



Maine chefs Sam Hayward, Melissa Kelly feeding 'eat local' movement

Sustainability more than a buzzword for some Maine restaurateurs

Special to Sustainable Food News, Jo Anne Bander

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Writer and consultant Jo Anne Bander profiles the chefs in Maine making a difference toward people and the environment through the food we eat. This article was originally published in the June-August issue of [The Maine Organic Farmer & Gardener](#).

Maine has become a destination for food savvy travelers who are in touch with the more complex array of Maine restaurants and foods than its iconic images of lobster shacks and blueberry pickers portray.

Credit for this transformation goes to chefs, restaurateurs, growers, producers and foragers whose creative interactions are forging a new Maine cuisine, new markets and a new image.

Fore Street's Sam Hayward a force for culinary change

Maine restaurants Fore Street, Primo, Hugo's, One Fifty Ate and Cole Farms have all been featured in recent articles in *The New York Times*, *Gourmet*, *Food & Wine*, *Travel and Leisure* and other national publications.

Not simply restaurant information for travelers or frolicking Mainers, they attest to Maine's superb, locally grown and gathered ingredients even more than any fundamental shift in the tastes of the resident or traveling populace.

The gurus

When Sam Hayward of Fore Street in Portland speaks about Maine food, everyone listens—the media, restaurant junkies and local farmers ready to sell their product direct or develop new products.

Self-effacing despite his early leadership of Maine's local food movement, self-described as “only one of those in the farm-to-fork movement along with dozens of others in Maine and privileged to be part,” Hayward stands out for his continuous search for new local products, matchmaking producers and processors, and constant promotion of Maine food.

Lee Straw of Straw's Farm in South Newcastle, a fifth-generation Maine farmer, has benefited from the full range of Hayward's efforts.

Hayward's Fore Street Restaurant is the major outlet for Straw's herds of organically grass-grazed lamb, which he raises on two islands off Spruce Head and on his farm, taking three a week in season.

“Hayward wanted my lambs, so he made the deal for me to have them slaughtered at Luce's Maine Grown Meats [in North Anson],” recalls Straw, “who had the staff expertise to cut to Hayward's specs after first hanging the lamb for 10 days for the meat to lax and develop a deeper flavor.”

Hayward filmed a fall 2005 segment for PBS's “Chefs a Field”, a prime opportunity to promote a Maine product. He chose Maine Island Lamb.

Then there are potatoes. The Maine potato put Aroostook County on the country's food map, but the Idaho has been “branded.”

Thanks to Hugo's chef Rob Evans, who initiated an annual Maine Potato Dinner at the Portland restaurant five years ago, Maine generated a feature article, “Maine Is Busy Praising The Potatoes,” in *The New York Times* on November 30.

The article spotlights Jim Gerritsen, whose family grows potatoes and other root vegetables at WoodPrairie Farm in Bridgewater, and Jim Cook of Skylandia Farm in Grand Isle, who grows crops and distributes for a group of Aroostook growers through Crown O' Maine Organic Coop.

In Cook's words, “there are literally hundreds of potato breeds to choose from. We grow the 50 that do best on the plate.”

Idaho might have its Russet, but thanks to voices like Evans, Aroostook farmers grow a “culinary potato.”

Flexibility is key

Key ingredients for an eat local, eat seasonal menu are flexibility, creativity and openness. Brian Hill, chef-owner of Francine Bistro in Camden, changes his menu as often as daily and creates a dish when “a farmer shows up at the back door with some wild-flavored celery, heirloom tomatoes or lovage.”

On a cold Saturday in April, when the root cellars of local growers were almost barren, diners at Francine got to choose from four first course, main course and dessert offerings—devoid of tomatoes but rich in local clams, white lima beans, local lamb porterhouse, Maine grown oyster mushrooms and a maple syrup-based dessert.

“Next week the digging of spring-dug parsnips begins,” Hill mentioned with the excitement that only someone who fixates on local fresh products to enliven his menu could communicate.

The Brooklin Inn serves dinner year round and proclaims in bold letters on a menu that changes daily that it serves exclusively organic and/or local ingredients and proudly lists the providers of its food by farm name.

“Focusing on local food requires a chef willing to be flexible about meal plans and to visit the local farmers, farmers’ markets and coops,” according to Chip Angell, who with his wife Gail took over the Inn in 2000. “The chef needs to build the menu on what is available, not just on what is on her mind.”

Restaurants, producers help each other

When Lisa Turner of Laughing Stock Farm in Freeport decided 10 years ago to expand her organic home garden and sell the excess, she started a small CSA. A lettuce surplus led her to the Harraseeket Inn’s buyer, Ron Breton, in Freeport.

He became client and coach, making suggestions about presentation and packaging and helping her determine prices. Turner now serves 13 restaurants year-round, from a farm whose cultivated acres have grown from one-fifth to six acres and one-third acre of greenhouses.

Restaurants represent 90 percent of Turner’s winter sales, which are mostly mesclun and sometimes baby spinach, broccoli rabe and sorrel as space permits, and 50 percent of summer sales when restaurants maintain ties to additional seasonal farms.

