



Giving Thanks for Local Bounty

By Andy Isaacson, Earthscope Reporter

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Long before the bounty of the Earth was compromised by pesticides and pasteurization, autumnal feasts featured thankful people and tasty local foods. Indeed, the legendary harvest meal of 1621 between the Plymouth colonists and the Wampanoag Indians celebrated the produce of local farmers — meats and seasonal vegetables free of synthetic chemicals. Blessed with a bountiful backyard of growers producing healthy and delicious food we now call organic, Marin residents this holiday season need only visit the local market to feast over the fruits of their labor.

While “going organic” may feed this romantic vision of an earlier time in our history, an Old World lifestyle where tastier foods travel short distances to our plate, arriving naked and stripped of Dow Chemical’s protective clothing, it is undeniably a show of support for Marin’s organic farming community.

For more than a century, small-scale farms across Marin have taken advantage of the region’s fertile soil and mild coastal climate. Many of these local farm and dairy operations have fallen victim to the economic competition of large-scale industrial agriculture, which has won consumers over with its offer of year-round consistency, affordability and longer shelf life. But organic farming, which avoids pesticides, hormones and chemical fertilizers, is growing in the county even while it declines. According to the Marin County agriculture commissioner’s office, there are 38 registered organic producers in Marin, farming roughly 2,330 acres and producing a total gross value of roughly \$4 million annually.

“The direction this county is going is toward value-added, sustainable practices,” said Helge Hellberg, executive director of Marin Organic, an association of farmers, ranchers, agriculture advisers and marketing experts. “In the long run we can compete with large factory agriculture if we sell the purity and beauty [of Marin] by attaching it to a premier product from the county, putting a face on it.”

As you prepare for holiday meals, look for this “face” at the farmers’ market held Sundays and Thursdays at the Marin Civic Center or the organic section in your local supermarket. A website — www.growninmarin.org — provides a listing of small farms in the county, searchable by product category or classifiers such as “grass fed” or “all organic,” allowing you to buy directly from the source, in some cases.

Seasonal vegetables this time of year include festive arugula, frisée and escarole greens, leafy chard, kale and collards. Winter squash, pumpkins, apples, chestnuts and unusual varieties of beets and carrots are harvested daily.

For many, a traditional holiday meal is held together by meat, fowl or fish, and thankfully, the county provides. Since the mid-19th century when first European families began ranching in, the

county's economy has been tied to livestock agriculture. 60 percent of every Marin agricultural dollar comes from meat and dairy production. There are about 30 dairies that provide 20 percent of the Bay Area's milk supply, and Marin ranchers raise about 12,000 head of beef cattle.

The Straus family has been farming in Marin for over 60 years. In 1993, Straus Family Creamery, in Marshall, became the first organic dairy in the western United States and since 1994 have been the county's (and the nation's) only wholly organic dairy processing plant. This year Straus is producing its seasonal organic, emulsifier- and coloring-free eggnog, and has released a line of ice creams.

Chileno Valley Ranch, operated by Mike and Sally Gal's south of Petaluma, produces natural, grass-fed beef, raised on organically certified fields. Marin Sun Farms, outside of Pt. Reyes Station, also is a local source of grass-fed beef, sausages, poultry and eggs.

"Heritage" turkeys — older varieties of the beloved holiday bird — are now available through select local farms and markets in Marin. Like heirloom tomatoes, heritage turkeys tell the story of food as it was before science homogenized the supermarket shelf. Spanish settlers brought wild turkeys back to Europe from Mexico and domesticated them; the first English settlers then began crossing these European varieties with wild turkeys.

These New World breeds, such as the Naragansett, bourbon red and Jersey buff, are making their way back from near extinction after the familiar broad-breasted white turkey — the "commodity turkey" as it is known in the industry — took over the market after the 1950s. This single genetic strain of turkey, a product of artificial insemination (the breasts too large, in fact, to allow natural mating), develops quickly (two-three months) and feeds on grains and antibiotics. Heritage breeds, by contrast, were raised on an open range, eat a varied diet, and take longer to develop. As a result they are older when butchered, offering more mature meat that, relative to the typical broad-breasted white, is like the difference between beef and veal. Mollie Stone's Markets, Andronico's, Willie Bird Turkeys and Good Earth in Fairfax are among local suppliers of heritage or organic turkeys.

From organic cranberry sauce to stuffing, going local this holiday season is as easy as pie. Give thanks for that.