

RUTGERS COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

NEW JERSEY AGRICULTURAL EXPERIMENT STATION

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Photos available upon request

Rutgers Extension Brings Together Historic Alliance of NJ Farmers, Grocers, Chefs and Distributors to Save Jersey Farms

Wegmans, Shop Rite, Chefs Committed to Buying from Local Farmers
Jersey Farmers, Noted Chefs Available for Interviews

New Brunswick--Rutgers Cooperative Extension (RCE) recently launched an innovative produce distribution and merchandising pilot project to help New Jersey farmers get their produce into new retail locations, such as white-table restaurants and grocery chains. Less than a month after a kickoff meeting that brought Jersey growers face-to-face with noted New Jersey chefs and national chain grocers, these new relationships have already turned into critically needed new sales.

“Our Jersey farmers grow the best produce in the country, yet they are struggling to make ends meet and each year it is becoming harder and harder,” says Jack Rabin, associate director of farm services for RCE. “They are trying to compete with huge growers in California, Florida and Chile and they have a relatively short growing season in which to make their profits for the entire year. Our goal is not to create a new distribution system, but to help our farmers increase their exposure by introducing them to new outlets and increasing their visibility in a crowded marketplace.”

Twenty chefs at restaurants in the Princeton and New Brunswick areas, three Jersey distributors and grocery chains Wegmans, Shop Rite and Kings are all participating in this pilot project. Rabin is hopeful that the program, which is being funded by RCE, can prove itself this growing season and can continue and grow for years to come – without outside support.

“We’re opening doors and introducing people,” Rabin says, “but the proof of the program will come with new sales that will go beyond this first season. “We all sat at a table together and realized that we were making history just by talking directly to each other. Chefs were telling growers what they wanted and growers felt empowered by hearing this directly. Even the distributors, who knew of the farmers had not met many of them.”

Jim Weaver, executive chef and co-owner of Tre Piani in Princeton and head of the Central New Jersey chapter for Slow Food, has long been a proponent of using seasonal local produce in his award-winning dishes. Weaver, who is involved in this pilot program, says, “With a few rare exceptions, individual farmers are not marketers. This program gives even the smallest farmer access to local chefs and grocery outlets by having Jersey distributors

who care about them bring their produce into the restaurants and stores that want home-grown fruits and vegetables.”

Larry Robinson, chef at Mediterra in Princeton was so inspired to meet the farmers and get their produce directly into his kitchen that he recently bought a new pick-up truck. “One of the reasons that I decided to get this truck was that I can use it to drive out to these farms and bring their produce back,” he says. “I love the idea of doing this direct. It’s better for me because I get the freshest, just-picked vegetables and it’s better for them because they get a good price.”

Ben Freidman of Riviera Produce distributes to more than 300 restaurants mostly in the New York area. He thinks participation in the pilot is a win-win for his company and for the farmers. “Jersey farmers benefit because I’ll introduce their produce into the New York market and my company benefits because I will get into some key Jersey restaurants.”

Hyatt Hotel in New Brunswick’s Purchasing Agent Jim Bucher so believes in the value of helping local farmers that he’s asked his distributor Ambrogi Produce to serve as his connection to New Jersey farms. “After all, many are our neighbors,” he says.

Joe Marino of Sun Valley Orchards found that he could get the best price for his produce by delivering to the grocer directly. “I’m loving this program,” he says. “Through this program I was able to get in touch with Wegmans in South Jersey and now they feature my produce.”

Hoping to help farmers build consumer awareness by utilizing merchandizing and marketing techniques, not usually used by small farmers, Rabin contracted with Gold Group Consulting, a strategy firm that specializes in bringing about profitable change. Its founder, Bob Gold, successfully applied these marketplace strategies in his own organic farm, located in Roosevelt, NJ. “I understand the challenges of the small farmer,” says Gold. “But I also understand how to market produce. It’s not hard, but it isn’t something that the typical farmer has the background or time or for. We’re here to help them in that area.”

Many of the farmers want to make the most of this new marketplace exposure. Sherry Marolda of Marolda Farms in Vineland says that she is looking forward to talking to the chefs involved in the program and finding out what fruits and vegetables they want to use in their culinary creations. “That’s my plan for the next growing season. I’m going to sit down with as many chefs as I can and find out what they want and I’ll grow it for them,” she says.

Bill Dae, Produce Buyer at the Shop Rite in Cherry Hill said that he was eager to get involved in the produce since he loves New Jersey produce. “Tell me you’ve got Jersey bananas,” he joked.

It doesn’t cover bananas, but RCE’s Rabin has developed a Quality Assurance Statement for most of the produce featured in the program. The Statement outlines quality standards that apply to the growing, harvesting, storage and delivery of all fruits and vegetables highlighted in this program. More information on the program, participants and the Quality Assurance Statement can be found after July 5 at www.njfarmfresh.rutgers.edu.

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To interview any of the Pilot Project participants or for photographs of the farmers and chefs, please call Michelle Hujber at 732-932-9559 or e-mail her at hujber@aesop.rutgers.edu.