



Photos by Nancie Battaglia

Rob Hastings, left, uses greenhouses and “hoop houses” to extend the growing season at Rivermede Farm in Keene Valley.

Think global, eat local

■ *Adirondack farmers cultivate a market for home-grown produce, cheese, and meat.*

By Adam Federman

I GREW UP in Saranac Lake and have to admit that until recently I could name only one farm in our 5.8-million-acre Adirondack Park: Tucker’s, famous for its potatoes.

The Adirondacks is known for many things, but farming is not one of them. One hears more about alpine vegetation than vegetables, more about days of snowfall than days of sunshine. If anything, the Park is famous for its short growing season—anywhere from sixty-five to a hundred days—and its poor soil.

But a quiet revolution in agriculture is changing the perception of the Park as a place where nothing grows. The emergence of new farms and community-supported agriculture (CSA), the raising of pigs, cattle, chickens, and goats, and a growing market for local meat and produce are altering the way we eat and perhaps even the way we live. Indeed, recent developments suggest the Adirondacks’ local-food movement has already gone mainstream.

In its final issue, before folding in 2009,

Gourmet magazine ran a feature story on eating in the Adirondacks and described the Park as a place where “a bunch of tough, talented farmers and cooks are giving Adirondack farming and food—which once looked bleak—a glorious second chance.” In 2010, organizers held the first Farm 2 Fork Festival, a weeklong celebration of local food. The Adirondack Museum in Blue Mountain Lake launched a three-year exhibit called

“Let’s Eat!” on the history of food and eating in the Park. Kristin Kimball, co-founder of Essex Farm, published *The Dirty Life*, her down-to-earth account of farming in the Champlain Valley. The Park even has a signature product (it always seemed unfair to me that Vermont lays claim to maple syrup): the Adirondack blue potato, developed by scientists at Cornell University in 2003. You can buy it at Tucker’s.

Still, despite the growing interest in all things local, the amount of food produced within the Park remains very small, barely a drop in the bucket. The number of farms in northern New York’s six counties has actually declined over the last two decades, though Essex and Franklin counties have managed to buck the trend. At the same time, however, the percentage of food sold directly from farmers to consumers through CSAs—the backbone of the local food movement—has grown by more than 20 percent. In Essex and Franklin counties, growth has been even greater (29 and 69 percent, respectively), suggesting that the Park is capable of becoming increasingly self-sufficient.

Whether the Adirondacks could ever fully sustain itself is another question. On the plus side, there probably is enough arable land to support the Park’s residents and most of the tourists who visit. “It’s not unfair to say that for every half-acre of good dirt



Goats at Asgaard Farm in the Ausable Valley.



“we could support a person for a year,” says Mark Kimball of Essex Farm, who now farms more than five hundred acres.

Based on that figure, about seventy thousand acres would be needed to feed the Park’s year-round residents. But that would require significantly more farms and, of course, farmers. Not to mention a dramatic shift in the way we eat. In Essex County, for example, which includes some of the best farmland in the Park, only 237 acres were devoted to growing vegetables, according to the 2007 Agricultural Census. Kimball says the missing link isn’t the amount of land but rather the dearth of farmers to work it.

“We need to come up with a way to get more farmers up here,” he says. Which isn’t always easy. But as new farmers settle in the Adirondacks and longtime farmers adapt to new realities, the face of agriculture in the Park is changing.

A little more than ten years ago Tucker Farms, located



Essex Farm caters to customers who want locally grown vegetables.

north of Saranac Lake, grew nothing but potatoes. A third of their product—seed potatoes—went to farmers in Florida who supplied a Frito-Lay chip plant. But in 1997, after passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement, Frito-Lay moved its operations to Texas to be closer to the cheaper Mexican potato market. The Florida farms went under, and Tucker’s was facing the same fate.

Shortly thereafter, Steve Tucker, who runs the 140-year-old-farm with his brother Tom, decided to reach out to The Point, a ritzy lodge on Upper Saranac Lake.

