

Home Field Advantage

How the farm-to-table movement is enriching the region's culinary landscape

By KRISTA GLEASON
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Two words echo across the landscape when talking about the farm-to-table scene in the Finger Lakes — connection and collaboration.

Farm-to-table refers to food made with locally-sourced ingredients. It's been called a movement, a trend and a lifestyle. In the Finger Lakes, it's infusing new life — and new flavors — into the culinary experience.

Brud Holland, chef at Fox Run Vineyards, traces the origin of the farm-to-table movement to Europe. "In European countries, farm-to-table is part of the culture, they've been doing it for centuries, it's how they live," explained Holland. He said that influence "traveled to California then walked its way across the country." It gave rise to American regional cuisine, where parts of the country became known for their uniquely regional foods, such as Midwest meat and potatoes or Pacific Northwest seafood. Then came the creation of community-supported agriculture, or CSAs, giving people access to buy goods directly from neighboring farmers.

Locavore advocates

One of the individuals widely credited with the start of the local food movement in the Finger Lakes is Debra Whiting, who opened Red Newt Bistro in 1998. Whiting, who passed away in 2011, was one of the first chefs to use regional ingredients on her menu. In 1999, she became one of the founding members of Finger Lakes Culinary Bounty, a 14-county network that fosters relationships between farmers and restaurants and educates consumers about homegrown foods and beverages.

Scott Signori, chef and owner of Stonecat Café, is also considered a locavore pioneer. Stonecat opened in a former Hector farm stand shortly after Red Newt. Its menu reads like a homage to Finger Lakes producers, wineries, breweries and distilleries. Signori said what he appreciates most about local foods is the freshness. "The stuff that shows up on my door on a daily basis is basically still growing," he said.

Kindred Fare in Geneva is one of the newer establishments giving momentum to the farm-to-table movement. Its menu items are ripe with local ingredients sourced directly from growers or through Ithaca-based Finger Lakes Farms and Regional Access, the two main distributors of the region's food products.

Proprietor Susie Atvell said, "asparagus is all over the menu right now," reflecting the seasonal nature of the region's agricultural bounty which brings a variety of foods and flavors to the table throughout the year. The Asparagus & Fried Egg dish uses asparagus from Pedersen Farms in Seneca Castle and eggs from Meadow Creek Farm in Interlaken.

Atvell said working with area growers is essential to their business. "We are building local connections with our food and with the people who produce our food, and that makes it appealing to us and for our guests who enjoy hearing about the story."

Down on the farm

In the Chef's Collaborative Garden on Hobart and William Smith Colleges' Fribolin Farm, fruits, vegetables and herbs are planted and cultivated by chefs from Halsey's Restaurant, Geneva On The Lake, Fox Run, Ventosa Vineyards and Glenora Wine Cellar's Veraisons Restaurant. Sarah Myer, Food Systems Program Manager for the Finger Lakes Institute at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, said the garden is giving chefs a better understanding and appreciation for how food is grown and cared for and ways to cook and pair different foods in the kitchen.

Myer works to educate both the public and food and beverage producers about the value of regional agriculture and the local food system – the journey food takes from field to plate. She pointed out that today, the farm-to-table movement is "benefiting from smaller farms and entrepreneurs who are creating innovative ideas to electrify and energize the food system in new ways."

One of those entrepreneurs is Maggie O'Reilly, a 2016 environmental studies graduate of William Smith. She started Maggie's Greens, located in a greenhouse in Stark Street Gardens in Waterloo. She supplies microgreens to The Linden Social Club, Ports Café, West Main Kitchen and other nearby eateries and farmers markets. O'Reilly said microgreens have a high nutritional value and intense flavor and are used in sandwiches and salad mixes and as garnishes.

"It's really powerful to see everything come from seed and changing our food system in a way that is more productive and more locally-based," she said. "People get to know who's growing their food and who's eating the food you're growing."

O'Reilly said she is planting her roots here because, "The Finger Lakes is so well connected. Everybody knows what each other is doing, strong suits, weaknesses, where there's gaps in product and opportunities for growth. It's a very cohesive community."

Cultivating the future

As with any positive movement, the goal is to keep it going. Organizations such as Finger Lakes Culinary Bounty, the Finger Lakes Institute and Cornell Cooperative Extension are building bridges between chefs, farmers, schools, consumers and others who influence and support the region's food system.

“Working together and collaborating is how you get the best of everything. Everyone improves. Everyone moves forward,” says Holland of Fox Run, who is also board chair of Finger Lakes Culinary Bounty.

Holland and Signori of Stonecat believe product and passion are key ingredients to sustaining the farm-to-table movement. The culinary experience will keep getting better as long as the foods – and connections – keep growing.

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Cooking up local foods and flavors

By KRISTA GLEASON
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If quality is king in the restaurant business, then local ingredients are queen.

At West Main Kitchen in downtown Waterloo, comfort food describes not only the taste but also the care that goes into each dish.

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green goddess sauce blending Ithaca Milk Yogurt with assorted local greens.

Susie Atvell, proprietor of the restaurant, thinks the Finger Lakes is doing a great job embracing the locavore movement.

