

ConsciousChoice

Do Bet the Farm!

How a premiere Chicago chef is plowing new ground for local organic farmers

by Jim Slama

Conscious Choice, September 2003

A few years back, Judy Hageman and Bill Warner were facing a cash crunch on their family farm in Southern Wisconsin. Challenged with \$11,000 in new expenses, they weren't sure how to meet their obligations. Much of the problem was due to their success. Their Snug Haven Farm was producing some of the region's tastiest year-round spinach and it was being sought by leading Midwestern chefs. To meet the demand, they committed to buying another greenhouse.

Simultaneously, they also needed to buy some new freezers so they could store and then sell their excess harvest of tomatoes. "We discovered that the tomatoes tasted better frozen than canned," says Warner. And one of the area's leading restaurants agreed by putting cold, hard cash on the table. "After the chefs at Chicago's Frontera Grill sampled them," says Warner, "they committed to purchase 500 pounds a week when fresh ones weren't available."

Like most small organic farmers, Hageman and Warner didn't have access to loans from traditional banking sources. "You have to prove you *don't* need the money in order to qualify for most loans!" says Warner. Instead, to purchase the freezers, they turned to their biggest customer -- Frontera Grill. They were not disappointed. "We were happy to loan Snug Haven the money," says Frontera chef/owner Rick Bayless. "We saw it as an investment in a farm and people we really like."

In a creative financing twist, Snug Haven farm repaid the loan principal by providing Frontera with frozen organic tomatoes. "The impact of this simple interest-free loan was huge," says Warner. "It turned our excess tomatoes into money quicker than we could have hoped. And the demand was so great that we also started freezing tomatoes from two other nearby farmers, giving them the same windfall."

This experience and others like it convinced Bayless and his management team that the pool of small, mostly organic, farmers from whom they purchased their commodities, needed extra financial support beyond the credit and creative payment methods. As a result, they recently launched the Frontera Farmer Foundation to provide quick money -- in the form of grants to local farmers when they are facing challenges or opportunities where money can make a difference.

"No great cuisine has developed without great local agriculture," says Bayless. "Of course, quality farmers are the heart and soul of any agricultural system. Yet the farmers in our region who are contributing the most to healthy, sustainable food production are unlikely to get support from the government or banks. We hope the Frontera Farm Foundation can give them needed

support and inspire other philanthropists to step up as well.”

Organic farmers Hageman and Warner are already planning to submit a proposal to the foundation. “If we had a kitchen to process and cook our tomatoes in the fall, we could sell even more of them,” says Judy Hageman. “Some of our customers [client restaurants] would prefer to not have to do all that extra [preparation] work and we can keep more money on the farm and local community by adding value.”

Nurturing Organic Farmers

The Frontera Farmer Foundation is the latest in chef Bayless’ mission of encouraging the growth of organics in the Chicago area. In the early ‘90s Bayless took his lead from renowned chef Alice Waters. Waters, based in California, was the first American restaurateur to develop a network of local farms to supply a restaurant with organic and sustainably produced food. “Visiting Alice was a real learning experience,” says Rick Bayless. “I would go out to Berkeley just to soak in the great system at [her restaurant] Chez Pannise.”

Bayless’ ongoing support for organics continued as he headed up the Chef’s Collaborative, a nationwide group of chefs that encourages sustainable food production. On a local level, Bayless, along with his managing chef, Tracy Vowell, have been steady supporters of Chicago’s Green City Market, a weekly farmers’ market in Lincoln Park that supports local sustainable agriculture.

Moreover, Bayless’ Frontera Grill has plans to partner with the City of Chicago to develop a greenhouse that will provide year-round food for the restaurant on formerly vacant city land. Such a bold initiative could go a long way in proving the viability of commercial year-round food production in an urban setting.

Finding enough organic farmers to provide food for Bayless’ Frontera Grill and his other restaurant, Topolobampo, fueled his search for a wider circle of organic suppliers. Bayless turned to Madison, Wisconsin chef, Odessa Piper for help. “Odessa had a good network of folks in Wisconsin who were providing seasonal produce and meat to her great restaurant L’Etoile,” says Bayless. “She very graciously introduced some of these [farmers] to Frontera.”

