
CULINARY CONVERSATION

The head of the Long Island Farm Bureau talks about free trade, growing cauliflower, and his dream of an agricultural visitors center at the end of the LIE.

In August, more than 350 friends, family and colleagues gathered to celebrate your leadership of Farm Bureau. How did it feel to have Senator Hilary Clinton make a surprise visit to sing your praises?

It was probably the highlight of my professional career. To have a national figure supporting East End agriculture is a big statement.

She obviously knows that Long Island is the leading farming region in the state in terms of the value of agricultural products sold.

We make up 20 percent of the membership of the state Farm Bureau. We bring more delegates to state meetings than any other county so we have a lot to say.

Among your recent accomplishments, you just helped change a Prohibition-era restriction on out-of-state shipping of wine that could help put this wine region on the national map.

That's already happening because of the quality of the product. Anybody who drinks a good Long Island wine knows that it speaks for itself.

As a former vegetable and potato farmer, does it bother you that grapes will soon surpass potatoes as the leading crop grown in Suffolk County?

Grape production is agriculture. And obviously wine is the value-added product of grape production. Most of the vineyard owners and winery owners are making an effort to be part of the agricultural community. There are some, however, that feel they're above being called a farmer. That's where I have a problem.

Under your 17-year tenure, membership in the Long Island Farm Bureau nearly tripled to over 7,000 in 2004, partly because you began to recruit winemakers, fish farmers, greenhouse growers, and small-scale cheese makers.

Bill Sanok, a great friend and mentor who used to direct the agricultural program at Cornell Cooperative Extension, described Long Island agriculture as a continual evolution. If you can make it here, then you can farm anywhere. The guys that are left have been able to find their niche.

But East End farmers still face some of the highest land and labor costs in the country, not to mention pressure from cheaper, imported produce.

I'm proud that Long Island Farm Bureau has always balked at the notion of free trade agreements. Free trade does not equate to fair trade. One year when I farmed, we grew 100 acres of cauliflower for Pathmark chain stores. Come September or October, we were moving three or four tractor trailers a day, and all of a sudden they weren't giving us orders. My father and I were panicking. One day a cauliflower is the size of a baseball, next day a softball and then it's too big to get in the box. We had made a deal with Pathmark that it was going to be \$9 for a crate of 12 heads. Our rep at Pathmark said they were getting it from Canada for \$7 a box. We saw the writing on the wall, and that's one of the reasons I decided to change careers.

And I suppose that's part of the motivation between Farm Bureau campaigns to get local produce into restaurants and supermarkets like Savor Long Island or the Grown on Long Island campaign at King Kullen. Absolutely. We'd like to see more of that. We think that more people should be buying and seeking Long Island product. The best return on farmland preservation is having access to your local farmer.

One of your dreams is to see an agricultural visitor center at the end of the Long Island Expressway that would showcase all that the region produces. Will it ever happen?

Right now, we're doing the business plan, and I think we'll have an idea of where we stand with it by the end of this year. We can have a wine education center, culinary arts center, and food business incubator. The answer is yes. We're ready for it.

Actually, much of Long Island's farmland doesn't even grow food. Half of the acreage in agriculture on Long Island is horticulture. Sod, trees and shrubs, perennials and flowers. We have 60 percent of the state's greenhouse and nursery industries. That's hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue. And thousands of people in the landscape industry. It's huge.

Would you like to see people planting vegetable gardens instead of just bigger lawns?

That would be nice too, and some people do that. I used to farm 200 acres so it's hard for me to plant half a dozen tomatoes. My farming is now my yard. My wife and I frequent the farmstands and enjoy other farmers' efforts. □



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