

HEALING THE
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SWIMMABLE BY 2020?

A BUMPY RIDE
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IN A WORLD GOING GREEN

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Hampton Roads

M A G A Z I N E

THE

GREEN

ISSUE

GET FRESH

WAYS TO SUPPORT TODAY'S
FARMERS, THE EARTH, AND
YOUR HEALTH BY EATING LOCAL
AND SUSTAINABLE FOODS

Cover photo of
Dee & Dave Sherr of
Dave & Dee's Homegrown
Mushrooms, Sedley

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Farm Fresh



DEE & DAVE SHERR
OF DAVE & DEE'S HOMEGROWN
MUSHROOMS, SEDLEY



BY WOODIE WALKER

EATING YOUR WAY TO GOOD HEALTH IN HAMPTON ROADS IS GETTING EASIER AS OPTIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE CONTINUE TO GROW

Faced with a seemingly endless supply of horror stories about the food they eat, many people are becoming more informed—and more creative—about their dietary choices. News accounts detailing e. coli contamination, salmonella outbreaks and unsanitary livestock operations have become almost routine. Sometimes, people die from these issues. The scare factor is high.

There are safer alternatives, however, according to an increasing number of Hampton Roads residents who are part of the sustainable agriculture movement. Some of these folks are producers. Others are consumers. Some have started businesses that make it easier to put farm-fresh, local commodities on the kitchen table. They share the goal of eating healthy, safe food—something they once took for granted.

"I became concerned a few years ago about the foods I eat and how they are processed," says Tom Scott, a Newport News resident. "I have some medical issues, so I have to watch what I eat. The more I learn about how our foods are handled and the junk that is put into them so that they will sell in the supermarkets, the more I look for foods that are minimally processed. I think it's healthier and worth paying a bit more for."

Scott is a customer of Off the Vine Market Inc., owned by Tess Schaffner of James City County. Customers throughout the Peninsula shop online for local fare that includes fresh meats, produce, artisan breads and cheeses, coffees and more.

Off the Vine offers clients two ways to shop. Some purchase subscription shares in which they get a standardized "grab bag" of whatever seasonal items are available that week, while others order a la carte from the online menu. Delivery is accomplished at a variety of established locations or through home delivery.

"For me, sustainability means not only producing our foods in an environmentally-friendly manner, with no added hormones, chemicals or pesticides," says Schaffner, "but also supporting our community agriculture by paying our farmers a fair living wage for the products they produce."

Tiffany Lanigan of Toano is one of Schaffner's regular customers.

"I want to support local farmers," she says. "I also want my food to taste good. The more local and in-season it is, the better it tastes. I love the fresh eggs I get from Off the Vine and knowing they came from free-range chickens, not some factory."

Off the Vine bridges the gap

CULLIPHER FARMS, PUNGO



between two basic kinds of delivery mechanisms for farm-fresh products. One method is the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) concept, in which a single producer offers "shares" to customers who pay the same fees for an equal portion of the goods available each delivery date. Some CSAs even have shareholders work on the farm to earn their portions.

Another method is the cooperative, in which customers draw upon a wide range of producers for a variety of products. Often, cooperatives have established delivery points, at which customers pick up their orders on a specific day. An example is RealFood Williamsburg Community Cooperative, established by students at The College of William and Mary in 2007.

"Our focus at RealFood is to

reconnect people with the food they eat," says Christy Ottinger, a William and Mary senior. "We encourage environmental and social awareness by connecting folks with local food and farmers, spreading knowledge about food preparation so you can be as involved as possible in your personal and community health."

"Word spread over the past few years, and we reached over 80 ordering members last semester, while our listserve grew to over 500. Most clients are William and Mary students and professors, but more community members are getting involved recently."

Ottinger says RealFood is managed by

volunteers, most of whom are students.

"We also have some devoted community members, but it's important that the younger generation is involved with Williamsburg's local food movement," she says. "The juice that keeps me excited is that the co-op is so counter-culture. Interest has exploded as more people understand how unhealthy our modern system is."

While cooperatives are catching on in more urban areas, state officials like Gail Milteer, a marketing specialist with the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS), are working with farmers to develop the CSA concept.