Tucker’s was already growing strawberries and a couple of varieties of specialty potatoes. Steve took a sample to then-chef Kevin McCarthy, who was looking for someone to supply local produce.

“He liked them and asked what else I could grow,” Tucker recalls. “So I took a seed catalog up there, and he started pointing out stuff that he’d like fresh, and it ended

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Asgard Farm

Community-Supported Agriculture

Following is a list of CSA farms in and around the Adirondack Park.

Farm to Family Food Network
Melinda Little
118 Shepard Avenue
Saranac Lake, NY
518-891-0197
mlittle231@aol.com
mccollomsmarketsl.locallygrown.net
Vegetables, meat (beef, pork, chicken, and duck), eggs, bread, honey, maple syrup, jelly, jams, and herbs
January-June and Sept.-Dec.
Monthly pickup in Saranac Lake

Full and By Farm
Sara Kurak & James Graves
319 Leaning Road Essex, NY
518-963-7127
fullandbyfarm@gmail.com
Vegetables, pork, beef, chicken, eggs, maple syrup, and honey
Yearlong and summer shares available. Pickup at the farm, Thursday evenings

Severance Farm
Robin Severance
1037 Stevenson Road
Westport, NY
518-962-2989
robin_westport@yahoo.com
Vegetables, fruit, eggs, flowers, beef, poultry, pork
Call for pickup options

Juniper Hill Farm
Adam Hainer & Melody Horn
Loukes Road
Wadhams, NY
518-524-5652
juniperhillfarm@gmail.com
Vegetables and cut flowers
June-October
Pickup on farm or Schroon Lake, Essex, and Elizabethtown farmers markets

Essex Farm
Mark and Kristin Kimball
2503 Route 22
Essex, NY
518-963-4613
All-you-can-eat vegetables, meat, eggs, dairy, grains, and more. Short-term shares are also available.
Year-round, pickup on farm 3-7 p.m. Fridays

Fledging Crow Veggies
Ian Ater and Lucas Christenson
122A Robare Road
Keeseville, NY
518-834-5012
fledgingcrow@gmail.com
Vegetables (certified naturally grown)
June-October
Pickup on farm or Lake Placid, Plattsburgh, Keene Valley, and Saranac Lake farmers markets

Ledgetop
Jessica Chevalier
177 Lake Road
Crown Point, NY
518-597-9512
Vegetables
Pickup at farmers markets in Saranac Lake and Lake Placid; call for other options

Asgard Farm
David Brunner & Rhonda Butler
74 Asgaard Way P.O. Box 605
Ausable Forks, NY
518-647-5754
info@asgaardfarm.com
Winter Meat Share (January-March) beef, pork, chevon (goat), eggs, and sometimes cheese
Pickup on farm first Thursday afternoon or Saturday morning of each month

Rehoboth Homestead
Beth Spaugh-Barber & Tony Barber
66 Jabez Allen Road
Peru, NY
518-643-7822
rhomestead.com
Vegetables, free-range chicken, eggs, and duck
June-October.
Pickup on farm Tuesday or Thursday



The farm of Tom (above) and Steve Tucker is known for its potatoes and corn maze.



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up being just about everything in the catalog."

Today, Tucker's can hardly be called a potato farm. The Tuckers, who till about three hundred acres, reduced by half the amount of land devoted to potatoes and now grow more than seventy different vegetables, including beets, herbs, corn, and Asian greens such as tatsoi and komatsuna. They deliver produce to six restaurants in Saranac Lake and Lake Placid and ship specialty potatoes, including the Adirondack blue, throughout the United States. Last year they opened a roadside stand with a "veggie phone" that customers call to place orders. They've also managed to pay off most of their debts, which were largely the result of relying for years on a single crop whose price was kept artificially low by the federal government. Globalization and the free-trade ethos of the 1990s forced the Tuckers to diversify, think smaller, and seek out markets closer to home.

