

# Have You Met Your Farmer? And Can His Turkeys Dance?

By Lou Bendrick

During the pig roast I watched a farmer imitate a turkey-mating dance. As silly as it sounds, and as amusing as the brief pantomime was, there were so many good things about that moment that it's hard to figure out where to begin.

I'll start by explaining that this particular farmer, Sean, often supplies my free-range chicken eggs, and he's one of many farmers who feed my family.

Dominic at Moon in the Pond sells me grass-fed beef, Alan and Elizabeth at Indian Line generate a weekly load of vegetables. I haven't met the people at High Lawn Dairy, but my daughter has been to their farm and met their Jersey cows.

Among the things that would shock my grandparents, were they alive today, would be the fact that few Americans know where his or her food comes from. The vegetables on

the average dinner table have made a 1,300-mile trip to get there. It's a safe bet that the breakfast melon has traveled more than I did this year.

Because I know my farmers I'm a rarity, but that's changing. Southwestern Massachusetts is one of many regions around the country that is embracing Community Supported Agriculture (a phrase coined by Indian Line Farm, the nation's very first farm and the place where I proudly collect my weekly pound of greens, among other things). CSAs short-circuit globalization by connecting local growers with local consumers like me, who cover a farm's yearly operating

budget by purchasing a "share" of the season's harvest. (I've purchased "shares" of things before, and I'll vouch that very little performs better in a bear market than hearty kale.)

CSAs are entwined with the Slow Food Movement, which was founded in Europe as a response to the proliferation of fast food outlets in Italy. The movement has expanded to address the industrialization and standardization of food and the subsequent extinction of thousands of food varieties. "Slows" like me are often in the kitchen trying to figure out what my grandmother would make out of an armload of kale. You'll also find us at farmer's markets going over the produce and sourdough loaves with the discerning eye of an elderly Frenchwoman. Then you'll find us in the

kitchen again, cooking a meal from scratch while the rest of the house goes to hell. For me, sitting down to a long meal with my family and friends is a defiant act—a way at of thumbing my nose at the frenzy of American life while getting fed at the same time.

I often find myself at the sink doing dishes while most people are in bed, but it's a small price to pay for teaching my child about the pleasures of food. When I can't stand the sight of another crusty pot, I can still support my farmers. An organization here called Berkshire Grown promotes locally grown food by connecting diners with restaurants and other

businesses that pledge to buy local farm products, from chevre to heritage turkeys. This brings me back to North Plain Farm, the pig roast and the dancing farmer.

If you're curious, and I know you are, the male turkey stands on the back of a female and does a little dance before fulfilling his duty.

"Watching a turkey mate is pretty a interesting thing," Sean said, standing among a flock of heritage (that is, once common but now rare) breeds such as Bourbon Reds, Narragansetts, White Midgets, Buffs, and Black Spanish. The young, bearded farmer went on to explain that common, commercially bred turkeys must be artificially inseminated. The Broad-Breasted White turkey, the one most likely to be trussed for Thanksgiving this year, has such short legs and enormous breasts that it can barely walk, let alone dance on the back of a hen. Needless to say, this is not the same bird that Ben Franklin proposed as our national bird, the one he called a "Bird of Courage." It's a modern turkey, bred to freakish proportions and sustained by antibiotics and hormones and other additives. I don't think it's just my slow mentality that tells me that I don't want one of these obscenely buxom, junkie birds on my table for Thanksgiving, the slowest of slow meals.

We all deserve to know where our food comes from and to shake the rough hand of the man or woman who brought it to our table. I also want a turkey I can eulogize: I want to say he was raised in Berkshire County, that he traveled little, roamed freely and had a drug-free lifestyle. And that, among other things, he enjoyed dancing.

*Lou Bendrick lives and eats, slowly, in the Southern Berkshires.*

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## Shucking Corn for Students *Eating Local isn't Always Easy*

By Steven Stycos

It seemed so easy. As a member of the Cranston, Rhode Island, School Committee I arranged for local farmer Vinny Confreda and Cranston's Food Service Director Mike Marrocco to meet to discuss the purchase of fresh vegetables for the school lunch program. As part of an effort to improve school nutrition and boost local farms, I previously organized a meeting that resulted in Hill Orchards in Johnston selling thousands of Rhode Island apples to the school lunch program. Vinny's vegetables were the next logical step

Meeting in February 2003, Mike quickly agreed to buy Vinny's well-known sweet corn, and perhaps some tomatoes and eggplant when the harvest was ready in the fall. It took a mere 15 minutes for Cranston to become the first Rhode Island community to agree to buy sweet corn directly from a local farmer.

But by September, Mike was having second thoughts. The corn's price of \$13 per bag—or 22 cents per piece—was competitive with frozen corn on the cob from the Midwest. But that was for unshucked corn. Vinny's price rose to 38 cents for shucked corn, an amount Mike was not willing to absorb. Nor was he willing to pay his staff to shuck the 1,250 ears necessary to feed Cranston's elementary school students. So no local corn was served in the schools in fall 2003.

It's not easy to get fresh local fruits and vegetables into school cafeterias, largely due to low school-lunch prices and the federal government's commodities program. When I started working on the issue, I wondered why schools served dreadful canned green beans, instead of fresh ones. It's no wonder kids

grow up disliking vegetables, I righteously concluded. But I discovered we serve our children inferior food to save money.

This October, for example, school lunch programs could buy a case of green beans, or six number 10 cans, from the commodities program for \$2.50. When Mike put the same item out to bid, the

*A school lunch director working on a tight budget does not have to think too long about whether to use mushy government beans, or fresh tasty ones that cost more than ten times as much, plus labor. The result is locally grown produce gets shunted aside and agribusiness wins again.*

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Nevertheless, this past next winter I tried again for sweet corn. I asked if Vinny would allow volunteers to husk the corn. He quickly said yes, but wondered whether, in this time of working mothers, I would be able to find the volunteers. Mike was also skeptical and advanced the serving date a day in case we didn't finish husking in one day.

But one e-mail brought an enthusiastic response.

September 20, a team of 19 Cranston parents, including state Senator Elizabeth Roberts, descended on Confreda's farm to husk the 1,250 ears. People eagerly divided into threesomes around trash barrels and started husking. We broke each ear in half to accommodate elementary school appetites and placed them in plastic bags to keep them fresh. Conversations about children, food, politics and farms flowed. And to our surprise, we finished in less than an hour and a half. Long enough to feel like we had worked, but quickly enough to get home and prepare dinner for our families.

Mike says the kids loved the corn and our message about fresh, locally grown vegetables made the evening news and morning newspaper.

Now, about that eggplant...

*Frequent contributor Steven Stycos has been knocking on many doors lately, campaigning for a third term on the Cranston School Committee. He is also one of the founders of the Cranston Farmer's Market.*