in the bounty; if it isn't, they share what is available.

Just Food, a New York nonprofit organization, has played a leading role in encouraging the growth of CSAs in New York City. It matches groups

and farmers and then helps each CSA become self-sufficient. It also shows groups how to implement a range of payment options to encourage participation by low-income community members. In 2003, the program will provide 300 tons of local vegetables to 6300 CSA members. The CSAs provide more than 80% of the income for some of the farmers and are critical to their ability to stay in business. Just Food's work has also inspired soup kitchens and food pantries to explore how they can meet more of their needs from local farms.

The internet has made it possible for consumers to purchase directly from farmers in new ways, including by mail. For example, FarmToTable.org, created by EarthPledge, an organization based in New York City, connects consumers and food professionals with hundreds of sustainable farmers, vintners, farmers markets and restaurants that support local producers in New York State. FoodRoutes.org provides this kind of connection for certain other parts of the country.



Farmers markets and community supported agriculture encourage direct contact between consumers and farmers.

MANY FARMERS ARE RESPONDING CREATIVELY TO NEW MARKET OPPORTUNITIES.

The growing number of consumers who want fresh, high quality food has provided new opportunities for farmers – and many are responding creatively.

For example, The Rogowski Family Farm in Orange County, New York worked with Just Food to establish the first CSA site in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn. The Rogowskis have been adept at tweaking the CSA model to meet their customers' needs. After their Williamsburg customers introduced the Rogowskis to the special vegetables used in Hispanic cuisine, the Rogowskis began to grow them. When they realized that seniors weren't participating in their local CSA because they didn't need a full "share", they created a "Senior Share of the Harvest" – a smaller share at a smaller price (about \$4.00 per week in 2003). Eventually they plan to create a CSA that includes prepared foods for customers who want their products but don't want to cook.

Jim and Moie Crawford grow more than 40 types of organic vegetables at New Morning Farm in Pennsylvania. To extend the season during which their produce is available, they plant almost 200 times per year. Jim was also in the lead in creating the Tuscarora Organic Growers Cooperative, which facilitates the marketing for dozens of producers year round.

Niman Ranch, based in California, is a company that markets and distributes meats from a network of small producers who adhere to a strict code of husbandry principles. Increasing numbers of consumers request these products to obtain high quality meat produced in ways that respect the welfare of the animals and the environment. The national market created by Niman Ranch has been critical to sustaining many small producers, particularly small hog producers in Iowa.

WORKING WITH SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES.

"You are what you eat" is finally being taken seriously – especially with regard to school children. In an increasing number of schools, children are being given the opportunity to develop knowledge of "taste" that will influence their food choices for a lifetime. Many innovative programs have been designed to meet curriculum requirements while introducing students to issues that relate to food and agriculture.

In the Sante Fe Public Schools, for example, Cooking with Kids™ engages students in hands-on learning about foods that are healthy, appealing and multi-cultural through a curriculum that includes math, science, social studies, language, music and art. In 2001 Cooking with Kids™ collaborated with the New Mexico Department of Agriculture and Santa Fe Public Schools to begin to include locally grown produce in school meals.

Assemblyman Patrick Manning of New York State created a program that placed machines stocked with locally produced and processed milk and yogurt drinks in five schools in his district earlier this year. The milk is from Ronnybrook Farm, a Hudson Valley dairy that has created distinctive value-added products from milk produced without growth hormones. The machines, designed to go out of service if the temperature rises above a certain point, serve the milk appetizingly cold. Many were skeptical when they were placed in high schools next to soft drink machines. But student demand has been so strong that several more schools hope to join the program.

One of the first universities to work with regional farmers was Hendrix College in Arkansas.¹ In the last few years, several other colleges and universities, including Vassar and Yale, have begun to incorporate fresh regional food in their cafeteria fare and to introduce students to agricultural issues.

CREATING NEW ALLIANCES.

Many types of nonprofit organizations that have not traditionally worked closely with farmers are creating new ways to work together.

For example, a growing number of land trusts are focusing on protection of agricultural land. The Scenic Hudson Land Trust provides the leading example of how they can support farming as well. Over the past seven years, this nonprofit organization has protected more than 3,000 acres of farmland in the Hudson Valley by purchasing development rights, using conservation easements. The Scenic



Increasing numbers of consumers request high quality meat produced in ways that respect the welfare of the animals and the environment.