"When I started with Kevin there was no local-food movement," Steve Tucker said. Ten years later, the challenge is keeping up with local demand.

"It's like Berkeley, California, thirty years ago," said McCarthy, who now teaches at Paul Smith's College. Others compare it to Vermont fifteen years ago. Both areas now have vibrant local and regional food networks.

Whatever the barometer, "we're at the infancy of our agricultural movement up here," said Adam Hainer, who runs Juniper Hill Farm in Wadhams, a tiny community in the Champlain Valley.

Local food in demand

Adirondack Harvest, a nonprofit devoted to promoting local agriculture, says there are at least twenty-five seasonal farmers markets, a handful of community gardens, ten CSAs, and as many as six hundred farms within the Park (that number, from the 2007 Agricultural Census, includes all farms, from aquaculture and tree farms to livestock and dairy). Between 2002 and 2007, vegetable and livestock sales went up markedly. And crops not normally associated with the Adirondacks are getting serious attention. Cornell Cooperative Extension is experimenting with grape varieties for cold climates, and there are now several small vineyards in the Champlain Valley. It's also working to develop varieties of organic wheat, soybeans for making tofu or soymilk, and winter and spring canola.

"I think there's really a demand," said Tom Both, executive director of Adirondack Harvest. "People want to support the local-food movement. And we have more

farmers now and more land that's being tilled."

That support reflects nationwide trends and a growing awareness among consumers of the economic and environmental impacts of what we eat. Modern industrial agriculture uses more fossil fuel than any other sector of the economy, excluding transportation. So buying from smaller farms and reducing the distance our food travels (known as food miles) is good for the planet, according to proponents of the local-food movement.

It's also good for the local economy. As McCarthy puts it, "if I spend money with Tucker, he spends it with the guy to change his oil, who spends it with the guy at the grocery store, and then all the money stays in our neighborhood and paves our roads." It's a simple idea but one with enormous potential. Michael Pollan, the author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and other books on the politics

of food, has described the changes in the way we eat as nothing short of a revolution.

In the Adirondacks, restaurants have played an important role in the local-food movement by providing a crucial link between farmers and consumers. Dave Hunt, the chef at Generations Restaurant in Lake Placid, says that the local-food scene is turning him into "an activist kind of guy." He said he'd like to see an eco-friendly meat-processing and distribution plant somewhere nearby. The meat he buys, and that all restaurants buy, must be processed in a federal facility, and the one closest to Lake Placid is just north of the Park in St. Lawrence County. Those raising poultry have to go even farther. "My dream is to have it up here in Lake Placid," Hunt said.

McCarthy, as a member of Adirondack Harvest's board, was tasked with helping build relationships between farmers and restaurants. One challenge was figuring out how both farms and restaurants could benefit financially. Sharing information—such as how much Sysco and other large suppliers charge restaurants for food—helped give farmers a sense of what they were up against. In the early days, restaurants also needed to assure farmers that their interest was more than just a whim. McCarthy went so far as to purchase the seeds for certain crops he wanted, like celery root, that farmers weren't sure they'd be able to find a local market for.

"In terms of the fresh local-market growers, establishing that market and learning how to provide for the market takes time," said Mike Davis, who

manages the Cornell Cooperative Extension's experimental farm in Willsboro.

At the same time, restaurants using local products have had to make adjustments. Seasons matter. Chefs have to decide how far and wide they want to search for something as well as balance the expectations and demands of consumers. They also have to be aware of what's in their backyard. Just beyond the Blue Line around Plattsburgh is one of the premier regions in the world for growing McIntosh apples, which do particularly well in cool climates. There's no reason to have them shipped in from Washington State.

But most restaurants in the area—and there are ..►



Chef Dave Hunt often puts local food on the menu of Generations Restaurant in Lake Placid.

► new ones opening frequently—are far more aware of what is available from local farms than they were just a few years ago. Many of them showcase local food. In addition, the Park now has an impressive number of small farms devoted to raising livestock.

