

## A Fridge Too Far

### The Farmers Diner Serves Comfort Food from a Lazy Distance

By KIRK KARDASHIAN

Photography by JUSTIN CASH



Consider this: each morsel in an average American meal travels 1,500 miles from farm to fork. Call it an accomplishment of the modern means of conveyance, a wonder of our proudly shrunken world or the folly of over-achievement. Tod Murphy, the founder of the Farmers Diner, calls it inefficient, unsustainable and counterproductive.

The Farmers Diner — which opened in the Quechee Gorge Village in Quechee, Vt., about a year ago — abides by the principle that local food is good food. That's why 75 cents of every dollar the diner spends on food is used to purchase produce, meat and dairy from farms within a 70-mile radius of the restaurant.

Murphy's place is not a pricey, gourmet organic eatery. "I always say it this way," Murphy says as the sounds of Johnny Cash, a steel guitar and clanging plates meld together in the background, "the farmers who supply us can afford to be regular customers." An integral part of the operation is Vermont Smoke & Cure, a small smokehouse in Barre, Vt., that the diner owned and has now spun off as a standalone company. It supplies bacon, ham and sausage to restaurants, local grocery stores, regional supermarket chains and gourmet shops in New York and Boston.

#### A NOURISHING NARRATIVE

"I think people want a story with

their food," says Lisa Johnson, the coordinator of Valley Food & Farm, one of the programs at Vital Communities, a White River Junction, Vt., based non-profit dedicated to community building. Valley Food & Farm's mission is to foster the relationships that make local agriculture a vital part of daily community life in the Upper Valley. What Johnson means is not just the story of the establishment that serves the food, but the story of where the food came from in the first place.

At a chain restaurant, that story is not so interesting, and sometimes it's unappetizing. At the Farmers Diner, the story feels as good as the food tastes, and

it starts with Tod Murphy. He grew up in suburban Connecticut, playing in the sand pits where Foxwoods Casino stands today. After bouncing around the country working for Starbucks and then for his own start-up coffee company, he realized that he was "at heart a New Englander and a farmer." So he and his wife bought a farm in Washington, Vt., a small town just south of Barre.

That was when the dilemma of today's small-scale farmer hit home.

"We were raising veal

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Tod Murphy, the founder of the Farmers Diner

calves, and we just couldn't sell them," says Murphy. At the time, the Vermont Fresh Network (a network of restaurants that serve local food) was just starting. "The chefs were interested in a specific cut, so we had a hard time selling the whole calf. The great solution to that problem was a diner, because it takes all the parts that nobody else really wants to buy."

Murphy set out in 1999 to find investors for his Farmers Diner. "We started by buying the smokehouse and learning the unique supply chain issues of small-scale farming. And then we spent another year getting the diner in Barre open, because investors just wanted to see that we could actually do it," he says.

The Barre location opened in 2002, and it fit right in with the gritty character of Vermont's granite city: truck drivers shared counter space with lawyers and farmers and, as Amy Huyffer of the Strafford Organic Creamery puts it, "There were plenty of muddy boot prints on the floor."

But, to the dismay of the Barre patrons, the diner closed in August 2005. The problem was, ironically, one of scale. "It was way too small — just 50 seats — and we didn't have enough volume to cover the overhead," Murphy says.

In search of a new location, Murphy considered Burlington, Vt., and Lebanon, N.H., but the Quechee site — replete with a 1946 Worcester dining car attached to an antique Woodstock barn and a seating capacity of 120 — was the perfect match. "The diner and the barn together made sense for the Farmers Diner," says Murphy. Add to that a 500 square foot prep kitchen, capacity for 40

outdoor seats and the foot traffic from the antique mall next door — and business is booming.

