

'Farm Fresh' Impresses Chefs

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GAP (Lancaster Co.) — Recently a group of food industry representatives from Philadelphia came to see how area farmers take advantage of the abundant rainfall and fertile soil of the Lancaster area.

Approximately 20 tour participants included members of the "Chefs Collaborative," a chapter organized to establish a farmer-to-restaurant link.

The Philadelphia chapter is a one-year-old offshoot of the Chefs Collaborative, an organization begun in Seattle, Wash. in the early '90s. The Philadelphia group is particularly active, in part because of farmer interest.

On the producer end of the chain, a group of landowners from the Plain community have banded together to form the organization, "Farm Fresh for Chefs." The group, which includes 11 producers, markets meats, poultry, vegetables, fruit, herbs, and dairy products directly to restaurants, delivering the products once a week to Philadelphia. The products are all grown in Lancaster County and picked to order.

The farms involved in Farm Fresh for Chefs are certified organic with grass-fed animals.

Judy Faye, executive producer of the Book and the Cook, is excited about the "new relationship" between restaurants and Lancaster county producers. "It's a front-line outlet. Our restaurants are just, to use cooking jargon, ravenous for specialty products," said Faye.

She noted that Philadelphia has an abundance of quality restaurants, so owners are now looking for a competitive edge.

"Everybody's good, it's the kind of special experience they can bring to their patrons," she said. "Organic cheese and farm-fresh products are exactly what they want."

According to White Dog Cafe representative Debbie Eisenberg, one of the objectives of the day

name in the food description on the menu," said Cafe representative Tony Burnett.

"Customers ask where they can get it (Lancaster products), since they know they can eat it here but not at home," said Burnett. "They're learning that they don't have to go to the local supermarket and buy something shipped out of California. You

like telling the buyers how to use the product, how things are grown, or the kind of growing season they're having."

Ruth Yaskin is a private chef who works for families on contract. "The market's constantly changing and growing," said Yaskin. "If chefs don't support who's growing their food in their own backyard, where are they

farmers see it as a curse, but I suggest they look at it as an opportunity when they have customers on their driveway, if I'm willing to switch my operation to take advantage of that," he said.

"If a farmer takes on some management skills, more money will stay inside the farm gate through direct marketing or roadside stands."

Although a nationwide standard for organic farm does not exist, an organic farm makes minimum use of pesticides, and only those pesticides approved by the organic research board and not used on a regular basis.

There are seven active organic-certifying agencies in Pennsylvania. There are no firm, across-the-board standards to define organic.

"That's why, at this stage in the game, if you're interested in organic you should go visit the farm itself," said Brendle, also a member of Farm Fresh for Chefs.

Many of the farms along the tour were grassland operations. One advantage of pasture is that the animals return to soil many of the nutrients they ingest, instead of harvesting and selling the nutrients in the hay, according to Brendle.

Alvin Stoltzfus' Spring Water

Farm was another stop on the tour. Stoltzfus, also a member of Farm Fresh for Chefs, hosted a chicken barbecue for the group.

A former row crop operator, Stoltzfus now has a total pasture operation where he keeps chickens, hogs, and dairy cattle on grass. Stoltzfus sells milk to the National Dairy Products organization, which produces the "Natural by Nature" organic milk for retail stores.

Alvin Stoltzfus' herd is made up of Dutch Belted cows, similar in appearance to the Oreo-cookie-like, beef Belted Galloway cattle. A lowland grassland cattle, these animals are better adapted to the grassfed diet than more traditional breeds.

Dennis Tice, sales director of Natural Dairy Products, spoke about the nutritional value of grass-fed dairy.

Tice summarized the health benefits of grass fed dairy animals. Although results are not scientifically proven, grass fed products have shown promise in preliminary studies.

Restaurants, noted Tice, are a starting point for organic food, as demand will be created when customers eat it at a restaurant and want to have the same foods

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"Lunch was a huge treat," said Joel Maruchek from Phoebe's Bar-B-Q, who enjoyed being "a bunch of city slickers in a new environment. The hospitality was incredible. There were some serious chefs in the group (from Philadelphia) who were just blown away." Phoebe's Bar-B-Q has bought Lancaster County products direct for five years.

feel good when you know where it's coming from and it hasn't passed through 10,000 hands before it gets to you."

Burnett also noted that the food at the Cafe holds a taste advantage over foods from other sources.

Said Eisenberg, "We serve a wide variety of things on the menu and we do these things using local farmer products, not

going to turn to?"

En route to the first tour stop, participants viewed the free-range chickens housed on Amos Lantz's entirely grass-based farm, along with the travel trailers where Lantz houses his laying hens. Lantz changes the trailer's location often, giving literal meaning to the term, "free range chickens."

