

# Farm-to-table a natural fit in the Berkshires

By BOB DUNN  
*The Berkshire Eagle*

Fresh ingredients and locally prepared food are good for consumers, and the relationships between the growers and providers of those ingredients and food benefit the Berkshire economy.

"We're keeping our money in the county and supporting each other, and that's the benefit to all of us doing local business," said Ruth Crane of Holiday Brook Farm in Dalton.

Crane, who runs the business operations of the farm with her husband, Dicken, said the process of farm-to-table growers distributing their products to consumers through either direct sales or providing ingredients to restaurants has been expanding, especially among younger adults.

"I think this has been a growing movement, where the next generation is concerned with where their food is coming from," she said.

Holiday Brook Farm provides ingredients to Dreamaway Lodge in Becket, Otto's in Pittsfield, and The Old Creamery in Cummington, Crane said. The farm also provides maple products to Appalachian Naturals which uses them in their sauces and dressings.

"Supporting farms that in turn give back to the economy, it's like any business, it's cyclical and we're all supporting each other," said Crane.

This growing interest in farming, means less farmland is avail-

able in the Berkshires, but Crane sees that as more of an opportunity than an obstacle.

"It leads to more creative styles of farming, owning massive acres of land is not the only way to grow your own food," she said. "Lots of people are figuring out they can grow a lot of vegetables in their small yard or on their back deck in containers, so growing food doesn't have to be just this one model."

Kim Wells, of East Mountain Farm in Williamstown, has been farming since 1987. Wells has seen customers' interest in farm-to-table meats increase since 2004, when the Eagle Bridge Smokehouse, a USDA-approved slaughterhouse, opened in nearby New York state.

Other facilities have opened since then, which have allowed farmers to provide specific cuts of meat to markets instead of entire sides of beef, Wells said.

Restaurateurs used to politely decline purchasing Wells' meat. But now about half of all the meat that he sells is purchased by restaurants and retail outlets. Part of the appeal of farm-to-table meat, is the opportunity for the purchasers to work with better ingredients.

"It starts with the chefs and it puts them in touch with a quality of product that they can't really get from the big distributors," he said. "Most chefs are just so happy to get real meat."

Selling products to local restaurants and to customers at both farm-

ers markets and East Mountain's own retail store keeps the money circulating within the county, he said.

Another benefit to selling locally is the ability to provide a greater level of hands-on customer service than the large distributors can.

One Saturday last summer, Wells received a call from a chef who told him that the meat he had ordered from a distributor had been condemned and couldn't be sold.

"It left him with zero meat during the busiest weekend of the summer," Wells said.

Wells was able to work out a deal with the chef to provide him with enough meat until his next order arrived.

Both Crane and Wells say there is a lot of interest throughout the Berkshires in both local agriculture and providing farm-to-table ingredients.

"We did a Mother's Day brunch here last year and sold out tickets really quickly," Crane said. "All the people who came said they would definitely do it again next year, so there's great enthusiasm for that kind of different way of consuming your local products."

"I hope it's growing; I get the sense that it is," Wells said. "I don't think it's gone too far, too fast. I guess we'll see if I'm right."

At Haven Cafe & Bakery in Lenox, owner Shelly Williams said using the best available local ingredients makes for better food.

"If you start with the product that tastes the best, you don't have to do



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**Ruth Crane co-owns Holiday Brook Farm in Dalton with her husband, Dicken.**

much to it to make it taste good," Williams said.

Buying locally also provides the opportunity to create working relationships with farms and food providers, which provides more incentive to keep those dollars local.

"I'd rather give my money to a person I know," she said.

Williams sometimes does tastings of even the most basic ingredients, like salt, to find the one that tastes the best.

"Taste is my philosophy," she said. "It just so happens that buying locally and buying fresh and organic, and from people who care about the Earth and keeping our bodies healthy ... keeping their employees happy and spreading the love, so to speak, actually makes the food taste better."

"It all matters," she said.