¹ Gary Valen, now Glynwood's Director of Operations, spearheaded this effort while he was Dean of Students at Hendrix. He shares his experience in a *Gleanings* available in the Resource Center of Glynwood's web site at www.glynwood.org and provides advice for others who want to create a regional food system in a booklet entitled "Local Food Project: A How to Manual". To obtain a copy of the booklet contact him at gvalen@glynwood.org

Hudson Land Trust developed a "critical mass" approach, working with communities that are supportive of protecting their farmland and focusing its efforts where it could to protect significant blocks of farm acreage that will help maintain the viability of agricultural activity, rather than create a patchwork of isolated and increasingly inefficient "protected" farms.

At the start of this effort, Scenic Hudson Land Trust created a working group of interested parties, most importantly farmers, to develop a form of easement designed to protect agricultural and natural resources, while giving farmers maximum flexibility to adapt their farms as market and other conditions dictate.

BRINGING PUBLIC AND PRIVATE RESOURCES TO BEAR.

In many regions, local and county governments and civic organizations are developing comprehensive efforts to retain farmers and farming.

Chester County, Pennsylvania, is in the path of development spreading out from Philadelphia. Its residents are determined to preserve the agriculture that remains. The Chester County Agricultural Economic Development Initiative grew out of an in-depth study, conducted jointly by the Chester County Economic Development Council and the Chester County 2020 Trust with the support of the farming and economic development communities.

Its findings painted a dire picture: farming in the county is becoming less profitable, real estate taxes on farmland are rising rapidly, and there are few affordable financing opportunities. At the same time, farmers are under enormous pressure to sell to developers. The study also found that farmers have a continuing need to upgrade their technical and management skills and that the county needs to undertake long-term planning for agricultural economic development.

The Initiative has responded with strategies relating to workforce development, small business development, market share expansion, business succession planning, economic development leadership, affordable financing and public information programs.

TAKING ACTION AS INDIVIDUALS.

The programs described above suggest the range of actions that can be taken by nonprofit organizations and government officials and agencies. Individuals can also play a critical role by using their power as consumers.

Whenever possible, "shorten the food chain" by buying directly from the farmer at a farmers market or through a CSA. The food will be fresher and tastier, you can learn how it was produced and the farmer will receive more of your food dollar.

If you want fresh, local food, ask for it! Consumers can have a surprising amount of influence.



Residents are determined to preserve the agriculture that exists.

Restaurants are a notoriously competitive business. Owners and chefs take heed if patrons ask where and how the food being served was produced. Even a major fast food chain has indicated that an issue raised in letters from only 25 consumers is discussed by its board of directors. McDonalds' recent announcement that it will require its chicken producers to reduce the use of antibiotics is a clear response to consumer concern. In a supermarket, as few as 10 or 15 requests may prompt a response from the manager.

Use your purchasing power. Whether for a dinner at home or a community "pot luck", plan your menu to feature fresh local food. If you use a hotel or conference center, this may be more challenging, since most have contracts with major food purveyors that leave them with little flexibility. But increasingly they are learning how to leverage that flexibility to obtain at least some food that is local and produced by small farmers.²

Exciting new efforts to strengthen the connections between farmers and communities are underway across the country. We hope that the handful mentioned above will inspire you to explore ways that you can join this rapidly growing movement.

² Glynwood Center has produced a brochure entitled "A Guide to Serving Local Food at Your Next Event", which provides suggestions on how to work with hotels and conference centers. It is available in the Resource Center at www.glynwood.org

Glynwood Center helps communities address change in ways that conserve local culture and natural resources, while strengthening economic well-being.

Glynwood Center does this by gathering, developing, testing and sharing ideas and initiatives from the United States and abroad.

Glynwood's Agricultural Initiative is helping to connect communities, farmers and food. In 2004 Glynwood will produce a publication showcasing the winners of the first annual Glynwood Harvest Awards along with a wide range of other examples of exemplary work from the United States and abroad.

For more information about Glynwood Center and its Agricultural Initiative visit www.glynwood.org



P.O. Box 157 COLD SPRING, NEW YORK 10516 TEL 845-265-3338 FAX 845-265-3391
www.glynwood.org

©COPYRIGHT 2003 GLYNWOOD CENTER

Gleanings is an occasional series of publications through which Glynwood Center shares ideas drawn from its programmatic activities.
Photos: Front cover: Vegetables - Michael Turton, Tractor - Gary Valen; p. 2 - Wayne Mones; p. 3 - Gary Valen; p. 4 - Warwick Exchange Team