

# strength *in* numbers



**I**T'S NO SECRET:

In the Hudson Valley, farms and vineyards exist in the shadow of stalking developers. But the buzz of sustainability is spreading. It is rippling out from the agri-world and has logically surged through the culinary gateposts to refuel gastro-tourism and bolster rural economies. For those who work the land, strength in numbers is one way to fend off rural sprawl and stay in business. Getting a farmer's peaches on the breakfast table of the B&B down the road, guiding day visitors to the "U-pick" apple orchard, or trucking ale from a microbrewery into a restaurant a few miles away all help keep the money in the local loop and keep both land and lifestyles sustainable.

But, with 20-hour workdays for farmers and chefs, who has time to do this?

Organizations like **Meet Me in Marlborough** and the recently launched **Columbia County Bount**y are working to connect the dots of diverse interests and, though still relatively new, each is having a strong and positive influence on everything from agritourism to wine tastings in their respective areas.

For the last four years, Meet Me in Marlborough (MMiM), a nonprofit umbrella for local farms and businesses, has been guiding visitors through a tightly knit Marlboro network of farms, wineries, restaurants and B&Bs.

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According to B. J. Mikkelsen, president of MMiM and owner of Willow Tree Flower Farm, in Milton, the group's overall vision is to save as many farms as possible. Pointing to a nearby ridge on his neighbor's property, he admits, "It's tempting for farmers to sell their land to developers," then adds, "Soon there will be 11 houses sitting up there."

The first priority, says Sheila Mannese, executive director and one of the founding members of MMiM, was to get everyone on the same page. "People are buying apples from China, not Marlboro—we wanted to get more people to buy local," she says. "I wanted to see how the farms could stay alive in Marlboro and prosper into the future."

Today, MMiM's 80 members include a dozen farms, four wineries and several restaurants and a diverse array of shops including visual artists, beauty spas, a dance center, a wine shop, among others.

Although most restaurateurs, businesses and younger farmers are cyber-savvy, older farmers tend not to communicate via email. The answer, says Robinson, was to talk to all farmers face-to-face on a regular basis.

The group's initial outreach to farmers, though, was "met with a lot of suspicion," Robinson says. "The older farmers had stories about getting cheated 10, 20 years ago." Traditionally, farmers believed they couldn't work within the chefs' timeline, while chefs generally thought local produce was too expensive, he notes—some farmers plowed plants under because they couldn't get a fair market price for their goods. A series of focus groups, organized last March with the help of David Colby at the Columbia County Chamber of Commerce, as well as chefs' visits to farms and farmers' visits to chefs' kitchens, helped open communication and plant the seed for a "seasonal-menu mind set."

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on the same page.

—Lori Selden,  
*Co-chair, Columbia County Bounty*

John Foglia, owner of Ship Lantern Inn, in Milton, recalls the skepticism about MMiM in the beginning, but he says he always felt strongly about promoting Marlboro destination points to his dining patrons. "With the fall foliage and the harvest coming up, we expect to be telling people about the places they can stay and visit," he says.

For the field-to-fork connection to work, farmers and chefs need to communicate, so serving local produce and wine to touring palates in the Hudson Valley was the impetus behind Columbia County Bounty (CCB), according to the group's co-chair, Lori Selden, owner of Mexican Radio restaurant, in Hudson.

"It started last year at the ag-brunch with the Columbia County Chamber of Commerce," Selden recalls. "I was telling chef David Robinson, of Bezalel Gables Fine Catering, about how I drive down to the Greenmarkets in New York City to pick up Columbia County produce and then drive it back up here to serve in the restaurant. How weird is that?" Selden remembers the brunch menu offered food produced out of the area. "There were local farmers speaking at the brunch but they weren't represented by their produce," she notes. She and Robinson both shared the frustration of not being able to serve enough local produce and, not surprisingly, farmers expressed similar frustrations. "The biggest problem was people were not connecting," she explains.

Younger, second-career or niche-crop farmers seem to understand the concept of selling locally, a notion that seemed to fall along generational lines. But Robinson had an offer difficult for any farmer to refuse. "They could sell me enough greens for a banquet situation in just one stop," he says, "or they might sell the same amount sitting at a farmers' market for six hours."

