



(Amy Toensing for the Boston Globe)

Quechee diner sets a fresh, local table

The Boston Globe

By Kathleen Burge, Globe Staff | March 4, 2007

QUECHEE, Vt. -- On a busy Saturday afternoon at the Farmers Diner, plates of hamburgers sail through the kitchen's double doors, milk shakes froth on the rims of metal cups, French fries are stacked in a golden pile. Here there is no such thing as an anonymous slab of ground beef or a bottle of milk of unknown origin. Tod Murphy, the diner's founder, can trace the lineage of each potato he serves as if it were a poodle strutting at the Westminster Dog Show.

The hamburgers, Murphy says, come from the St. Johnsbury farm of Pete Roy, an old friend. The milk arrives from Strafford Organic Creamery, a few towns over. "Earl and Amy are the farmers there," he said. They once gave Murphy and his wife a few cows for their farm. And the potatoes are from farmer Bob Chappelle, who lives 10 minutes from Murphy's home.

Murphy created the Farmers Diner with the notion that most food should be grown, raised, or produced locally. In an economy where beef cattle routinely graze 2,000 miles from the plates upon which they will ultimately land, Murphy's way of doing business is somewhat radical. At his direction, the diner spends more than two-thirds of each dollar spent for food on products raised within a 70-mile radius.

Jed Dickinson, who owns local composting and recycling businesses, eats regularly at the Farmers Diner to please both his principles and his palate. As a local business owner, he wants to support others like him; as a composter, he knows some of the growers whose food Murphy serves.

And, Dickinson says, local food just tastes better. He contrasted a recent meal at the Farmers Diner -- a chicken sandwich, broccoli-cheddar soup, and a milk shake shared with his 85-year-old mother -- with another diner meal on a trip home from Massachusetts. At the other restaurant, he said, it was clear his plate was filled with food from a bag in the freezer.

"I'm really able to notice the difference between food that's prepared fresh each day and food that comes from a distant place and is frozen," he said.

Although other restaurants serve some local produce and meats, Murphy believes his diner is a rare, affordable version of places like Chez Panisse, Alice Waters's ground breaking restaurant in Berkeley, Calif., that built its reputation on local ingredients.

"My interests were much more democratic," Murphy said. He prides himself on the fact that the farmers he buys from can actually afford to eat regularly at his restaurant.

When Murphy was developing the Farmers Diner, he knew he didn't want the kind of restaurant common in Quechee and Woodstock, that relies heavily on wealthy tourists. Except for a few upscale dishes added recently -- steak with onions and blue cheese for \$17 and crispy farm-raised trout for \$14.95 -- the most expensive item on the diner's menu is the Smokehouse Club sandwich at \$8.75.

Murphy started the Farmers Diner in Barre in 2002, and moved to a larger space in Quechee last August. Now the restaurant's 120 seats stretch between a 1947 Worcester diner car and an attached high-ceilinged room that was once a barn built in the 1800s not far from Quechee Gorge.

The diner serves Pepsi, which annoys some customers, who would rather see Murphy boycott the beverage conglomerate. But he offers no apologies. "I don't

want to serve food only to people who already believe in what we're doing," he said.

This is a far cry from Applebee's. The menu quotes "The Mad Farmer Liberation Front," a poem by conservationist, farmer, writer, and poet Wendell Berry: "Love the quick profit, the annual raise / vacation with pay. Want more / of everything ready-made" it begins. Few restaurateurs would dare to slip a poem containing the word "carrion" under the noses of people about to order food.

The menu also includes an exhortation by Thomas Jefferson to recognize the virtues of agriculture. Everything that has been grown or produced locally -- most of the menu -- is listed in red. The organic sauerkraut comes from Wellspring Farm in Marshfield, the turkey is from Stonewood Farm in Orwell, and the blue cheese is from Jasper Hill Farm in Greensboro.

While well-intentioned, buying locally is not always easy, Murphy says. For example, when he asked farmers how much they charged for carrots, the answers came back by the pound, the box, the bunch, and the bunch without tops. It was impossible to figure out how the rates compared.

And not everything can be produced locally. In Vermont, gardens grow lush in summer, but turn into a wasteland come winter. Consider sugar, which is generally made from sugarcane grown in the tropics.

No one in Vermont makes cane sugar, although there is plenty of locally produced maple sugar made from sap. But that costs about 12 times as much as white sugar. And it tastes like maple, Murphy notes. Would people want to stir it into their coffee?

That coffee is another problem. Coffee beans, like sugarcane, are grown in warmer climates. Although Vermont companies roast and sell their own coffee, they rely on beans grown in distant lands. Ketchup, too, is troublesome. Although it is made locally, the tomatoes are not native to Vermont -- and it doesn't taste like Heinz.

The gourmet ketchups may offer a taste treat for more polished palates, but they also may not be what regular customers coming in for the French fries are expecting, Murphy said.

But sometimes, the economies of scale work in his favor. This year, giddy with the spaciousness of their larger Quechee kitchen, the restaurant staff made pickles from local cucumbers.

Murphy, who began his working life as a schoolteacher, moved to Vermont from New York after starting a coffee franchise. As he and his wife began to farm their

land in Washington, southeast of Barre and Montpelier, he became aware of how farmers struggle to make a living. He dreamed up the diner as a way to make their food available and affordable.

Murphy would like to open other Farmers Diners, supplied by a central kitchen. He's been talking to officials at the University of Vermont about putting a small version in a new student center in Burlington.

"Local good food shouldn't just be a rich person's item," he said. "It should be for everybody."

Contact Kathleen Burge at kburge@globe.com.