“For summer 2006, I am adding fava beans, mache and sorrel, because restaurants want them,” he said.

Francine’s Hill got his April oyster mushrooms from Andrew Smith of Mineral Spring Mushroom Farm in Newport. Oyster is the only winter mushroom he grows.

“We have a commercial scale mushroom operation with sterile culture environment that gives mushrooms an environment they don’t have in nature, and we work with mushroom hybrids as well as species from the wild,” Smith explains.

He cultivates primarily forest mushrooms: oysters, shiitake, maitake and beech. Foragers provide wild mushrooms, which he distributes.

“Chefs are always looking for a high end fresh product as well as being able to use a Maine name and put that on their menu,” notes Smith, for whom restaurants represent about 50 percent of direct and indirect mushroom sales.

Mark Guzzi of Peacemeal Farm in Dixmont cultivates 10 acres of mixed vegetables, with melons and spring-dug parsnips among his specialties, for seven farmers’ markets a week, where the restaurants find him.

“We are not aggressive because we don’t need to be,” reports Guzzi, “but Francine’s is a regular order. Hill takes a 50-pound bag of large potatoes every week, so we harvest extra and pick out the large ones for him.”

Jim Cook distributes Guzzi’s spring-dug parsnips through his Crown O’ Maine but bemoans the limited supply of this specialty product, sweet because its carbohydrates turn to sugar when it overwinters in the earth.

“We positioned this as a restaurant crop, but its increasing popularity has increased demand beyond our supply,” reports Cook.

This year Guzzi dug some 2,000 pounds of the total 3,000 pounds he’ll have, and he and Cook are encouraging other farmers to grow more. This is the power of restaurants to create a value-added product.

Local may mean grown on site

Midcoast Maine buzzed in 2000 when Melissa Kelly and Price Kushner took over a farmhouse restaurant, now called Primo, on the Rockland/Owl’s Head boundary.

They were fresh from the Old Chatham Shepherding Company Inn in the heart of the Hudson Valley local food belt, and she was the 1999 James Beard Best Chef in the Northeast.

Essential from the beginning were their gardens and orchard.

"It's easy as a chef," according to Kelly, "to get anything, anytime. The garden keeps us focused on what is seasonal, and we plan our menu accordingly. It does not save money. From July through November some 85 percent of the produce comes from the garden."

Rich Hanson opened Cleonice Mediterranean Bistro in Ellsworth in 2002 to invent something that would pull from his own Italian-Mediterranean roots, connect to farmers and offer food that is tasty yet affordable.

Now in his fifth season, working with local farmers has so intrigued Hanson that "I want that final step of the creative process of growing my own food, too."

He needs Italian greens Puntarelle and Denteleon (a dandelion) in such small quantities that they are not necessarily commercially viable, but worth growing himself.

Local farmers remain his base for the basic ingredients of Mediterranean cooking: Maine-grown tomatoes, basil and peppers.

Cooking local on a budget

Josh Potocki, chef and co-owner of One Fifty Ate in South Portland, came to Maine to cook with Street & Co. and four years ago started a bagel bakery.

Bagels led to other breads, then to breakfast and lunch in the shingled cottage in South Portland.

Success led them to move the bakery to Willard, and this year the One Fifty Ate crew is opening a restaurant named Bar Lola on Congress in Portland to expand their dinner menu.

"It is important to us to serve locally grown, seasonal food and help support the local economy, but the SYSCO [bulk food delivery service] route would have been cheaper," comments Potocki. The gain from the added cost is that "customers love our eggs and comment on their flavor."

As a small restaurant serving three meals a day, searching for ingredients and direct sourcing is more than One Fifty Ate can handle.

Farm Fresh Connections, a nonprofit begun in 2002 under the umbrella of the Maine Sustainable Agriculture Society, markets and distributes for a core of 16 Maine farmers and sources Maine-grown products.

It filled the void of access and affordability—and provides the eggs with flavor. Restaurants represent 40 percent to 50 percent of Farm Fresh's gross sales, according to its director Martha Putnam.

Small and small budget as they are, Potocki gets mushrooms and fiddleheads directly from a forager, and friends with a new organic farm will supply chervil, bronze fennel and Chantenay carrots this summer. Some 30 percent to 40 percent of the restaurant's ingredients are from Maine producers.

Cole Farms on Route 100 in Gray, opened in 1956 as a farmland diner, was featured in an October 2005 Gourmet article about Maine's old-time diners by Jane and Michael Stern, "who came inland looking for vintage Down East meals."

The food at Cole is indeed vintage—and affordable, with menu items such as red franks, liver and onions and chicken pot pie.

The affordability issue challenges next-generation proprietor Brad Pollard in his efforts to buy local food.

"I don't mind paying a little extra knowing the food will be fresher, but it's hard to spend 10 to 20 percent more," he comments. Pollard uses apples from local farms, native blueberries, Maine potatoes, Maine shrimp and value-added products, such as pre-sliced apples from nearby Valley View Orchards.

Cleonice's Hanson resolves the local but affordable issue through a flexible, continuously changing menu based on tapas (small, savory dishes) and soups and sandwiches at lunch.

