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## **DE GUSTIBUS; A City Dinner for Greenmarket Farmers**

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THERE was an air of city slicker about the 50 farmers and members of their families done up in suits and ties, silk dresses and high heels who came to town on Sunday. For once, they had not awakened at 4 A.M. to load the truck with broccoli and apple cider and drive to the Greenmarkets. Winter is the time when most farmers, except for a hardy few with potatoes and baked goods to sell, take a break to examine seed catalogues.

The farmers assembled at the National Arts Club on Gramercy Park South to celebrate the 14th season of the urban farmers markets, to trade stories, express their concerns, eat dinner and, while they were at it, poke some fun at the powers that be.

"You didn't eat your tomato," said Henry Smith of Sycamore Farms in Middletown, N.Y., across the table to Barry Benepe, director of the Greenmarkets for the city's Council on the Environment.

Ellen Concklin, who, with her husband, Richard, owns the Orchards of Concklin in Pomona, N.Y., interjected, "Is that what that's supposed to be?"

The pale Florida tomato that adorned every plate was an embarrassment, like serving ballpark mustard in Dijon. But then, even boosterism could not enhance the appeal of the rutabaga from Hoeffner Farms in Montgomery, N.Y. Tough crowd.

"You've got yourself a raucous group," Jim Hightower, the guest of honor, who also left most of his rutabaga, told Mr. Benepe.

Mr. Hightower, who recently lost his bid for re-election as Texas Commissioner of Agriculture, is known in farming circles as the official who promoted farmers' markets and diversified agriculture and organic farming in his state.

The Greenmarket system received praise from the participants, although the meeting turned into something of a good-natured roast of Mr. Benepe. Mr. Hightower expressed amazement at Mr. Benepe's purple sports jacket, and the farmers chided him for his comment to the press last year that some of them made as much as \$10,000 a day. "The low end of the range, \$140, was left out of the quote," Mr. Benepe said.

But Bob van Nostrand, owner of Old Orchard Farms in Orient, L.I., who was among the first to participate in the program that operates in 18 citywide locations in season, put his appreciation very simply.

"We wouldn't be in farming today if it weren't for the Greenmarkets," he said.

Stanley Oszczepinski, of S.&S.O. produce in Pine Island, N.Y., also credited the program for the growth of his operation.

"We used to grow 40 acres of onions," he said. "Now, because of the Greenmarket, we have 150 acres of vegetables. If there's money to be made, you have to diversify and change."

Vince D'Attolico, another Pine Island farmer who grows 96 kinds of vegetables, including 36 varieties of lettuce, and has had a stand in the Greenmarket since 1982, said, "A lot of onion farmers are going under left and right because they're so hard-nosed and reluctant to diversify."

Mr. D'Attolico, a former electrical contractor in New York City who moved out 12 years ago after having trouble collecting too many accounts, said he went into farming for the cash. "We're making a living and paying our bills," he said.

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Leeks, garlic, cilantro, basil, exotic eggplants, sweet and hot peppers, finger potatoes, red lettuces and collard greens are some highly marketable crops that the New York State onion growers or the cabbage and potato farmers from Long Island have added in response to consumer demand.

In his remarks at the end of the dinner, Mr. Hightower cited an example of a Texas rancher with 7,000 acres in cattle and feed grains who came to Mr. Hightower's agency in desperation because he was unable to turn a profit.

"We discovered that Texans ate 100 million pounds of pinto beans a year and there were none being grown in the state," he said. "Now this farmer has expanded into 25,000 acres and the state of Texas has a new agricultural industry worth \$29 million."

He also spoke of his enthusiasm for organic farming, which he said could result in higher yields, lower costs and less water use after the first couple of years, but not all of the farmers at the dinner were convinced.

"You can't do as successfully with apples, not in this damp climate," said Jim Lindsay of Idyllwood Orchard and Farm in Clifton Park, N.Y.

"I had customers who said they would love to buy organic apples," added his wife, Jenne. "So I brought a bushel of them down to the market and sold a total of two and a half pounds."

Like a number of other farmers, she said they do minimal spraying because chemicals are so expensive. "Consumers can be very demanding without understanding what's going on."

The beef and pork the Lindsays sell has not been treated with antibiotics and hormones. "It's a real selling point these days and it doesn't affect the quality," Mrs. Lindsay said.

Hall Gibson, owner of **Ryder Farm** which has existed for more than 200 years in Brewster, N.Y., and said preserving the family farm also meant caring for the environment. He added, "In this economy I think I'd rather be in farming than anything else."

Robert Lewis, marketing director for the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets, said the Greenmarket program has helped revitalize open downtown spaces. For many of the farmers the Greenmarkets have also put them back in contact with the people.

"In the Greenmarket you know who your customers are because you see them every week, so you have to care about what you sell them or they won't come back," Mr. Smith said.

"For a big grower in Florida or California, whether or not someone likes what he grows doesn't matter because he doesn't come in contact with the people who eat his products."

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**GRAPHIC:** Photo: Greenmarket farmers listening to Barry Benepe, director of the Greenmarkets for the city's Council on the Environment, at a dinner to celebrate the 14th season of the urban markets. (Barton Silverman/The New York Times)