

# Sustainable food: North Country School works to keep its food supply local

By ANDY BATES, News Staff Writer

LAKE PLACID — “You are what you eat” is a common saying for many.

There’s even a television commercial that used to run regularly, where someone who ate a doughnut for breakfast suddenly found the frosty pastry around their waist, prohibiting them from getting through the doors of the subway car.

But the “you are what you eat” mantra has a new caveat — it’s not only what you eat, but how you eat, and it’s goes beyond chewing your food 32 times to ensure proper digestion.

As John Turenne, founder of Sustainable Food Systems, Inc., suggests, it’s knowing your food — where it came from and how it was planted, tended, harvested, packed and shipped.

And every meal, Turenne recently told the students, staff and faculty at North Country School, has a story to tell.

Turenne’s been on both sides of the issue. He’s worked at institutions where the bottom line was more important than what went on the plate. But he’s also established programs like the Yale Sustainable Food Project and worked with other institutions where the dollars and cents of food service weren’t the only factors driving what was being made in the kitchen.

“I started to realize the pressures of dollars and cents, but made menu decisions that impacted a lot more than the wallet,” he said, adding that the food he found himself buying came from across the country, even across the world.

Often, he said, it had to be shipped hundreds and thousands of miles and was produced with the aid of chemical fertilizers and pesticides and at the hands of ill-treated and underpaid workers.

That’s a story he said he no longer wanted his meals to tell, though he admitted it’s a story too often told.

At North Country School, students and faculty who sit down for community meals every day rarely flip the pages of that story.

They know where a lot of their food comes from because they grow it. What they don’t grow, they try to get from local providers.

For farm manager Tim Hughes-Muse, North Country’s farm has three purposes: education, recreation and production.

With about four acres under cultivation, half of which is planted with a cover crop like winter rye to fix nitrogen and replenish nutrients, and a short growing season — at 2,300 feet in elevation, they have slightly more than 60 frost-free growing days — they do a lot with very little.

They grow staple leafy greens like lettuce, spinach, kale and chard. They grow tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers and zucchini. They grow garlic, potatoes, onions, carrots, parsnips, rutabagas, kohlrabi, cauliflower and broccoli. They grow pumpkins, winter squash, cabbage, beets, peas, beans and strawberries, as well as maintain about 450 feet of flower bed.

Along with that, Hughes-Muse said, the school has about 100 laying hens, sends 36 hogs a year to Brasher Falls for slaughter and processing to supply the school with pork products and tends to cows, horses, sheep and other livestock.

Some of the crops are grown more for consumption, while others are grown to teach students about different varieties and growing techniques, he said.

And while it’s not a requirement that every student work on the farm, Hughes-Muse said he’d be surprised if when a student leaves the school, they haven’t spent some time with their hands in the soil.

“The farm is just a way of life for the school and the camp,” he said, “and it takes the entire school to make it work.”

Then it takes North Country’s kitchen staff of four to bring what’s pulled from the farm to the fork.

As Turenne suggested in his visit, one reason a lot of places shy away from a more sustainable approach to institutional cooking, aside from not having the money or resources to tap into a local supply, is they just don’t have the employees and equipment to make it work.

“When you start using whole, fresh foods, you need the equipment and the chefs with the proper skill sets to prepare it,” he said.

Victoria Barney heads North Country School’s kitchen and said, “The hardest thing for us is where we are in terms of getting the things we want to prepare, and also the amount of time that goes into preparing a meal.”

She said that aside from some of the storage crops the school produces, almost all of what they can grow on campus is gone by December, and since they can’t grow enough by themselves to accommodate all the mouths they have to feed, they try to get as much locally as they can.

A Sunday night dress up dinner, for example, consists of 35 pounds of roast beef, 50 pounds of potatoes, a hot vegetable, tossed salad and homemade applesauce for dessert.

Nearly all the bread and baked goods they prepare from scratch, as well.

They supplement what they grow by purchasing herbs, potatoes and other crops from Tucker’s Farm in Gabriels, apples from Rulf’s Orchard in Peru and wheat from Champlain Mills. They even get people in the community with gardens to donate some crops.

Still, she said, the school wants to be able to can and put more crops up for storage in order to keep them from purchasing produce that’s not in season in the North Country.

In order to do that, however, she said the school is in need of an upgraded root cellar and cooler.

As Turenne suggested, building a sustainable food system can be different for everybody. Whereas some people love strawberries and blueberries in their yogurt all year long, others choose to do without fruits and vegetables that can’t be produced where they live during the winter.

Barney, for example, said she’s stopped purchasing out-of-season fruit this year, and the students and faculty seem to have taken a shine to menus she’s been able to put together without tomatoes in winter.

“The only thing they haven’t been too crazy about were these black bean patties I made,” she said.

But even those, while not a huge hit, still have a great story behind them.

Contact Andy Bates at 523-4401 or [abates@lakeplacidnews.com](mailto:abates@lakeplacidnews.com).