

What's in Season from the Garden State

Seasonal Highlights from Cooperative Extension, a unit of Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station

November/December, 2011

Getting Jersey Fresh to Retail and Restaurants: It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's *Middleman!*

Here's an equation that doesn't add up: New Jersey is small, densely populated and a stone's throw from major metropolitan market areas. Factor in numerous farms scattered throughout the state and the logical conclusion would be that the *Jersey Fresh* wholesale produce market is booming. Unfortunately, that is not the case due to a large gap in the system. New Jersey is deficient in a distribution mechanism which respects and embraces seasonality and delivers wholesale *Jersey Fresh* produce to New Jersey retail markets and restaurants.

A service network of produce distribution that choreographs the movement of food from farm to fork exists in the region, but New Jersey product is often bypassed by major wholesale distributors in favor of year round suppliers. Small or medium-size farms may not produce enough on a daily basis to reliably satisfy some distributors, so instead they sell at farmers' markets, roadside stands, or through Community Supported Agriculture arrangements. Even buyers favoring *Jersey Fresh* are challenged to connect with individual farms for satisfying their customers' needs. Farmers often don't have the time or know how to solicit business from markets or restaurants or have refrigerated trucks for deliveries.

What the New Jersey wholesale produce distribution network needs are middle enterprises that cater to the Jersey supply chain. Someone who will pick up from New Jersey farms and communicate to customers what fresh Jersey supply is available every week.

And now, we'd like to introduce two mild-mannered heroes who have stepped up to the plate to fill it with Jersey and bridge the gap in the system: Guarino Sons Produce and Zone 7.

Guarino Sons Produce

Long before the *Jersey Fresh* program was established by the New Jersey Department of Agriculture in 1984, Guarino Sons Produce has been promoting local Jersey produce to regional retail markets and food service buyers. For over 60 years, the family business, located in National Park, NJ has served as a "secondary supplier" for their customers. As buyer Brian Guarino explains, supermarket chains obtain inventory from their corporate warehouses, which sometimes are out of state. Hence, they go to a secondary supplier for fill-ins and specials – like local tomatoes or peaches that would not be available from the corporate warehouse. Much of their produce comes from local South Jersey farms, which Guarino's picks up from local farms or buys at the Vineland Produce auction. Guarino's sends their clients a weekly price sheet of available *Jersey Fresh* items. Most of their customers are Central and North Jersey supermarket chains, food service

Continued on page 2



Guarino Sons Produce was presented the Phillip Alampi Industry Marketing Award at the 2011 New Jersey State Agricultural Convention. The award is named after the former Secretary of Agriculture, Phillip Alampi and is given annually to someone who has made a significant contribution to the marketing and promotion of New Jersey's agricultural industry. Pictured, left to right: Al Murray, assistant N.J. Secretary of Agriculture; William Griffin, president of the N.J. Agricultural Society; N.J. Secretary of Agriculture Douglas H. Fisher; Mike Varsaci, Ray Budden, Jerry Harry, Bob Guarino, Jason Guarino, Brian Guarino, Gary Martorana and Carol Cliver.

New Jersey Department of Agriculture's Jersey Fresh Availability Report



Whether it's cold hardy vegetables like winter squashes, root crops or hearty greens, or apples held in cold storage or new crops of greens grown in greenhouses or hoop houses, local distributors like Guarino Sons Produce and Zone 7 have Jersey Fresh produce during the late fall and winter season. Availability includes: Brussels sprouts, carrots, beets, potatoes, sweet potatoes, broccoli, cauliflower, winter squashes, apples, cranberries, collards and kale. Some community farm markets operate through the winter. You can find them at the New Jersey Department of Agriculture's Jersey Fresh website:

<http://www.jerseyfresh.nj.gov>.

Tis the season to buy holly – look for Jersey Grown Christmas trees and holiday greens. To find retailers selling Jersey Grown Christmas trees, wreaths and grave blankets visit the New Jersey Department of Agriculture's Jersey Grown website:

<http://www.jerseygrown.nj.gov>.

Where to find Jersey Fresh? Ask for it where you shop or dine or go to:
<http://www.jerseyfresh.nj.gov>

To receive these reports by e-mail:
njfarmfresh@njaes.rutgers.edu

Web: <http://www.njfarmfresh.rutgers.edu>

For your county Rutgers Cooperative Extension office go to:

<http://www.njaes.rutgers.edu/county>

clients such as schools and colleges that want to serve local produce and roadside farm stands. Their standards for quality and professionally packed product that they pack themselves, keeps customers fulfilled with reliable Jersey product.

Guarino's has witnessed the effect of the upsurge in the buy local trend on their business. Not only has it brought in new customers, but also increased demand from existing customers. Guarino's have added value-added products to their line to provide Jersey products year round, including the canned Jersey tomatoes from Violet Packing and frozen breaded eggplant and zucchini products from Flaim Farms. While they branch out to other states to supplement their winter product supply, they continue to carry a number of late season Jersey produce after Thanksgiving (see side bar).

<http://guarinosproduce.com>

Zone 7

When the door opened for Mikey Azzara to start Zone 7 in 2008, he didn't walk through it - he was pushed through it. As the outreach and education director for the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New Jersey, he knew intimately the need for New Jersey farmers to get their product to local restaurants and the lack of an entity to do it. When both a restaurant and a farm handed him two trucks – one a toy that said "Produce" on the side and the other a real truck on one year loan, Azzara was in business.

Zone 7, located in Lawrenceville, NJ picks up foods from farms in New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania, many of which use organic and/or sustainable practices. They deliver to New Jersey and Philadelphia area restaurants and independent natural food groceries. Each week after talking to farmers, Azzara sends an availability list to customers for orders.

While the growers are busy cultivating their crops, Azzara cultivates relationships between his farmers and chefs and the local community. During the growing season, Zone 7 hosts "Dinners on the Farm", where local chefs participate in creating a meal of local foods at a host farm. Azzara also has meetings with all the farmers and chefs to make plans for the following year. All this cultivation has paid off – in the four years since Zone 7 has opened its' truck doors, business has doubled each year.

Winter poses no challenge for Zone 7 to keep supplying customers. Fall and winter crops (see side bar) extend the season, and Azzara adds local artisan products such as eggs, cheeses and grains to the availability lists.

<http://www.freshfromzone7.com>



When not trucking, Mikey Azzara is otherwise involved in local food endeavors such as the New Jersey Farm to School Network, the Lawrenceville Farmers' Market and school gardens at the Lawrenceville School.