



Fresh Attitude: Locally grown foods enliven area menus

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By **Anthony Coleman/The Times**



Martin Griff/The Times Mikey Azzara, founder of Zone 7, which

promotes locally grown products by buying from farmers and selling to area restaurants, moves a case of asparagus from a cooler at Cherry Grove Farm in Lawrence Township.

LAWRENCE -- It's a cool, cloudy day and condensation has formed on the windows of Mikey Azzara's Honda, where the air conditioning is at full blast to protect locally grown asparagus that fills the back of the car.

His company truck arrives and he and driver Jesse Dornstreich begin sorting through boxes and bags of local green onions, garlic scapes, pea sprouts, lettuces, herbs, mushrooms, radishes, strawberries, zucchini and herbs. Everything that goes into Azzara's car is bound for dinner that night at Rat's restaurant in Hamilton, while Dornstreich is putting together an order for Eno Terra in Kingston.

A short time later the restaurants will receive locally grown fresh fruit and vegetables that were picked that morning or the day before and will be on restaurant tables that night.

It's all in a day's work for Zone 7, Azzara's distribution company that brings local fruit, vegetables, eggs,

cheeses and grains to restaurants near you from farms not far away.

A year ago Azzara, already known in the food community as the manager of the seasonal Lawrenceville Farmers Market and as community outreach worker for the Northeast Organic Farming Association, crafted a new career.

While working with farmers and chefs at NOFA, he helped to create connections so more local restaurants could serve locally grown produce instead of relying on regional purveyors. New Jersey and Bucks County, Pa. farmers had the produce and the chefs wanted to buy it, but the challenge was moving it from farms to restaurants.

"I realized that distribution was the missing link," Azzara said. "There's not enough time in the day for the farmers to deliver their produce, and most didn't have refrigerated trucks."

His dream formed gradually over time; "My dad told me to do this two years before I started," he said. The dream moved into high gear when farmers Mark and Judy Dornstreich of Branch Creek Farm in Perkasio, Pa., gave him a push.

The couple had been selling organic produce to chefs for 25 years, but saw that while there was an increased interest in eating local foods, the growing demand was not being met.

"They wanted to share what they know and help move the food system along," said Azzara.

The clincher was when they said they would loan him their refrigerator truck and that their son Jesse was available to work as a driver.

The name was easy; Zone 7 stands for the USDA plant hardiness zone for New Jersey. Contacts came easily too; Azzara knew many chefs and farmers from his years with NOFA and the Lawrence market. He then set out to meet more.

Azzara launched his business in May 2008 with 10 farms with a focus on organic and sustainably grown ingredients. Local farms include Terhune Orchards in Lawrence, Gravity Hill Farm in Titusville, Oak Grove Plantation in Pittstown, Muth Family Farm in Williamstown and E.R. & Son Organic Farm in Monroe. His special love is organic foods, and he hopes to increase the market for them by expanding availability.

"I want to show farmers there is a market for their product."

Will Mooney, owner and executive chef of The Brothers Moon restaurant in Hopewell Borough, was among those who encouraged Azzara to become a distributor and is a regular customer for Zone 7.

"For me it's been a really great fit," said Mooney. "It's reducing the amount of time that I have to run around to farms," he said, and increased the variety of what he can buy locally.

"He's able to find other growers and a greater diversity of products," Mooney said.

Freshness and quality are key.

"Everything is fresh out of the ground," Mooney said, which means better-tasting food and more nutrition.

Flexibility also is a factor. "It works well for me because I'm a small restaurant and I have the capacity to change the menu" based on what's new, even when a crop only lasts a week, Mooney said.

Other restaurants that patronize Zone 7 include Elements, Nassau Street Seafood, Bent Spoon and Mediterra in Princeton Borough, Hamilton's Grill Room in Lambertville, Frog and the Peach in New Brunswick and Nomad Pizza in Hopewell Borough. He also sells to the Whole Earth Center in Princeton Borough.

The farmers also are happy with Zone 7. Matt Conner of Cherry Grove Organic Farm in Lawrence says it's an outlet for surplus produce after he has distributed vegetables to members of the farm's Community Supported Agriculture co-op.

"This year we planted a lot of spinach," he said, which did well thanks to cool spring weather. Azzara was able to find a ready market for the overflow.

"It's working for him, for me, the restaurants and the customers," said Conner.

Azzara begins his Zone 7 workweek with phone calls to farmers to find out what is available. He follows that with calls and e-mails to chefs, advising them of the week's produce. The chefs place their orders and Azzara calls the farmers again to place his order. The information goes into his laptop and he and Jesse Dornstreich begin their rounds of pickups and deliveries.

That meant on one recent night there was asparagus for Mooney's menu as well as red Romaine lettuce and cheese from another local farm. Whenever possible, Mooney lists the name of the local farm on the menu with the item.

Azzara grew up in Lawrence, leaving to attend Middlebury College in Vermont. He majored in psychology, but it was his minor in environmental studies that spurred him to spend the summer after his junior year working on a farm in Europe. "It really clicked for me in Italy," he said.

When he graduated a year later, he came back to Lawrence to work in the fields for Conner.

While he could have gone back to Italy or stayed in Vermont, he chose to come home to New Jersey, where he wanted to help preserve farmland and saw the need to make local food more accessible.

The work is hard, from lifting boxes to making the connections between farms and restaurants, but he doesn't mind. This year he will buy from 15 to 20 farms and serve chefs at 30 restaurants, all of whom appreciate his efforts. One customer looked at his first delivery and told him, "This is the real deal."

He works to meet his environmental goals as well.

"In the end, we use less carbon fuels to move the food, people get fresher food, more of New Jersey remains farmland, we keep money in the community and we build a stronger sense of community," he said.

The future will bring a new truck of his own, complete with refrigerator and freezer compartments. He will also be staging dinners on the farms featuring local produce and meats, and help promote a growing variety of produce as chefs make connections with farmers to grow specialty items. A new website (freshfromzone7.com) is on the verge of being launched.

In the meantime, he continues to make his rounds of phone calls, filling up his vehicles with the farmers' bounty each week, satisfying farmers, chefs and diners.

Contact Zone 7 at (609) 896-9190.

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