"Our website, www.virginiagrown.com,

has a detailed list of CSAs that are working with us," says Milteer. "I meet with them and provide information on the length of the season, the amount to charge for a subscription, ideas of areas that they could sell to, and the use of various marketing tools."

One grower from Milteer's list is Mike Cullipher, whose family operates Cullipher Farm Market in Pungo and also has a CSA-type program that serves about 140 families.

"We call it our Family Membership Program," he says. "We're not a typical CSA, in that our members don't have to work in lieu of payment for their share. We offer fruits and almost every type of vegetable you can think of, along with pure honey from the hives on our farm."

The Cullipher family has been truck farming in Hampton Roads and north-eastern North Carolina for more than 100 years. Today the Cullipher team includes Mike's parents, his wife, their children, and his sisters and nephews. Prior to 2002, they sold mainly to chain stores, roadside markets and wholesale businesses. The decision to expand and create the Family Membership Program was a natural fit, he says.

"It's a family operation," says Cullipher. "The things I personally enjoy most are being able to farm and share the knowledge about what real, fresh produce tastes and looks like. The hope that my Dad and I are passing down our attachment to the land to the next generation is rewarding."

The Culliphers are also a supplier for Dave and Dee's Homegrown Mushrooms of Sedley, which provides produce to restaurants and cooperatives from Richmond to Virginia Beach. While oyster mushrooms remain the foundation of the business he runs with his wife, Dee, and daughter, Amy, Dave Scherr says the decision to expand to other items has paid off.

"We started in 2003, selling our mushrooms to white tablecloth restaurants," says Dave. "The next year we expanded to become a broker of other produce as well. We deliver to restaurants that promote seasonal menus, plus co-ops and public and private schools. Right now we serve about 80 restaurants and all of our products are grown in Virginia."

"That's a big deal to me," he says. "We're pulling from about 15 growers, most of whom are right here in Hampton Roads. It has taken time to foster those relation-

CHRISTY OTTINGER, MAYA COUGH-SCHULZE AND RACHAEL TATMAN OF REALFOODS, WILLIAMSBURG



ships, but it's important to me to work with and promote local growers."

Scherr says the future of his business lies in people becoming more interested in where their food comes from, "especially with the food scares of late," he says.

"Our goal is to continue securing produce from within a 50-mile radius of our facility in Sedley. We're always working with potential growers for additional products to market. This year we're looking to have more of everything, from strawberries and blueberries to tomatoes."

The locally-grown theme is important to consumers, too. Laura Lindsey of Shacklefords is another customer of Off the Vine, which gets a weekly delivery from Dave and Dee's.

"I wanted to get fresh milk, cheese and produce and avoid all the chemicals and antibiotics," says Lindsey. "They are not a problem if you are buying directly from the farm. Factory farming is causing most of these problems."

A key ingredient to healthier eating through sustainable agriculture lies in education, according to Jo Ann Hofheimer of Virginia Beach, president of Buy Fresh Buy Local Hampton Roads (BFBLHR).

"We are a grassroots, not-for-profit organization interested in connecting people to the freshest local foods," says Hofheimer. "We're part of a national group coordinated by FoodRoutes Network in Pennsylvania. There are 76 chapters in the U.S. now and seven in Virginia."

"We meet monthly and our main emphasis is producing two food guides each year, in the spring and fall, which you can view online. Almost 35,000 copies of the fall 2009 guide have been distributed to area farm stands, restaurants, libraries, wellness centers, and community organizations. We expect to print 80,000 to 100,000 guides in April."

As a consumer education and advocacy group, Hofheimer said BFBLHR aims to be visible at community events and farmers markets in season and speaks to schools, garden clubs, and conservation and civic groups throughout southside Hampton Roads.

