

Fresh Food Brings Fame To Hardwick Ag Center Attracts National Attention

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Fresh Food Brings Fame To HardwickGourmet magazine has pegged Hardwick, VT as "one of the most important food towns in America." If media attention is any indication, what is unfolding in the small town gives new meaning to the fresh, locally grown food movement.

In recent months, publications including the New York Times, Vermont Life and Gourmet magazines have focused on the rising fortunes of Hardwick and its locally produced food. National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting Service are developing stories that include Hardwick. A book about Hardwick's food evolution also is in the works.

The small town once was the center of the granite industry, only to see that boom fade into a dusty oblivion – that is, until local farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs realized the Hardwick region boasts more organic farms per capita than any place in the nation.

Moreover, they saw if they collaborated, they could be part of a new mission to rebuild their economic and ecological health through a community agricultural system in a state already widely respected for its innovative food production and marketing.

The farmers also saw they could make some money, spend it locally and help create new and more diverse food sources. In the process, such enterprises have recently generated about 100 new jobs in the area, according to Hardwick Town Manager Rob Lewis.

Enter the Center for an Agricultural Economy, a nonprofit organization founded in 2004 by Hardwick entrepreneur Andrew Meyer. The son of a local dairy farmer, Meyer owns Vermont Natural Coatings, a whey-based varnish company, as well as Vermont Soy, an organic soy drink and tofu company.

Vermont Soy is one of Hardwick's success stories: the company, which uses locally grown beans, had five customers at the beginning of 2008. Today, it boasts 350 customers and annual sales revenue of close to \$2 million.

Tom Stearns, president of the Center for an Agricultural Economy, owns High Mowing Seeds in Wolcott, which currently employs 30 and sells seeds nationwide.

"I want to provide the world with a model food system that serves the local population while enriching its producers in ways that range from the cold, hard tangibility of cash to the less precise metrics of social improvement and regional pride," said Stearns.

The center aims to emphasize the importance of local foods and help serve as a clearinghouse for community programs and resources needed to develop a locally based system of healthy foods. It wants agricultural leaders to spread the word to garner public support and implementation of such a system.

The center recently partnered with the University of Vermont, underscoring the university's commitment to local food systems. UVM will provide research on what is needed to create a healthy food-based economy, and will work to find the expertise to help create that system.

Graduate student Clint Jaspersen will facilitate the new relationship between UVM and the center. One of Jaspersen's initial tasks will be creating a food map of the Hardwick community, Stearns said.

The center has plans to build an industrial park for agricultural businesses which will include an educational center and a year-round farmers' market. A community garden already is up and running with a greenhouse, a paid garden specialist and 22 plots.

In creating the center, Meyer was joined early on by Stearns, who collected seeds as a hobby when younger. In 2000, he compiled a two-page catalog that generated \$36,000 in sales. Today, company sales are approaching nearly \$2 million a year.

Another local entrepreneur and producer is Pete Johnson, a center board member and owner of Pete's Greens. Johnson grows organic crops on 50 acres in Craftsbury, about 10 miles north of Hardwick.

With four moveable greenhouses, he has an extended growing season of up to nine months. As a value-added revenue source, he has installed a commercial kitchen that allows him to prepare and sell soup stocks, baked goods, sausages and prepared frozen foods.

In addition, Johnson has redefined the community-supported agriculture model, which normally means one farm offers shares for sale to its customers, who then gets a supply of fruits, vegetables or other food goods. At least 30 farmers and food producers are involved in the program. For example, local pie producers are encouraged to use local butter, eggs, flour, maple sugar and apples.

Center vice president Andy Kehler can be found at the giant cheese case on Jasper Hill Farm, a 260-acre farm in Greensboro owned by Kehler and his brother, Mateo Kehler. The brothers spent \$3 million to make the case by blasting into the side of a hill at the farm.

The cave is 22,000 square feet, and is divided into seven arched vaults. It is designed in accordance with the European model, which means a number of cheese makers can share the vault, thereby reducing the cost of entry to new artisanal cheese producers.

Then there is Claire's Restaurant in Hardwick, a magnet for local farmers that began with 50 local investors who contributed \$1,000 each to get the restaurant started. The eatery is reported to use local foods, breads and vegetables as much as possible. The investors will get discounted meals during four years as a return on their investments.

Stearns, the organic seed producer, is a visionary who is passionate about the center's potential to "attract the world to Hardwick." He cites the town's "topographical good fortune to be located in a region of ample, fertile farmland and a culture of the working soil."

"The only rational response to a global food system on the brink of crisis and a town desperately needing something on which to hang its future is to do what we are doing," Stearns said.

Stearns said he sees such agribusinesses as "recession proof," adding "some of us are doing more business or growing faster now than we were three months ago."

According to Stearns, during the "past two years in the United States, with each crisis, energy,

food prices, food safety and now this economic collapse, another million people shifted their thinking from the old food system to the new food system.”

“They want to know where their food is coming from,” he said. “They want to know that it is safe.”

Agriculture, from Stearns’ point of view, must be reframed. He said he sees Hardwick and similar places “as the antidote to a collapsing food system and foods grown thousands of miles away arriving on their plates, preserved and polluted. They are foods that cause obesity, medical problems.”

Books are in the works that will help spread the word about Hardwick’s local food economy. Cabot resident and Gourmet magazine writer Ben Hewitt is penning one book; plans for the other book haven’t yet been disclosed, Stearns said.

Hardwick also is slated to be included in a four minute All Things Considered report on NPR on how Hardwick has been resilient in the midst of this economic slump, said Stearns.

The Public Television System, meanwhile, is developing a 30-minute documentary that will include Hardwick. According to Stearns, three reporters spent three days in Hardwick in October in order to put a comprehensive program together. The report is slated for broadcast during February.