

Farmer-Chef Connection firmly rooted, growing strong

By Mary A. Kane

Rooted in earnestness and sincerity, the Farmer-Chef Connection is taking hold throughout the region, drawing several in the Oconomowoc area into its circle.

Chefs who value quality and growers who do the same are coming together in a variety of creative ways here and elsewhere, creating a nationwide movement that is growing well beyond “trend” status. That was supremely evident last week when nearly 80 chefs, farmers and food suppliers gathered for the third Farmer-Chef Connection and Farm Showcase, held this year at the Waukesha County Technical College campus in Pewaukee.

While many participants were from the immediate vicinity, there were those such as Leah Caplan, of the Washington Hotel, Restaurant and Cooking School, who came from as far as Washington Island, off the coast of Door County. She was part of a panel discussion that also featured the Oconomowoc Lake Club’s executive chef, Jack Kaestner, and Nathan Berg, of Native Bay Restaurant in Chippewa Falls. Demonstrating that the grass roots movement has captured official attention, half a dozen staff members of the state’s Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection also were on hand.

Kaestner sees great potential in what took place and declared emphatically that there will be a fourth such event next year “for sure.”

The half-day event was an occasion to rekindle and make new contacts that ultimately could lead to business partnerships that afford the opportunity to go the extra “local” mile in bringing high-caliber produce and other foodstuffs to some of the region’s most prominent tables.

Robert Karp, of Milwaukee-based New Spirit Ventures, led with a keynote presentation. A social entrepreneur in the local food movement for more than 15 years, Karp has helped start Community Supported Agriculture projects, known as CSAs, farmers’ markets, institutional buying projects and farmer-buyer-consumer cooperatives.

Karp is a strong advocate for educational efforts which focus on helping farmers and wholesale food buyers build relationships. He helped establish the “Buy Fresh, Buy Local” marketing campaign which now has chapters in more than 25 states. Originally from Janesville, Karp served as executive director of the Iowa-based Practical Farmers of Iowa from 2001-2006.

“You need to get the chefs and farmers together in one place,” Kaestner said. “You need to sit them together around a dinner table and let them get to know one another.”

That’s precisely what Kaestner did this past January when he hosted a monthly meeting of the American Culinary Federation’s southeastern Wisconsin group. He orchestrated that gathering so that two farmers were paired with eight chefs at each table. The 14 farmers and approximately 60 chefs and culinary students in attendance were so enthusiastic that last week’s event came together with ease.

“Dinner at the club gave me a chance to experience the reaction of chefs to our cheese for the first time,” said Burt Paris, of Edelweiss Growers Cooperative Creamery, Belleville.

He said it was immediately evident that he was in the presence of people with educated palates who took the time to genuinely assess the quality of his product.

“It was fun to watch chefs truly taste the cheese, then look up and ask, ‘Who are these guys?’ I watched one guy walk away and then drag back a friend to try it.”

That was again the scene last week at WCTC following the formal program when the Farm Showcase provided restaurateurs and food buyers the venue in which to learn about and sample a broad range of quality food items from farmers, beekeepers, orchardists and cheese makers.

Events like these have had dramatic results around the country since they began in 2001. This year alone, Farmer-Chef Connection gatherings in Seattle and Oregon have drawn 250 to 300 or more participants.

One obvious trend is the number of younger farmers who are embarking on their own novel ways of working the land, thereby ensuring another generation of farmers is firmly grounded in the soil.

“Our next step is that we need to look at the infrastructure network here,” Kaestner said. “Growers should be able to create a year-round market in a central location. A central clearinghouse would allow them to grow different items if they could find a distributor base in Lake Country year-round.”

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