But the Park still lacks a distribution network for local food. Adirondack Harvest once set out to fill that void, but Rob Hastings of Rivermede Farm in Keene Valley said the effort fizzled out. “The idea of centralizing farms somehow and distributing from a hub hasn’t caught on,” he said. Vermont, in contrast, has a well-developed farm-to-table network, and consumers can find area products in their local supermarket.

Ironically, farmers or chefs in the Adirondacks often have to drive long distances to get local products to market. Or come up with more inventive methods. Lesley Trevor, who runs Snowslip Farm in Lake Placid, recalls when Dave Hunt of Generations stopped by one day, as he often does, looking for London broil. Trevor, who sells beef from a farm in Westport, had some but not enough. Since she was on her way to Keene Valley for a wedding, she called up the farm and they sent someone from Westport to meet her. Before the wedding, in formal dress, they transferred the London broil, “like contraband,” to her car.

McCarthy longs to see the day when having local products on the menu is not something that is advertised as exceptional. “It should be to the point where buying local is a professional standard in the industry, not something that you exploit on your menu,” he said.

And it’s not just restaurants that are getting in on the act. Some public schools are beginning to buy local. Keene Central School would give Alice Waters—the founder of Chez Panisse in California and one of the leading proponents of sustainable food programs for



Cynthia and David Johnston raise Scottish Highland cattle at Dacy Meadow Farm.



schools—a run for her money. Over the last three years the small school—it has 164 students in grades K-12—has largely weaned

itself off processed food. The school has a garden (which students help maintain) for tomatoes, peppers, kale, and salad greens, among other produce, and buys most of what else it needs from local farms. This year, for the first time, the school purchased a share in the

Essex Farm CSA.

In late September I visited the cafeteria on pizza day just before lunch was served. The dough was home-made—most of the flour came from Champlain Valley Mill in Westport—and the sauce was made with tomatoes from the school garden and CSA share. Only the cheese was government-issue. The school was in the middle of

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Farmers Markets

Following is a list of farmers markets in the Adirondack Park (and a little beyond), with contact information when available.

Chateaugay Lakes

Lawn of the Hollywood Inn
June 18-September 3
Saturdays: 10 a.m.-2 p.m.
Adirondackfarmersmarket.com
Jo Ellen Saumier, 518-497-6038

Elizabethtown

Behind Adirondack Center Museum
May 20-October 14
Fridays: 9 a.m.-1 p.m.
Adirondackfarmersmarket.com
Gina Agoney, 518-293-7877

Keene

Marcy Airfield, Route 73
June 19-October 9
Sundays: 9:30 a.m.-2 p.m.
Adirondackfarmersmarket.com
Dick Crawford, 518-561-7167

Malone

Malone Airport, Route 11
June 15-October 12
Wednesdays: 12-4:30 p.m.
Adirondackfarmersmarket.com
Vicky Lesniak, 518-497-0083

Paul Smiths

Paul Smith’s College
June 17-September 23
Fridays: 2-5 p.m.
Adirondackfarmersmarket.com
Paul Moriarty, 518-637-2377

Saranac Lake

Adirondackfarmersmarket.com
Jane Desotelle 518-563-4777

Saranac Lake Village Farmers’ Market (producer only)

Riverside Park
June 4-October 15
Saturdays: 9 a.m.-2 p.m.
Sam Hendren, 518-524-7247

Indoor Harvest Market

Saranac Lake
Place and times to be announced
October-May
Sam Hendren, 518-524-7247

Tupper Lake Wild Center

June 16-September 15
Thursdays: 11 a.m.-3 p.m.
Adirondackfarmersmarket.com
Ellen Beberman, 518-891-7470
Special events:
July 14, local art day
Aug. 11, local food celebration

Willsboro

Route 22,
June 16-September 8
Thursdays: 9 a.m.-1 p.m.
Adirondackfarmersmarket.com
Linda Therrien, 518-963-4383

Lake Placid (producer only)