Selling produce directly to caterers and restaurants began to catch on: Last year, CCB farmers saw sales growth of 2 to 5 percent for their local produce—that growth skyrocketed to 70 and 80 percent this year. "This is really huge for us—people are *asking* for local produce and are willing to pay the price differential for things like grass-fed meat or apple cider doughnuts," Robinson says. "They love the idea of eating something they can't get anywhere else." Now, 56 restaurants, 65 farms and numerous individuals are part of CCB.

Last month, 200 people attended the second Bounty of the County Supper, an event Selden says was "magical." "It was the happiest group of people I've been with in a long time," she says. "The wonder of this whole thing is everyone is really on the same page. They are embracing the concept in the culinary world and supporting farms through CSAs by eating local. I'm happy to be part of it."

Robinson sees a better relationship and understanding among chefs and farmers, especially after he and area chefs

visited the farms last spring. “I learned what farmers go through and how they work,” he recalls. “But, in the end, it’s worth it to cook with fresh, high-quality meat—an animal that ate breakfast this morning is the one you’re cooking in the kitchen this afternoon.”

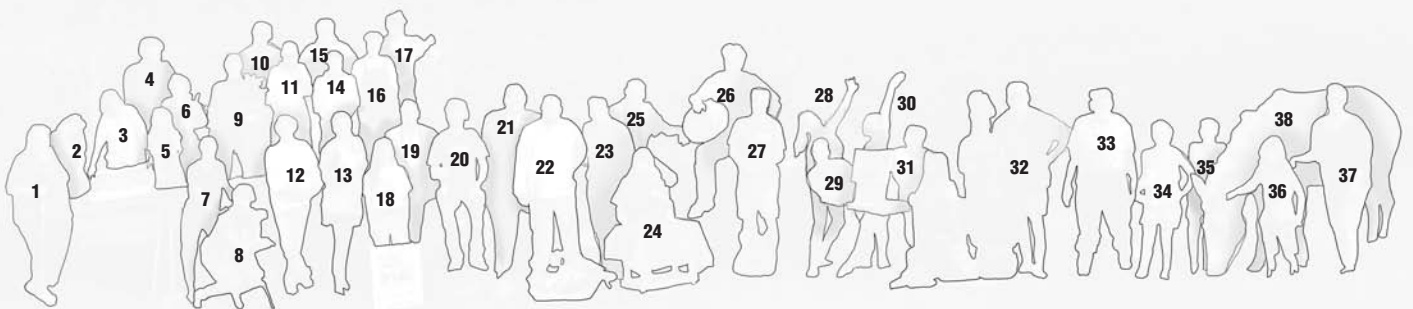
This fall, farmers will visit the chefs’ kitchens to see how their produce is prepared and used. They will be invited to cook a few appetizers. “We want them to see the volume in our kitchens, taste the dishes and bridge an understanding,” Robinson says, adding that the bonding between farmers and chefs should be a natural. “There are so many similarities—we both work on our feet for extremely long hours in a job that is not necessarily lucrative. The pride the farmer takes in his or her produce is the same we take in putting that produce on the plate. We [both] work with our hands. Also, cooking can be solitary at times, as is farming.”

Bonding works; so does networking. Lynn Faurie, owner of B&L 4E Farms, which sells organic and pasture-raised beef, chicken and eggs, says becoming a member of MMiM was a way to support other local farmers. “People who see the

MMiM signs and show up here for the fresh eggs ask us where they can get peaches,” Faurie says. “We tell them to go to Weed Farm.” Faurie’s partner, Barbara Masterson, a landscape artist, also was encouraged to join MMiM when she heard about “Paint Out,” a unique event where artists collectively venture out to capture one of Marlboro’s stunning landscapes on canvas. (Paintings inspired by the Hudson Valley landscape will be shown in November at an art show gala.)

Hosting artists to paint one of the many Hudson Valley vistas is Barbara Best, formerly the general manager of MMiM member Benmarl Winery. “No one [business] can survive today alone,” Best emphasizes. “It’s a much better business approach for us to send people to sister wineries after they have tasted the wine here. People want to know where they can eat, stay, or go in the area—we are all taking care of each other rather than just seeing things myopically. A group like MMiM brings more dialogue among farms, wineries and restaurants,” she adds.

This sentiment is echoed by Steve Clarke, owner and farmer of Prospect Hill Orchard. “After people come to my



farm and pick fruit, they want to know what else there is to do in the area," he says. "There is a lot of diversity here. We want to be a destination where people decide in the morning what they are going to do, hop in the car, come up here."

