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NEW JERSEY DINING ON-THE-FARM MEALS

The Sweet Corn? Grown Right Over There

By TAMMY LA GORCE

THE Red Gold potatoes that studded the white corn chowder came from E. R. & Son Organic Farm in Colts Neck.

The pheasant was from [Griggstown Quail Farm](#) in Princeton.

And the organic sweet corn that was featured in all four courses — including the dessert of corn [ice cream](#), made by the [Bent Spoon](#) in Princeton — came from the 118-acre [Muth Family Farm](#) here. The farm's proprietors, Bob Muth and his wife, Leda, sat at an elegantly set outdoor table recently, enjoying every morsel of the dinner.

The feast laid out for the Muths and 36 visitors, who paid \$135 each to join them in late July, was prepared under an outdoor tent by [Chris Albrecht](#), executive chef at [Eno Terra](#) in Kingston. It was organized by [Zone 7](#) of Lawrenceville, a company that is working to help organic or sustainable farmers in New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania distribute their products.

"My goal has been to help keep the Garden State the Garden State," said Mikey Azzara, who founded Zone 7, named for New Jersey's location on the [Agriculture Department's Plant Hardiness Zone Map](#). "Why is it easier to get stuff from all over the world than it is to get stuff from a New Jersey farmer to a New Jersey restaurant? I saw this as an important nut to crack."

The dinner at Muth Family Farm in Gloucester County benefited the [New Jersey Farm to School Network](#), which was co-founded by Mr. Azzara, 30, of Lawrenceville. A series of such dinners, with part of the proceeds going to different organizations, takes place monthly from June to October at various farms represented by Zone 7; the next one is on Aug. 8 at Oak Grove Plantation in Pittstown.

Other groups hold similar on-the-farm events for those who are interested in eating locally (and are willing and able to pay a premium to do so). Among them is [Slow Food Northern New Jersey](#), a chapter of [Slow Food USA](#), which will hold its next dinner, along with Sustenance Events of Scotch Plains, at [Fosterfields Living Historical Farm](#) in Morristown on Aug. 22. [Outstanding in the Field](#), an organization based in Santa Cruz, Calif., that roams the country

with the goal of connecting people to the origins of their food, will have a dinner in New Jersey on Sept. 4 at [Mosefund Farm](#) in Branchville.

For Zone 7, which was established in 2008, the dinners are a way to celebrate a venture that, on the continuum from crawling to sprinting, is currently at the “satisfying brisk walk” phase, according to Mr. Azzara.

“The business is really a leap of faith,” said Mr. Azzara, who enlisted his brother, his girlfriend, a cousin and a few others in addition to Mr. Albrecht, who is a Zone 7 client, to put on the recent four-hour event at Muth Family Farm. It included wines from [CoolVines](#) of Princeton and a farm tour led by Mr. Muth, 54.

Essentially, Mr. Azzara said, Zone 7 is a direct link between farmers and the stores and restaurants that might otherwise have trouble doing business with them, because of the difficulty of finding out what is available when, where and for how long.

“I kept hearing that there was a missing link in the food system between small and medium-sized growers in New Jersey and Pennsylvania and the people who want what they have, whether it’s a chef or a grocery store,” Mr. Azzara said.

Before he founded Zone 7, Mr. Azzara was outreach director at the New Jersey office of the [Northeast Organic Farming Association](#), a nonprofit group that helps farmers develop sustainable organic agricultural systems and educates the public about them. He got to know a lot of farmers in the process.

“I decided what I really need to do is reach out to the 10 best farmers I know to see if they would like me to find out what they have and get it to the people that want it,” he said. “I got in touch with grocers and chefs and farmers, and pretty much within five minutes of every conversation they all said yes.”

Even though he founded Zone 7 in 2008, when the economy was in recession, “I haven’t really had to make one cold call the whole time,” he said. “It just snowballed.”

The company now works with nearly 30 organic or sustainable farms in New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania and around 60 restaurants and stores.

Zone 7 sold \$70,000 of produce its first year; in its second, sales topped \$250,000. He is currently the only full-time employee.

Mr. Azzara gives credit for the venture’s growth to farmer friends like Mr. Muth, who called the dinner at his farm “the highlight of my summer.”

“So many people think food comes from the supermarket — it was good to get people down

here and show them what we do,” he said.

One person who was impressed was Martha Wright, 54, a freelance copywriter from Cherry Hill, who especially enjoyed an appetizer of melon soup made with local honey from Bob’s Buzzy Bees in Yardville and sparkling wine.

Her reaction: “That is incredibly, outrageously good.”

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