"There are plenty of farmers markets, CSAs and other small boutique offerings that have started popping up in the last few years," she said. "Pick one of our 11 lakes on any given day, drive around, and you can find all sorts of treasures and places to stop to enjoy local products. And th

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If quality is king in the restaurant business, then local ingredients are queen.

At West Main Kitchen in downtown Waterloo, comfort food describes not only the taste, but also the care that goes into each dish. "It is not enough for us to cook every recipe from scratch. We have gone further by staying committed to sourcing the ingredients from local farms and artisan food makers," said chef Merrill Moore.

West Main's down-home, scratch-made plates use homegrown products from nearby farms and businesses, including Rosenkrans Farms beef and Riegel Family Farms vegetables from Seneca Falls, and Muranda Cheese Company products from Waterloo. Even the tea is grown in the community, by Finger Lakes Tea Company. West Main also employs the fruits of its own labor, with heirloom vegetables, legumes and herbs harvested from its garden in the village's River Park Commons.

The New York Wine & Culinary Center in Canandaigua is a shrine to Finger Lakes-made food and beverages, as well as those produced across the state. A huge chalkboard at the entrance to its Upstairs Bistro lists the local suppliers behind its seasonal menu, which the Center says features at least 90 percent New York-grown ingredients. The Josef Brunner Artisan Meats plate is chock full of gourmet goodness from Artisan Meats in Canandaigua. The NY Artisan Cheeses selection includes the popular chevre from Lively Run Goat Dairy in Interlaken. The Apricot Mimosa on the cocktail menu is made with Apricot Stomp from Red Jacket Orchards in Geneva, and Chateau Frank Brut sparkling wine from Dr. Konstantin Frank Winery in Hammondsport.

At Kindred Fare in Geneva, its name reflects the spirit of camaraderie that exists between Finger Lakes growers and restaurants. Many of its menu items are locally inspired. The BBQ Country Pork Ribs, for example, are one hundred percent Finger Lakes: pork from Grass Land Farms in Ovid, “tangy slaw” ingredients from Stick and Stone Farm in Ithaca and Remembrance Farm and Sweet Land Farm in Trumansburg, fingerling potatoes from Greater Tater in Wayland, and green goddess sauce blending Ithaca Milk Yogurt with assorted local greens.

Susie Atvell, proprietor of Kindred Fare, thinks the Finger Lakes is doing a great job embracing the locavore movement. “There are plenty of farmers markets, CSAs and other smaller boutique offerings that have started popping up in the last few years,” she said. “Pick one of our eleven lakes on any given day, drive around, and you can find all sorts of treasures and places to stop to enjoy local products. And the restaurants keep getting better and better.”

No one can argue with that.

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From grape and grain to glass

By Krista Gleason

The grape may be one of the most famous of Finger Lakes-grown products. And Dr. Konstantin Frank may be the region's most famous producer. The vine vineyards Dr. Frank first planted in 1958 on the grounds of his eponymous winery are considered to be among the oldest in the United States.

The French concept of terroir refers to how a region's soil, climate and terrain combine to create a crop's unique flavor. It was the terroir of the landscape surrounding Keuka Lake that attracted Dr. Frank, especially the steep slope of the land that provided excellent soil and air drainage. The rocky soils of the Keuka Lake vineyards are acidic with a high shale content, producing mineral characteristics ideal for the winery's dry Rieslings.

Sprinkled among the region's hundred-plus wineries are a growing number of craft breweries and distilleries pouring passion into their products.

Climbing Bines Hop Farm and Craft Ale Company, overlooking Seneca Lake in the town of Torrey, grows seven varieties of hop plants for its signature brews. Hops give distinct flavors and aromas to beer much like grapes and soil do to wine. "The terroir, the soil, the micro-climate we have gives our Cascade hops, for example, different characteristics than those in Oregon or the Pacific Northwest," said Chris Hansen, partner at Climbing Bines.

Their farm brewery uses grains such as barley, spelt and buckwheat from a variety of sources, including local farmers Tim Christiansen and Peter Martens, and Birkett Mills in Penn Yan. Their Tart Cherry and Honey Apricot beers contain juices from Red Jacket Orchards; the honey is from local beekeepers Skip Jensen and Steve Culver. Climbing Bines also supplements their estate-grown hops with hops grown by Pedersen Farms in Seneca Castle and Keuka Hopper Hut in Penn Yan.

In Ovid, Myer Farm Distillers produces handcrafted spirits from grains grown on their family farm. The Myer family has been cultivating the land since 1868, with fifth-generation farmer John Myer at the helm for the last 35 years. In 2012, John and his brother Joe started a new venture using the farm's organically-grown wheat, rye, corn and barley to produce its namesake vodka, gin and whiskey.

Their most popular product is Myer Farm Gin. The juniper integrates with the botanicals so the taste is not overwhelmingly tinny but more balanced, said president and master distiller Joe Myer.

The distillery plays a role in promoting the region's food and beverage movement by connecting people to the ecosystem behind their products. "People can come here and see the land from which the grain grows that we use to produce our spirits," said Myer. "And they know that the grains are organic and the way we cultivate the soil is sustainable."

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