#### REVERSING THE TREND

Buying a farm, as Murphy did in the mid-1990s, with the intent to actually farm the land was to go against the trend of a



precipitous drop in the number of farms since the 1940s. Murphy speaks of this decline with a mournful gravity and a personal connection, since he can remember working on his grandparents' farm in Connecticut. "Farmers in Vermont, just like across the nation, are 1.5 percent of the population. More people give money to VPR than there are farmers in Vermont," he says. Compare that to the 1940s, when one out of every three people in the United States was a farmer.

One goal of the Farmers Diner is to shift the momentum in the other direction. "We want to be a catalyst that helps the farming industry grow," Murphy says. He is not alone in that quest: Valley Food & Farm has been connecting farmers, restaurants, suppliers and regular consumers in the Upper Valley for six years. Through their efforts they have raised the profile of local food.

Murphy recognized this when he made trips to the Upper Valley to sample his smokehouse products. "Anytime I was depressed, we'd come down and sample products, and we sensed a real appreciation in this community for what we are trying to do," he says. "You respond to



Breakfast is served all day at the Farmers Diner with eggs, burritos, pancakes and vegetarian fare.

that — you go where you're wanted."

#### LOCAL CORNUCOPIA

You also go where there's readily available local food. Within the 70-mile radius (as the crow flies) around the Upper Valley, there is no shortage of homegrown flavor. Eggs come from Sharon Miller's farm in Quechee; chocolate milk and ice cream from the Strafford Organic Creamery; potatoes from Chappelle's farm in Williamstown, Vt.; produce from Esquire Farm in Hanover, N.H., and Cedar Circle Farm in Thetford, Vt.; beef from PT Farm in St. Johnsbury, Vt.; cheese from Boggy Meadow Farm in Walpole, N.H.; and yogurt, beans, cornmeal and wheat from Butterworks Farm in Westfield, Vt. The list includes more than 40 farms and farmers — real people, not generic conglomerates.

Murphy describes the PT Farm, which is right on the edge of the 70-mile circle, as an operation that began "before Elvis became Elvis. I just pray to God it stays in business." The tenuousness of some of the local farms makes planning and budgeting at the diner a labor intensive endeavor. In fact, that's what Murphy cites as the diner's biggest challenge: "Money — to afford the overhead to track down local products."

Of course, the diner is forced to use a few nonlocal products in the winter — like lettuce, tomatoes and onions — but

### More Info

The Farmers Diner is open 7 days a week, from 6:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. between Sunday and Thursday, until 8:30 p.m. on Friday and Saturday. The phone is (802) 295-4600 and Web site is: [www.farmersdiner.com](http://www.farmersdiner.com)

Murphy is always looking for ways to shorten that list. Next winter, for example, he is considering replacing whole tomatoes with tomato chutney preserved during the summer, adding more local beans and making pickles from local cucumbers.

**WHAT'S NEXT?**

In the current iteration of the Farmers Diner — its scale, methodology and procedures — Murphy has found a replicable model. And up to a certain point, the bigger the diner the better, since a kitchen and prep area the size of Quechee's can serve twice as many people as the restaurant can hold today. With enough room, "we could go to 300 seats because in this business you really want to maximize the three big meal periods: Dinner on Friday and breakfast on Saturdays and Sundays," Murphy says.

In particular, the Farmers Diner has plans to open a restaurant in the new student center at the University of Vermont. Beyond that, Murphy says, "we'd like to do a couple more things in Vermont, and we have people interested in doing Farmers Diners in the Hudson River Valley and outside of Boston. We would look for local investors, create local companies and bring our management and expertise."

That's good news to Lisa Johnson and supporters of independent farmers. "I think the Farmers Diner will have a positive impact wherever it goes because, if nothing else, it shows that it can be done," Johnson says. "It's not some pie-in-the-sky thing — it's pie on your plate." **UVL**

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*Justin Cash has been capturing images from the rolling green hills of Vermont to the high peaks of the Rockies for more than 10 years. He now calls Woodstock, Vt., home. You can see more of Justin's work at [www.justincash.com](http://www.justincash.com)*



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