
EATER AT LARGE

BY BRIAN HALWEIL



FARMER'S BEST FRIEND

The American Farm Bureau, one of the oldest institutions in American agriculture, enjoys a reputation soiled in recent years by corruption, accounting scandals, discrimination, and more allegiance to Big Agribusiness than the family farmers who form its lifeblood. Most disappointing has been the Bureau's perennial lack of creativity in its efforts to keep farmers on the land.

Leave it to Long Island to buck the trend. Several years ago, the Long Island chapter of the Farm Bureau launched its "Savor Long Island" campaign, a month-long celebration of Long Island food and wine presented by Long Island chefs. Long Island farmers and farmland won't stand a chance against home construction and road building unless the people who live and play in the region begin to depend on this land for their sustenance.

Alas, the innovative program was the victim of recent budget cuts. But that hasn't kept many East End chefs from declaring an allegiance to this place.

In fact, some restaurants see this as a central part of their appeal. In Greenport, the Fifth Season restaurant opened in early 2005 with the tagline, "a local epicurean experience," and claims to be "the first ones to do a completely Long Island menu and wine list," according to Jeniffer Orłowski, who runs the restaurant with her husband, Erik. "There's so much to highlight outside of potatoes," Mrs. Orłowski said.

Others have been doing it for longer. The Seafood Barge in Southold offers North Fork vichyssoise, Mattituck Inlet steamers, grilled local sea scallops and a largely local raw bar. (The first time I had Long Island potato chips was at the Seafood Barge, topped with Montauk tuna tartar and spicy greens from Golden Earthworm up the road.) The restaurant's wine list is dominated by Long Island, including at least 10 local wines by the glass.

"It seemed like a very organic concept to be drinking what was grown within a 10- or 15-mile radius," said owner Dick Ehrlich. "I like the idea of supporting people who pay LIPA rates and New York State sales taxes." The relationship works both ways since wineries often refer customers to the restaurant, and winemakers, proprietors, and winery staff regularly dine at the Barge. Given such a virtuous circle, Mr. Ehrlich is "always amazed at the Long Island restaurants that have no Long Island wines or others that don't emphasize it to a larger extent."

Economic advantages aside, many chefs are simply looking for the best quality ingredients. Recently, when East End farmers were picking their first sugar snap peas, Coleen Donnelly, the chef at Magnolia in Sag Harbor, had a chance to compare the nearby crop with the trucked-in alternative. "It was night and day," Ms. Donnelly said. The local peas weren't as uniform in shape or size, but they had other

merits. "They looked like they were produce and not mass-produced. They were just heavenly." Whether it's the sugar snaps on her catfish entrée, the kohlrabi in her chilled slaw, or the young collard greens and carrots in her "campfire trout," Ms. Donnelly is looking for fruits and veggies "picked when they want to be eaten."

She acknowledged that, in some ways, it might be more convenient to deal with a large food distributor. But she added that a farmer can be more dependable in other ways, like when a chef needs produce on short notice. And when one of her farmers has just picked 60 pounds of peas, she'll do everything she can to relieve them. Ms. Donnelly particularly enjoys when the farmer who raised the crop comes in for a meal. "It's just this wonderful exchange of talent and appreciation," she said.

The opportunities seem almost endless, although favoring local fare sometimes means being creative. And waiting for the proper season. "I'm always impatient," said Todd Jacobs, chef and owner of Tierra Mar and Atlantica in Westhampton Beach. "I assume the asparagus will be a bit late. And I get tired of root veggies by March." In April, for a fundraiser for the East End chapter of Slow Food, the international movement to protect the right to taste, Mr. Jacobs offered potato pancakes made from local fingerlings, local clams, oysters, and scallops, and Long Island duck prepared as confit and a terrine. Local flounder and North Fork bison burger anchored the main courses. Despite seasonal limitations, Mr. Jacobs has no problem meeting the needs of a catering hall and ballroom that often serve 400 meals each night.

"It's important to bring recognition to this area," said Andrew Engle, in his fifth season as executive chef of the Laundry in East Hampton. Mr. Engle builds his menu around the seasons—offering sweet dumpling squash, fresh cannellini beans, black Tuscan kale and Iocona farm chicken in the fall, and open-faced spring vegetable raviolis in spring. A favorite early summer dish is pan-seared striped bass (caught off the tip of Long Island or in the Peconic Bay), accompanied by a salad of heirloom tomatoes and basil (from EECO Farm in East Hampton) and sweet corn (from Hardscrabble Farm in East Hampton). He'll pair the dish with the Reserve Chardonnay from Sagaponack's Wölffer Estate.

"People always talk about California cuisine, but there's no reason we can't have a Long Island cuisine," Mr. Engle said. "We have the farms, the vineyards, some of the best fisheries in the world."

No matter how many restaurants buy into the concept, eater participation is essential. So, be sure to ask for the Long Island offerings at your favorite restaurant. If the waiter returns a dumb stare, go eat somewhere else. □

This is the first in a series on chefs who favor local produce. Next issue: Chefs who farm, fish, hunt, and rake clams.