For chef Piper, the support was the right thing to do on many levels. “It was exciting to have Rick and [his wife] Deann visit, eat good food, and talk about organic farming,” says Piper, whose restaurant is considered by many to be one of the best in the state. “[And] the impact they had on the marketplace was so significant. Their buying power helped many struggling growers become successful.”

This impact is most evident with Homegrown Wisconsin, a Wisconsin- based organic farmer cooperative. Back in 1998, the cooperative hired Judy Hageman as its general manager. Her charge was to sell fresh produce to the Chicago market. “Snug Haven Farm already had relationships with Frontera Grill and...the Dining Room at the Ritz Carlton, so it was easy to sell them additional products through the co-op,” says Hageman.

One of the early farmers in Homegrown Wisconsin was Rink DaVee, who participated in its tremendous growth both as a producer and later as manager when Hageman stepped down. “The big orders from Rick [Bayless] ...really gave us some momentum,” he says. “It encouraged existing farmers to ramp up production and also brought new farmers on board because they recognized that the Chicago market could turn into something big.”

With its huge volume of customers, Frontera Grill soon became the biggest customer of the co-op. And a weekly purchase of 1,000 pounds of organic white onions, for example, has quite an impact on the market, particularly when nobody in the region is growing them. “And we don’t

want just any white onion -- we want white onions that are damn near the size of softballs!" says chef Vowell. "The local farmers have really responded to our sometimes wacky needs. I think they like the challenge, not to mention the regular checks."

Vowell also worked with Hageman and Warner's Snug Haven farm to buy their first frozen tomatoes. "Rick must have thought I lost my gourd when I proposed it -- storing 20,000 pounds of frozen tomatoes was definitely a stretch," she says. "But it worked and now other restaurants are also purchasing frozen tomatoes."

Frontera now freezes products such as sugar bomb strawberries from Wisconsin. "These products just taste so much better than anything we can buy commercially," says Vowell. "It's worth the extra cost and effort."

In some cases, the Frontera staff will take a hands-on approach to their farmer relationships. Farm tours for the staff are a usual part of the growing season and, last year, the staff helped Illinois farmer Greg Gunthorpe build chicken coops for the 2,500 birds he is raising for Frontera.

Chef Vowell took this hands-on approach to a new level when she bought a farm near Kankakee to raise vegetables for the restaurants. "Growing the food gives me an even greater appreciation for the things our farmers must face," she says.

Vowell isn't the only staffer providing food for the restaurant. One of the original sources for unique herbs and vegetables was Bayless himself. He, along with wife Deann, tended a garden on three city lots in Chicago. Complete with a greenhouse, it is now under the care of an organic agricultural expert.

The garden exemplifies the holistic approach taken by the Baylesses. "Rick and Deann put integrity and passion into everything they do," says Odessa Piper. "Their success makes them a tremendous role model. They prove that you can do the right thing while still running a prosperous business."

Prosperous indeed. In addition to their restaurants, the Baylesses have also developed a line of organic chips, sauces, salsas, and fair trade coffee that are now sold in supermarkets across the country. Moreover, Rick Bayless, an author and recipient of the James Beard Foundation's Chef of the Year Award -- the highest recognition in the restaurant industry -- is returning to public television this fall as host of the cooking show, "Mexico, One Plate at a Time."

Bayless' clout as a premiere chef and restaurateur certainly lends extra limelight to his campaign for sustainable agriculture. This is a godsend to not only the local area farmers struggling to build a market but also to those of us who yearn for a safer, healthier environment free of toxic herbicides, pesticides, and fertilizers.

Jim Slama is the co-founder and editor-at-large of Conscious Choice magazine and the president of Sustain. He was recently named to Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich's advisory board of Farmers and Farm Families.

A Taste of Bayless

Restaurants: Frontera Grill and Topolobampo, 445 N. Clark Street, Chicago; 312-661-1434.

PBS cooking show: "Mexico, One Plate at a Time," begins airing on Saturday, September 6. Check local listings for times.