



THIS GREEN AND PLEASANT LAND

THE DESIRE TO 'BUY LOCAL' OR 'GO ORGANIC' IS MORE THAN JUST A BUMPER STICKER ON A PRIUS.

It's a damp March evening at the Anchor Run Farm. Gray clouds cling to the horizon, and the evidence of a long, cold winter blankets the snow-covered fields. But inside the greenhouse, new life is quietly stirring. Within weeks, things will look very different here as the seedlings, still nestled in a soil bed, will rise and begin bathing in the rays of a warm spring sun. The farm, dormant for months, is on the cusp of another season of doing what it does best: producing food for Bucks County residents.

Located in Wrightstown Township, Anchor Run is one of dozens of operations in Bucks County that offers sustainable, locally produced fruits and vegetables. Call it a cultural shift, a craving by consumers to become more knowledgeable about what they're putting into their bodies or a resurgence of the small-scale farmer, these days, more and more shoppers in Bucks County are choosing to buy their food fresh from the local farm instead of the supermarket. And perhaps with good reason.

GROWING GREEN

"Products you buy at the grocery store travel an average of 1,500 miles to get there," says Dana Hunting, who operates Anchor Run Farm with partner Derek McGeehan. "It could have been picked weeks prior and traveled across the country in a tractor trailer. The food we give out is picked that morning." Not only do the products from Anchor Run pack more flavor because they're fresher, but you don't have to feel guilty

about the spent resources and the subsequent pollutants as a result of transport.

Farmer Tom Murtha of Blooming Glen Farm in Perkasio has also noticed an increased interest in locally produced food on the part of consumers. "I'm seeing that people want to be a bit more informed," he says. "People are taking a second look as to where their food comes from, how it's being produced and what the animals are being fed."

Kimberly Kaufmann, director and a co-founder of the Bucks County Foodshed Alliance, a collaboration of farmers, environmentalists and consumers working to expand the availability of the region's sustainably produced food, attributes some of the changing mores to recent media attention, including Michael Pollan's best-seller "The Omnivore's Dilemma." "People are just getting smarter and asking questions about how their food is made," she says. Kaufmann, who also helps lead Slow Food Bucks County, an organization dedicated to the shift away from industrially produced food, adds that while today's consumers may be worried about their wallets, most are recognizing that their health comes at a far greater expense.

"Big corporate farms send produce out all over the country," she says. "If there is an E. coli breakout, as we have seen, it could infect so many people before it can be contained." Kaufmann also notes that food is often produced out of the country in over-worked soils that are depleted of nutrients. "Food is too important to your health and quality of life to depend on another, sometimes unscrupulous, nation to produce food for your body," she adds.



DIFFERENT STROKES FOR DIFFERENT FARM FOLKS

All farms are not created equal. But all those that utilize sustainable farming practices have one thing in common: They don't burden the environment. "Sustainable agriculture is a holistic approach that considers the local ecosystem," explains Hunting. Common sustainable practices such as cover cropping, crop rotation and the use of organic fertilizers, like compost, allow farmers to protect the environment while at the same time produce chemical-free and nutrient-laden foods.

Cover cropping, a process where farmers grow rye or oats when the land is fallow in order to return nutrients to the soil, "is sort of like a living mulch," explains Anchor Run's McGeehan. "The idea is to build the soil up so it produces the best possible food. We're constantly trying to improve the soil," he adds. According to Murtha, both cover cropping – which also chokes out weeds – and crop rotation, the process of growing dissimilar crops in the same areas in sequential seasons to avoid the buildup of pathogens and pests, helps to break the cycle of insect infestation and damage: "It's usually at least a five-year window before we repeat the same crop in a field. It throws the bugs off."

And when it comes to actually producing a crop, there are numerous health and environmental arguments against artificial fertilizers. Most advocates of organic farming point to the impact chemicals have on the local ecosystem as a reason to avoid them. "Synthetic fertilizers are petroleum derived," says McGeehan. "They build up in the soil and leech into streams."

FROM CROPS TO KITCHENS

Both Anchor Run and Blooming Glen are examples of Community Sustained



Agriculture (CSA) ventures, a subscription-based operation in which people purchase shares at the beginning of the growing season. Then, depending if they have a full share or a half-share, they pick up produce on a weekly or biweekly basis. Produce is distributed as to what's in season, so members know they're getting items that are as fresh as possible.

For Bucks County residents who want to shop local, the move toward sustainable farming has provided more options than ever. Wrightstown, New Hope, Doylestown, Lower Makefield, Plumsteadville and Springtown are among the communities that host organized farmers' markets. Offering shoppers access to an array of vegetables, fruits, meats, baked goods, dairy products and other locally produced items, the markets are perhaps the quintessential "buy local" operations.

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In conjunction with the CSAs and organizations like the Bucks County Foodshed Alliance, the movement shows no sign of slowing down. Even beyond the associations and activists, you'd be hard pressed to drive more than a few miles without noticing a sign advertising corn, fresh eggs, milk, tomatoes or other goods produced amid the bucolic landscape. Recently, the Doylestown Food Club was formed with the hopes of making it even easier for more people to buy local. "It's a little disheartening to buy garlic that has traveled 2,000 miles when there are farms less than 20 miles away," says founder Steph Walker. Noticing that while there are a lot of farmers' markets and produce stands,

Walker also recognized there wasn't a one-stop shop that carried a wide range of items. So she mobilized a group of volunteers to pool their resources and collect groceries directly from the farms to be picked up by members on a biweekly basis at the Goddard School in Doylestown, the local distribution site. Walker says the community has responded enthusiastically, and the club has nearly reached its self-imposed limit of 50 members, a necessary cap so as not to overburden the volunteers.

Kaufmann, who cites the consumer demand at the Wrightstown Farm Market, estimates that vendors have seen a 25- to 30- percent increase in sales every year since the inception of the Bucks County Foodshed Alliance four years ago. And what's good for individual businesses is good for their neighbors. Murtha, who is in his fifth season of farming at Blooming Glen, says that without the need for massive amounts of fuel used to ship produce across the country, buying local keeps your dollars close to home and the region economically viable. "There aren't too many things you're going to buy locally that you can use in your daily life," he says. "Commercial food is cheap because it's supported by inexpensive fuel and agricultural subsidies." And Kaufmann adds: "Why can't a local economy be a food economy?"

"Supporting local farms is a way to start developing alternative ways to get food," says Murtha. "The time is going to come, sooner or later, when we'll have to be a bit more creative about how we source our food. And one thing you always have with a local food system is you can always meet your farmer." 

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