

## Grown locally, eaten locally

Chefs and diners favor freshness

**LISA HOPPENJANS, Staff Writer**

Eggs and meat fill the refrigerators lining the garage wall at Noah Ranells and Ben Bergmann's Fickle Creek Farm.

A sign in blue marker tells customers in English and Spanish how much to pay for the eggs, sold within sight of the hens that laid them.

Walk into Weaver Street Market in Carrboro, and you'll also find Fickle Creek's eggs. You can taste them, too, in dishes at Lantern, a restaurant in downtown Chapel Hill, and at the Nasher Museum Cafe at Duke University.

Food from small local farms is moving beyond the farmers market onto local grocery shelves and restaurant plates. Boosted by chefs seeking freshness and flavor and consumers who think buying locally makes economic and environmental sense, farmers are finding new markets close to home.

Ranells and Bergmann opened their farm in 1999. They've been asked several times about shipping their eggs across the state, but they have turned down those offers in favor of sticking to strictly local business.

"Money is important, but having satisfaction and pride in what you do is an incredible force for any business," Ranells said.

### Sales are growing

It's difficult to tell how far local foods have penetrated the market, because few numbers are kept that track local food sales.

Mike Lanier, who works in agricultural economic development in the Hillsborough cooperative extension office, estimates local food sales in Orange County to be about \$3.8 million.

That's less than 1 percent of total food sales in the county last year, according to sales tax data. It includes retail and wholesale sales from farms within the county to customers within the county, as well as the sales of farmers from nearby counties at farmers markets in Hillsborough, Chapel Hill and Carrboro.

Still, local farmers and buyers suggest that sales are growing.





Jacob Yow, right, and Pam Costenbader harvest rapini at Ayrshire Farm. The organic farm is owned by Bill Dow.

Staff Photos by Harry Lynch

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### PIEDMONT FARM TOUR

The Carolina Farm Stewardship Association offers a tour of 31 farms in Orange, Chatham and surrounding counties from 1 to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. The cost is \$25 per car in advance or \$30 on the weekend. For a list of locations offering advance sales and a map of the farms included on the tour, visit [www.carolinafarmstewards.org](http://www.carolinafarmstewards.org).

### From farm to table

Margaret Lundy tries to work local produce and eggs into her menus at Margaret's Cantina in Chapel Hill. In addition to items on her regular menu, such as the local cilantro used in her salsa, she designs weekend specials around local produce available that time of year. A recent menu included: \* Pozole verde soup using organic cilantro from Bill Dow's Ayrshire Farm. \* An apple-pecan salad with Dow's arugula, apples from the North Carolina mountains and pecans from the Sandhills region. \* Grilled tuna served over spinach from Bunce Brothers Farm in Stedman and rainbow chard from Eastern Carolina Organics, served with a mango salsa spiked with habanero peppers from Gardens of Paradise in Siler City. \* Pot roast braised with red wine and fresh rosemary from Lundy's own herb garden, served with sauteed rapini from Ayrshire Farm; Yukon Gold potatoes and rutabagas from Eastern Carolina Organics; and red and white sweet potatoes grown in Sampson County.

### More B City & State

Andrea Reusing opened Lantern on Chapel Hill's Franklin Street four years ago and has steadily beefed up the local offerings in her pan-Asian menus. In the summer, she said, three-quarters or more of her ingredients might be local.

She also has added a series of dinners, about once a month, that highlight the products of local farms. It's a way of showing support and educating customers, she said.

It's also a matter of taste. A lot of supermarket produce is selected for its ability to travel, not its flavor, Reusing said.

"Imagine a turnip that the species was selected so it could sit in a crate," she said. "It's already genetically selected for sitting, not eating."

Bill Dow, who has owned Ayrshire Farm in Chatham County for 25 years, began supplying a few local restaurants about 20 years ago. Now he deals with as many as 24 at peak times. At times, restaurant sales can account for up to three-quarters of the farm's revenue.

"More and more people are eating in restaurants," he said. "There's less and less people cooking at home."

### Pooling resources

To make it easier for restaurants and food stores to buy local produce, some farmers have banded together to sell their products. Eastern Carolina Organics began in January 2004 as a project of the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association and later spun off as its own business venture.

Sandi Kronick, a managing partner of the Pittsboro-based organization, said the idea was to pool resources to make the process easier for buyers and sellers.

Chefs needed the simplicity of making one phone call to place an order and the assurance that they'd have the cilantro for their salsa or the heirloom tomatoes for the special appetizer on that week's menu. Farmers needed to know they'd have a steady stream of buyers.

"We wanted to hold people to their mantras of supporting local farms, but it would be hard if you didn't have a coordinated way to allow them to do so," Kronick said. "The majority of chefs aren't going to make 10 different phone calls to 10 different suppliers to get 10 different vegetables."

Eastern Carolina Organics now draws products from about 30 farms, all but one in North Carolina. In the Triangle, customers receive a product list showing what's available twice a week, with deliveries twice a week as well.

Recent offerings included herbs, oyster mushrooms, Yukon Gold potatoes, white turnips and greens such as rainbow chard and baby kale. In summer, the offerings expand to include blackberries, Silver Queen sweet corn, pickling cucumbers, honeydew melons, bell peppers and more than a dozen varieties of tomato.

Kronick said the group wants eventually to provide a year-round supply of 10 staple items, such as spinach and broccoli, taking advantage of the the different growing climates across the state.

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The corporation takes a 20 percent cut of the sales to cover expenses. The rest -- about \$790,000 since the first sales in April 2004 -- goes to the farmers.

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