"Buy Fresh Buy Local is a proven program that got started about eight years ago," she says. "The first Virginia chapter started about five years ago in Charlottesville under the Piedmont Environmental Council,





ON THE RIGHT: TESS SCHAFFNER,
OFF THE VINE MARKET

which manages our statewide website. Our group started last spring, and our goal is to support the local economy, ensure the environmental health and sustainability of farms throughout Hampton Roads, and perpetuate the long tradition of producing delicious food that is part of our regional heritage

"Studies show that if every household spent just \$10 a week on local foods, it could generate \$384.2 million annually in southeast Virginia alone and \$1.65 billion statewide."

For Bev Sell, general manager of Five Points Community Farm Market in Norfolk, nutrition and sustainable agriculture go hand-in-hand with building strong neighborhoods. The Five Points Market is located on Church Street, not far from the Virginia Zoo, on the edge of the Villa Heights neighborhood.

"We started in a field in the Norview area in 2001, under a tent," says Sell. "This area has traditionally been home to blue-collar, hardworking folk, and we wanted to help provide a place where residents could find good, nutritional food while supporting the dwindling number of farmers from this region. Keep in mind, there are about 47,600 farmers in Virginia today. In 1960 we had more than 92,000 farmers. A good rule of thumb is, the farther away from our food source, the less nutritional value we receive."

Over the years the Five Points Market continued to evolve. At one time the non-profit market was located in a former laundromat on Norview Ave., and in 2006

a satellite location was established at MacArthur Center. Then, in the spring of 2008, the market moved to its current location, a 6,400-square-foot former warehouse. Its walls are lined with tables and displays of fresh meats, produce and seafood. There is even a café, where patrons can get lunch made with many of the market's offerings.

Sell is proud of the growth she has witnessed.

"Looking back at where we started, I can see a lot of progress," she says. "Unlike some farmers markets, where the farmers themselves set up stands and sell their goods, our market managers work with farms to collect, price and sell the produce. This allows the farmer to spend more time doing what they do best—growing fresh, delicious healthy food.

"In 2008 we had about 29,500 customers," says Sell. "Last year we had about 34,000 customers. We are now working with nearly 50 farmers from the Eastern Shore to North Carolina. We also work with the court system, getting help from people who need to perform community service."

While most of Sell's customers shop in the warehouse, Five Points Market also operates a CSA.

"We have a 12-week program in the summer and fall for \$20 per week," she says. "Our winter and spring program is \$15 per week for 12 weeks."

The future for the Five Points Market includes more outreach, like the community garden its supporters established at Norview United Methodist Church.

"We want to foster more community garden projects," says Sell, "and expand our family cooking classes and demonstrations. We want to show more movies and expand our library. The people behind this market are passionate about these issues and educating our community."

As for Sell herself, she's "on a mission."

"I'm on a mission to make farming sexy," she says. "I want to get young farmers into this business, or what we'll have left to eat is going to be hoo-hah! I want people to be able to really smell and taste their food. A tomato is supposed to be smelled, not squeezed. That's how you tell a fresh, ripe tomato."

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Off the Vine Market –
offthevinemarket.com

**RealFood Williamsburg
Community Cooperative** –
realfoodwilliamsburg.com

**Virginia Department of
Agriculture and Consumer
Services (VDACS)** –
virginiagrown.com

Cullipher Farm Market –
cullfarm.tripod.com

**Dave and Dee's
Homegrown Mushrooms** –
daveanddeesmushrooms.com

**Five Points Community
Farm Market** –
5ptsfarmmarket.org

**Buy Fresh Buy Local
Hampton Roads** –
buylocalhamptonroads.org

The passion for healthy food that drives Five Points Market is inspiring others to found cooperatives and establish CSAs in Hampton Roads and beyond. According to Milteer at VDACS, sustainable agriculture is no longer just a catch phrase. It's becoming the way people put food on the table.

"The buy fresh, buy local movement is certainly in vogue," she says. "Consumers want fresh produce, meats, cheeses, and any other food items that can be found nearby. Buying locally is environmentally friendly, it's getting the freshest possible product with a great taste and nutritional value, and it's keeping money close to home, thus helping the local economy. And it's supporting Virginia agriculture."

"Many grocery stores, as well as restaurants, are sourcing local products. If your favorite shopping spots aren't offering local products, let the management know you'd like to be able to buy fresh, buy local. It can make a difference." **SRM**