**F**or both MMiM and CCB, keeping members connected will be an ongoing challenge. Mikkelsen says the goal for MMiM next year is to attract more small business into the fold—electricians, trades, hotels and other nonprofit organizations. Meanwhile, he is working to promote tour packages. "We can put together an itinerary including places to stay, visits to the Roosevelt and Vanderbilt mansions, or picking fruit at one of our farms," he says. MMiM also is establishing a "farm trail" linking area farms together by signage and maps. It will be the first of its kind in New York State. CCB has published a brochure of member restaurants, farms and markets, and other Hudson Valley Counties have picked up the "Bounty" moniker and joined the "locally grown" bandwagon.

Overall, Selden says she is already seeing the impact of

the group's work. "Customers at my restaurant love it when we tell them that the chard or the tomatoes are from a nearby farm, just picked today," she says. "Now we have a platform where people and farmers will call me at the restaurant and tell me they have a lot of extra broccoli rabe in their gardens and ask if I can use some. Now that I know who these farmers and gardeners are, it feels more secure." ❖

**COLUMBIA COUNTY BOUNTY**

**Columbia County Chamber of Commerce**

**507 Warren St., Hudson 12534**

**(518) 828-4417 columbiachamber-ny.com**

**MEET ME IN MARLBOROUGH**

**Marlboro Agricultural Alliance**

**PO Box 1139, Marlboro 12542**

**(845) 616-7824 meetmeinmarlborough.com**

*Meet Me in Marlborough's ART SHOW BENEFIT GALA, hosted by Stoutridge Vineyard, Marlboro, will feature paintings of local agricultural landscapes from blossom season to harvest. A portion of the sale proceeds will benefit sustainable agriculture efforts in the area. The event is November 3, from 7 to 9 PM. For more information, call (845) 616-7824; or check meetmeinmarlborough.com.*



**Meet Me in Marlborough members**

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| <p>1 Carol Crimi<br/>(Owner, Mountain Fresh Farm), and family:</p> <p>2 Sofia Crimi (Daughter)</p> <p>3 Attilio Crimi (Son)</p> <p>4 George Crimi (Husband)</p> <p>5 Olivia Crimi (Daughter)</p> <p>6 Giuseppe Crimi (Son)</p> <p>7 Heidi Weaver<br/>(Spa Director, Buttermilk Falls Inn &amp; Spa)</p> <p>8 Collin McKay (Volunteer)</p> <p>9 Mici Polizzi Simonofsky (Polizzi Tree Farm)</p> <p>10 Steve Clarke (Prospect Hill Orchards)</p> <p>11 Aaron Kent (Locust Grove Fruit Farm)</p> | <p>12 Jodi Cummings<br/>(General Manager, Buttermilk Falls Inn &amp; Spa)</p> <p>13 Alisha Albinder (Suzie's Apples)</p> <p>14 Sawyer Kent (Locust Grove Fruit Farm)</p> <p>15 Chip Kent (Locust Grove Fruit Farm)</p> <p>16 Marie Conte Mikkelsen<br/>(Willow Tree Flower Farm)</p> <p>17 BJ Mikkelsen (Willow Tree Flower Farm)</p> <p>18 Sheila Mannese<br/>(Executive Director, Meet Me in Marlborough)</p> <p>19 Bruce Weiss (Volunteer)</p> <p>20 Kristop Brown (Winemaker, Benmarl Winery)</p> <p>21 Mike Foglia (Owner, Ship Lantern Inn)</p> <p>22 Robert Bufano (Chef, Brickhouse Restaurant)</p> | <p>23 Joe Curran (Owner, Brickhouse Restaurant)</p> <p>24 MaryEllen Glorie (Owner, Glorie Farm Winery)</p> <p>25 Doug Glorie (Owner, Glorie Farm Winery)</p> <p>26 Steve Osborne (Owner, Stoutridge Vineyard)</p> <p>27 Robert McKay (Volunteer)</p> <p>28-30 Dancers (Madeline's Dance Center)</p> <p>31 Ellen Troncone Esposito (Artist)</p> <p>32 Bruce Bernard (Chainsaw Bear Productions)</p> <p>33 Howard Quimby (Quimby Farms)</p> <p>34 Maya Clemmer</p> <p>35 Emily Henry (Quimby Farm)</p> <p>36 Abby Henry (Quimby Farm)</p> <p>37 Diana Quimby Henry (Quimby Farms)</p> <p>38 Ginny (Quimby Farms mule)</p> |
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