Lunch features a seasonal soup at \$3.50 a cup; sandwiches that range from \$5.50 to \$7.50 with sides of salad or roasted potato; and an extensive tapas selection at \$7 and under. The winter dinner menu has entrees in the \$20 range.

People usually go to lobster shacks for an affordable taste of Maine's best-known product, but Waterman's Beach Lobster surpasses the norm. Located next to Spruce Head where lobstermen bring in their catch, facing a Wyeth-picture jetty on Penobscot Bay, Waterman's has been a local destination since Lorri Cousens and mother-in-law Anne opened it in 1986.

"The whole family lobsters, and people loved our location—the half-tide wharf—and we felt we could offer a good product," explains Cousens. "We're fussy on quality, and we'd rather not have it if it is not local."

Posted by the ordering line is the newspaper clip about their 2001 James Beard Foundation award as a Regional Classic.

The Cousens trap their own lobsters; steamers come from a friend who digs in nearby mud flats; corn and fixings for potato salad and cole slaw made daily are local; and Anne, who makes seven or eight pies a day in season, adds strawberry shortcake when she can pick ripe berries at a local U-pick.

The rhubarb for pie comes from a patch on the family farm down the road that has been generating fruit for at least four generations.

The restaurant challenge and opportunity

For large restaurants such as Fore Street, which averages 200 dinners nightly, obtaining enough of its desired cuts is a challenge.

While Fore Street uses 65 percent Maine product annually, two of its signature dishes—hanger steak and spit roasted pork loin—demand more product than is obtainable locally, even if it didn't pay attention to quality issues of texture and fat proportion.

Deed Caldwell, the third generation of her family to farm, and instrumental in getting Caldwell Farms' MOFGA certification for organic beef, has felt that challenge directly.

Restaurant sales represent about 25 percent of Caldwell's annual beef revenue and stabilize the market for high-end cuts, but Caldwell cannot provide enough at that end to satisfy larger restaurants' needs.

Her niche is smaller restaurants, such as Francine in Camden and Stephanie Brown's SeaGrass Bistro in Yarmouth, which lets her stockpile some 30 pounds of short ribs before featuring them.

Lee Straw used to deal with an "unstable market, maybe top dollar one day and then not even the cost of production another, because farmers are typically price takers not price setters."

The upgrade of his product through working with Hayward and meeting his demands has allowed him the stability of setting his own price, and Hayward pays the processing charge and shipment from the processing plant. What Fore Street does not take, Luce sells to the Harraseeket Inn.

When Bob and Ruth Sullivan opened Old Ackley Farm in Blue Hill just over two growing seasons ago, they defined their niche as pasture-raised chickens and organic eggs for restaurants.

The restaurant sales of chickens and eggs already represent one-fourth to two-thirds of sales, depending on the season.

They did their homework and went the extra step, building a processing plant and getting state-certified for institutional sales to overcome a major structural challenge to small farmers—strict state control on the amount of poultry that farmers can process on site for sale.

The Sullivans, permitted for up to 3,000 birds, process and deliver every week from June to October.

Sullivan is "very grateful to the chefs. It isn't easy for them to get deliveries from 10 different farmers instead of everything coming off one truck."

The tradeoff in working with restaurants with their large orders is their need for a consistent sized product.

Laughingstock Farm's Lisa Turner says her favorite thing about restaurants is "their loyalty and reliability for their farmer.

"Most of them stick with one farmer for years and use only a couple of farmers, giving stability. The restaurants don't try to get the farms to compete on price. Their loyalty makes the system work. They buy substantial amounts, and it is easier to work with their big orders and deliver them," she said.

Lloyd Griscom, who owns Peace and Plenty Farm in Phillips, Maine, with Hope Alexander, sold their organically grown Canadian Sourtop blueberries to Fore Street for the first time in 2005—10 years after he bought his property.

The lowbush, wild, mountain variety grows at 1,700 feet altitude. Griscom is thrilled that Hayward, whom he types "a connoisseur," talks about his product, one of many that he promotes, and praises it as a "wild blueberry, small but more complex in flavor profile than other blueberries."

Griscom hopes the publicity leads to increased sales and product development as he works on quality and healthy uses for his berries.

Why eat out

Hugo's Evans is committed to local food, because "organic farmers are the unsung heroes. They get out in the fields, sweat through the elements, and pound to pound don't get a return that equals their labor."

He thrives at "being in the kitchen working with the food, making it better, intensifying it, getting the flavor out."

When Fore Street's Hayward encounters challenges to Maine's food producers, he devises solutions. He resolved many of his own meat processing needs through his relationship with Arnold Luce, but knows that is not enough.

"I have been talking with MOFGA about developing a licensed processing plant that meets all inspection requirements as a public/private partnership, somewhere on I-95, easily accessible to farmers and markets to help small farms increase their livestock production," Hayward said.

New challenges keep cropping up for chefs who are committed to local foods. As they resolve the challenges and develop new foods, they help grow and support local farms and producers.

Here's an opportunity for the diner: To help the local farm economy, eat local, eat seasonal, eat out—at one of Maine's many restaurants that make local, seasonal food the essence of their cuisine.

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