Lake Placid Center for the Arts
17 Algonquin Drive
June 22-September 28
Wednesdays: 9 a.m.-1 p.m.
Sam Hendren, 518-524-7247

Schroon Lake

Town Hall
June 27-September 5
Mondays: 9 a.m.-1 p.m.
Sam Hendren, 518-524-7247

Essex

Town Hall
June 26-September 4
Sundays: 10 a.m.-2 p.m.
Sam Hendren, 518-524-7247

Ausable Valley

River Side Park
June 24-September 2
Fridays: 4-7 p.m.
Sam Hendren, 518-524-7247

Long Lake

Route 28N/30, across from post office
June 30-September 1
Thursdays 10 a.m.-2 p.m.
Ruth Howe, 518-624-2162

North Creek

Upper Hudson Railroad Place Pavilion
June 16-October 6
Thursdays 3-6 p.m.
Barbara Thomas
Northcreekfarmersmarket.com

Old Forge

Park Avenue behind Old Forge Hardware
June 24-October 7
Fridays 2-6 p.m.
Kelly Hamlin, 315-369-2313

Speculator

The Pavilion, across from public beach
June 30-September 1
Thursdays 3-6 p.m.
Anna Smith, 518-548-4521

Ticonderoga

Moses Circle, junction of Montcalm and Route 9N
July-October
Saturdays 10 a.m.-1 p.m.
Matthew Courtright, 518-585-6619

Warrensburg

(producer only)
Warrensburgh Mills Historic District, River Street
May 27-October 28
Fridays 3-6 p.m.
Teresa Whalen, 518-466-5497
taawhalen@yahoo.com

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constructing a greenhouse, and it had plans to plant apple and plum trees. Outside in the garden there were several varieties of kale, neat rows of corn, and plants drooping with red and orange cherry tomatoes.

School Superintendent Cynthia Johnston, who also runs Dacy Meadow Farm in Westport, said the local-food initiative has been integrated into the curriculum: students learn about their role as consumers and about the importance of buying locally. They compost everything but meat and dairy, and a sign in the cafeteria explains the process. An article next to where the students empty their dishes is titled “The Environmental Impact of Food Waste in America.” Johnston says if she could raise pigs in the schoolyard she probably would.

“I do believe it is the movement of the future,” Johnston said. “We’re just ahead of the curve a little bit.”

Extending the growing season

If there is one thing that hasn’t changed, it is the difficult task of growing in this region. Farming takes a lot of work anywhere. But in the Adirondacks a very short growing season and rugged topography impose their own limits. Many of our farms are in the fertile Champlain Valley or on the fringes of the Park, where the land is flatter and soils tend to be more forgiving.

In Keene Valley, just over twenty miles from Lake Champlain and about a thousand feet higher, frost can strike pretty much any time of year. Rob Hastings of Rivermede, who has farmed in the valley for twenty-two years, said that the year he started out there was a frost the first week of July and the third week of August. “I remember going out one night with every bedsheet in the house to cover the crops,” said Hastings, who had been managing a cooperative farm in the Caribbean as a member of the Peace Corps. “That’s when I really questioned farming in the Adirondacks.”

But instead of returning to the Caribbean, Hastings decided to stay. His interest in season extension is a product of those early experiences. He began by using simple row covers (or mini cloches) and, about eight years ago, put up his first high tunnel or hoop house. Simple steel frames with plastic siding, high tunnels can extend the season for about two months on either end.

Unlike greenhouses, high tunnels generally are not heated, though they can be, and don’t require flat ground. Some models are mobile, allowing for easy crop rotation. Hastings, who has four high tunnels and five heated greenhouses, grows carrots, spinach, and mixed salad greens year-round. He uses two of his tunnels for perennial strawberries and raspberries and also stores potatoes, cabbage, Brussels sprouts, celeriac, beets, leeks, and onions for winter sales.