Aaron E. Stoltzfus' Friendly Farm was the first stop of the tour. Friendly Farm is a certified organic operation that houses free range chicken and ducks. Stoltzfus has recently begun a custom chicken butchering operation and has updated his on-site processing facility.

Stoltzfus began his small poultry-processing operation approximately a year ago. During processing time Stoltzfus employs 4-5 other people to help.

The chickens are raised on grass in the summer. The chickens' location is changed periodically for proper sanitation and food balance. In the winter, Stoltzfus makes use of a greenhouse. The pipes keep the water supply suspended above the floor for the Cornish Cross Chickens.

At Stoltzfus' farm John Berry from Lehigh County's Cooperative Extension gave a brief summary of his recently-published "Farmer's Guide To Processing and Selling Meat or Poultry."

An extension marketing educator, Berry attempts to help farmers wade through meat inspection regulations and promote direct marketing by smaller farmers.

Berry noted that all meat and poultry must be processed under federal inspection, except farmers who process less than 20,000 birds per year. In this case, the government is still interested in sanitation and the way small businesses are established on family farms and will send officials at the outset of the operation.

Producers see urban sprawl differently, said Berry. "Some



During the winter months, Stoltzfus houses the ducks and Cornish Cross chickens in a greenhouse, another stop on the tour.

was to "Get chefs to be introduced to farmers, and see that it's not so hard to buy direct," said Eisenberg, who is also involved with the Chefs Collaborative. "The main goal of the chefs collaborative is to get chefs to buy direct and use sustainable agriculture."

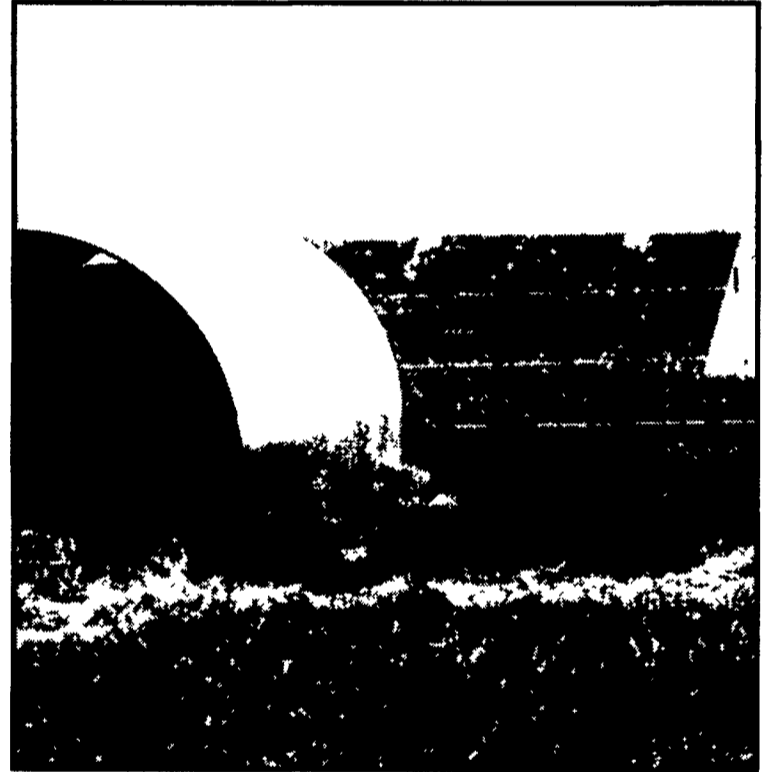
Most of White Dog Cafe's eggs, chicken, cheese, and milk comes from the Farm Fresh for Chef organizations' weekly delivery. The establishment advises their patrons of the origin of the food with a notice printed at the foot of the menu.

"We also attach the farm

products flown in. Chefs get introduced to different things since they get to talk to the farmers. It's a direct link."

According to Burnett, the connection is valuable to both producers and restaurant buyers. "Farmers try new things, which they introduce the chefs to," said Burnett, who noted that the link is also a means for direct feedback between the farmers and the chef on what customers like.

"The people who produce the food are a resource," said Joel Maruchek from Phoebe's Bar-B-Q on South Street, Philadelphia. "They can teach us things



Tour participants watched Stoltzfus' brood sows, above, recline during the afternoon tour. The sows will soon have piglets join them in the huts. The feed and soil treatment determine if the animal is allowed to be deemed "organic." Medication or antibiotics also may disqualify an animal from the organic label. Outdoor production, according to Stoltzfus, cuts down on animal health problems. Below are Stoltzfus' feeder pigs.

