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Local Farmers: Popular but Not Yet Hitting Pay Dirt

by **Maryanne Hedrick**

New York Magazine says local farmers are the new celebrities.

The trendiest places to be seen in suburban towns are the ever-present green markets that are open up to six months a year. Stores that feature local food are the most successful.

So a reasonable person would come to the conclusion that our Hudson Valley farmers hit pay dirt this year, since 2008 has been a good year for local farmers, no doubt about it. Amy Hepworth of Hepworth Farms in Milton, NY, whose family has been farming since the late 1880s, says this year for the first time they are selling everything they can grow.

Pete Taliaferro, a certified organic farmer from New Paltz who sells at the Ossining farmers' market, rented twenty more acres this year and increased his production geometrically.

The breadbasket's not so full

But the bigger picture is not so rosy. Our Hudson Valley farmers have also had a difficult time supporting their own families, since the area once known as the breadbasket of America is in fact "one of the top 11 most threatened farming communities in the nation," according to the American Farmland Trust's "Farming on the Edge" report.

The most recent info on food production shows that the Valley lost more than 450 dairy and beef farms and almost 100 orchards and vegetable farms (from 1997-2002, according to the Glynwood Center in Cold Spring). Much of our lost farmland was sold to homebuilders, or converted into more profitable "non-food" ventures, such as horse farming, hay production, and greenhouses.

Judith LaBelle, President of The Glynwood Center, says, "There are tremendous challenges facing the farmers of the Hudson Valley, as well as some tremendous opportunities that have helped to improve their economic viability, particularly in the marketing area. For example, the Valley happens to be a particularly healthy area for grass-growing and therefore animal grazing. However there is insufficient infrastructure for farmers to sell grass-fed meat. Glynwood has helped to add meat processing centers in the Hudson Valley during the next two to three years."



Pete Taliaferro of Taliaferro Farms in New Paltz, and Maryanne Hedrick

The bottom line is that it will take a long time for our Hudson Valley farmers to fully receive the monetary rewards that they deserve.

Let's agree to pay premium for premium

The key to supporting our farmers is to accept that the premiums we often pay for local food are worth it. Those of us who are fans of local food, need to hold to our principles and keep spreading the word about the benefits of eating local foods. The growth of direct sales, through markets and CSAs (community supported agriculture), has greatly helped our farmers this year.

Community-supported agriculture is a relatively new socio-economic model of farming and food distribution. A CSA consists of a community of individuals who pledge support to a farm operation so that the farmland becomes, either legally or spiritually, the community's farm, with the growers and consumers providing mutual support and sharing the risks and benefits of food production. CSA's focus is usually on a system of weekly delivery or pick-up of vegetables and fruit, sometimes dairy products and meat. Joining a CSA is the most economical way of accessing local food. It's recommended that people join early, since by definition, shares are limited.

Farmers' markets are filling a huge need, and they're no longer for the well-to-do. Food stamps are welcomed at all markets utilizing the Farmers' Market Wireless EBT Program, operated by the Farmers Market Federation of New York.

So, while we applaud our local farmers as they take a bow in a much deserved spotlight, they can't take applause to the bank. The local food they offer us not only tastes better, it's infinitely better for us. All our farmers ask for is our continued enthusiastic support.

Maryanne Hedrick is concerned about the future of local farming, and wants more people to have access to the highest quality local food. Maryanne and her husband, Tom created mypersonalfarmers.com in 2007, an online farmers market specializing in food grown and created in the Hudson Valley that provides home delivery.

Ten Reasons to Support Local Farmers

- 1—Local food tastes better.
- 2—Local food is better for you.
- 3—Local food is safe.
- 4—Local food supports Hudson Valley families.
- 5—Local food builds community.
- 6—Local food maintains an American tradition.
- 7—Local food preserves genetic diversity.
- 8—Local food preserves open space.
- 9—Local food supports the environment and benefits wildlife.
- 10—The Hudson Valley is losing farmland at the rate of seven acres a day.

Where to Buy Local Food

- www.nyfarmersmarket.com
- Mrs. Greens, Nature's Temptation, Near and Natural, Whole Foods, and other select food stores.
- www.mypersonalfarmers.com, an online farmers' market that delivers to homes and restaurants.
- Join a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA):
 - Cascade Farm in Patterson
 - David Frost: 845.878.3258
 - www.cascadefarmschool.org
 - Jun. through Oct. pickup at the farm.
- Ryder Farm Cottage Industries
- 400 Starr Ridge Road, Brewster
- Elizabeth Ryder: 845.279.4161
- www.ryderfarmorganic.com
- Jun. through Oct. pickup at the farm.