High tunnels may become more common in the Adirondacks. Several new farms are making use of them. Davis, of Cornell Cooperative Extension, said some kind of hybrid—essentially a high tunnel that uses a source of heat during early or late frosts—could make a big difference for farmers in the area. “If you can get through a

couple of frosty nights it may open up—without really having to put any more heat into that system—another four to six weeks of harvesting,” he said. Still, they aren’t cheap. A single tunnel about a hundred feet long can cost as much as \$12,000.

There are other ways to work around the weather, what Sara Kurak of Full and By Farm calls season extension the old way. This includes lacto fermentation, a kind of pickling that makes use of naturally occurring wild bacteria, canning, and root cellars—methods that allow farmers to store food and supply customers year-round. Kurak and her partner, James Graves, started their farm in Essex two years ago and offer a winter CSA that runs through the end of March. Members get everything from winter squash, parsnips, and beets to garlic, potatoes, and cabbage. They also make sauerkraut and kimchi—lacto-fermented products—and the share includes beef, pork, chicken, and eggs. The Asgaard Farm also offered a winter meat share for the first time this year.

Community-supported agriculture is relatively new to the Adirondacks, but its rapid growth suggests that the Park is becoming more self-sufficient. The Essex Farm CSA has grown by 35 percent a year and now has close to two hundred members. Newer farms have experi-

enced similar growth. The model is straightforward: CSA members pay an upfront fee for a share in a farm and usually pick up their food once a week. They often establish a connection with the farm and farmers as well as their fellow shareholders.

Area farmers markets are also beginning to sell local products year-round. The Ausable Valley Grange, which runs producer-only markets in Lake Placid, Saranac Lake, Ausable Valley, Schroon Lake, and Essex, is looking for a permanent winter location. Similarly, the Farm to Family Network emerged out of a desire to connect farmers and consumers through the winter season. Members pay a modest fee to join and then purchase products from a variety of regional farms, within the Blue Line and beyond, every month. Members do their shopping online, and the pickup is usually at someone’s home.

Cold weather may even distinguish Adirondack produce. Late greens take on a deeper, almost-radiant color and have a richer flavor. Fall-harvested carrots and other root vegetables tend to be sweeter because frost drives the sugar to the roots. “Carrots in July and August are fantastic,” said McCarthy. “But when carrots are grown in October and they change from the starch to the sugar, it’s the same carrot, but it’s a totally different product.”

Hastings, who brands his cold-weather carrots candy carrots, no longer seems phased by Adirondack weather. In fact he’s recently partnered with Lesley Trevor of Snowslip Farm to begin farming outside Lake Placid—at roughly 1,900 feet in elevation.

“I’ve listened to Rob complain about frost pockets in Keene Valley for years, and so he decides to expand to Lake Placid,” said Mike Davis. “It’s a little confounding to me, but it’s great.”

Food trends are notoriously short-lived. They seem to come and go with the seasons. What makes this one any different? For one, it’s been a long time in the making. There may be a lot of new farms in the Park, but they didn’t appear overnight. And the farmers are here to stay. Hainer, at twenty-seven, is a good example of the new breed of Adirondack farmer—young, enterprising, and energetic. He farms land that’s been in his family for three generations. It was once devoted to a single cash crop: birdsfoot trefoil—a forage plant distinguished by its bright-yellow flowers—well suited to the valley’s heavy clay soils. “Trefoil was hailed as a crop that was going to save Adirondack farmers,” Hainer said. But when the bottom fell out of the market in the 1970s, the farm went under.

Like other farmers in the region, Hainer understands that no single crop is going to save Adirondack farmers. He now grows at least forty kinds of vegetables. This year he plans to lease seventeen more acres of river-bottom land from a neighbor in exchange for a CSA share and hopes to continue to expand his membership base. He’s also thinking about the possibility of marketing local produce outside of the Park, perhaps in New York City, where the greenmarket scene is thriving. In the process he and other local farmers may just put Adirondack agriculture on the map. ■



Photos by Nancie Battaglia

Chef Kevin McCarthy prepares a meal with locally grown food at Dacy Meadow Farm.