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In 90's Cuisine, the Farmer Is the Star

BYLINE: By TRISH HALL

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A BRIEF history of food heroes:

In the 1970's, it was the restaurateur, the man who owned the joint and could give you the best table at the best time.

In the 1980's, it was the chef, the man -- or woman -- who looked at cooking as an art, and dinner as a canvas.

In the 1990's, it's the farmer, a perfect walking symbol of something Americans now crave: connection to the earth, labor that produces something genuine and, not incidentally, great food, in season, picked at its peak of flavor.

In culinary circles, knowing the farmer has become more important than knowing how to make a beurre blanc.

Chefs who were once judged by technique, by their ability to deftly mix flour and butter and cream into sauces that would glorify and embellish, are now judged by their ability to enhance, not disguise. A great chef now provides the freshest and best ingredients -- berries off the bushes for only hours, mesclun ripped from the earth when the flavors of the greens combine in the most felicitous way.

Ever more conscious of the importance of ingredients, chefs meet with farmers early in the season to discuss what seeds to plant. During harvest, they make pilgrimages to visit the farmers who supply their restaurants. David Bouley, the New York chef, sometimes visits Blooming Hill Organic Farm, a purveyor 60 miles north of New York. It is run by Guy Jones and his sister, Cindy Jones, who once a week drives vegetables directly to Mr. Bouley's four-star restaurant, Bouley.

Less famous consumers get to know farmers at the local markets that are multiplying in many American cities. Although economically crucial, farmers' markets are also social networks with layers of complex interactions between the urban and the rural, the seekers and the sought. Customers at the markets linger at the stands, asking about food, but also about what time the farmers wake up, how long it takes them to get to the city and how their children are doing.

"This is a very loving relationship," said Barry Benepe, founder of the New York Greenmarket. "A lot of conversation is going on, not just selling." That contact is so important that most markets require the owner of the farm to sell at the stand in person.

Hilary Baum, a founder of Public Market Partners, a Bronx organization that provides technical assistance to farmers' markets, said this kind of personal interaction is "part of the product, of what's being sold at the market." Americans have always expressed a longing to return to the land, but they rarely do it. Every year, there are fewer and fewer farmers, struggling to hold on to a way of life that is now shared by only 4.6 million people in this country, according to the United States Department of Agriculture.

Although the new respect for the farmer may help those who sell directly to consumers and chefs, many other, decidedly unchic farmers are having a lot of trouble surviving. Indeed, farmers take on more symbolic value and become the object of greater nostalgia as they become scarcer. The same thing happened with cooking: chefs became celebrities and cooking became an art as fewer people cooked complicated meals on a daily basis.

People cut off from the earth tend to be intrigued by its most mundane manifestations. Last year, the Hudson River Club, a restaurant at the World Financial Center that features Hudson Valley foods, had a farmer bring in 50 corn plants, still rooted in dirt, and plant them in the restaurant. "I had people pick their own," said Waldy Malouf, the restaurant's chef. "They loved it. I guess they had never picked corn before." At another special event, fishermen brought huge, whole salmon, and diners crowded around so they could touch them.

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In Philadelphia, the White Dog Cafe has a Farmer's Sunday Supper in the fall, where farmers mingle with the restaurant's customers. Keith Stewart, who has a farm in Greenville, N.Y., sends a newsletter to his regular customers about life on the farm. "To talk to a real farmer is meaningful to them," he said.

Hall Gibson, resident manager of Ryder Farm in Brewster, N.Y., said at least a dozen customers visit the organic farm each year. Breezy Hill Orchard in Clinton Corners, N.Y., holds a harvest celebration each fall; so does Blooming Hill Farm, where hundreds of customers sit around a huge bonfire and roast potatoes.

"We don't want to be some abstract source of food," said Mr. Jones of Blooming Hill, whose 15-acre farm in Blooming Grove, N.Y., is known for its mesclun. "We wish more people would come to visit. We want people to think this is a viable occupation, for some kid to think, 'I want to be a farmer when I grow up.' "

The city dwellers want more than just good food or an outing in the country. They want the contact; they want the farmer. In Petoskey, Mich., Bill McMaster's farm stand draws a constant stream of visitors. "When you buy this food from Bill, you get the sense that life is still good, that life makes sense," said Justin Rashid, president of American Spoon Foods, a maker of specialty foods that is situated in the same town. "What you're buying into is this sense of well-being."

The small specialty farmers who have gained star status generally began tailoring their crops to please chefs, who were rebelling against the tasteless tomatoes and mass-produced lettuces they were forced to buy. "Fifteen years ago, the farmers were really out of the loop," said Larry Forgione, chef of An American Place in New York and a pioneer in the effort to use locally grown food.

Now, chefs routinely nurture relationships with farmers. "The more you can be involved with the people producing the food, the better it is," said Mr. Malouf. When he wanted venison with more fat around the meat, for instance, he met with the producer, Eberhard Deer Farm in Millbrook, N.Y., to discuss changes in the feed.

Finding good ingredients has become a major part of the job for chefs. No longer can they call a few big dealers and order everything; to track down the best, they have to deal with many vendors. Joseph Pace, the chef at Petrossian, spends Wednesday and Friday at the **Union Square** Greenmarket in New York. "I scout out things I want, and then a van picks them up," he said. Other days, he calls farmers to find out when certain items are expected to ripen. "Like anything else, it's part of my day," he added. "It's got to be a quarter of my time."

As the natural qualities in food become more important, chefs prefer to keep their favorite farmers to themselves. "Every chef doesn't want to think their special ingredients are being bought by someone else," said Lora Zarubin, chef and owner of Lora, a restaurant on 13th Street in Manhattan. She admits to being obsessed with a special variety of arugula and hopes to find a local farmer who will grow it for her.

The fetish for freshness, too, is transforming the way cooking and shopping are approached. In her new cookbook coming out this fall, Alice Waters, the owner of the Chez Panisse restaurant in Berkeley, Calif., emphasizes the importance of going to the market *before* deciding what to make, not after. Peter's, a restaurant in Indianapolis, sometimes has striped bass that has been raised in purified water and delivered live to the restaurant in a portable tank. Freshness carries such status now that some farmers, with understandable bitterness, say some chefs brag that they get all their food at farmers' markets -- even when they don't.

Could farms replace museums as the place to party? Peggy Hirschberg, president of Parties to Perfection, a party-planning concern in Mamaroneck, N.Y., is trying to persuade one of her clients to hold a party on a farm. "Most of my clients have been everywhere and seen everything," she said. Everywhere and everything, that is, except a farm.

"We're like folk heroes," said Elizabeth Ryan Zimmerman, who with her husband, Peter Zimmerman, owns Breezy Hill Orchard. The admiration helps compensate for the stress, she said.

Not that many urbanites know about that part, or want to. "Remember 'The Waltons'? How they're all eating together? That's what they think farm life is like," said Vincent D'Attolico, who owns an organic farm with his wife, Joan, in Pine Island, N.Y.

Daisy Miller, an art student from Boston, is working on a farm this summer and has discovered what farm life is really like: rise at 6 A.M., and work until 7 P.M., dinner, then bed. "This teaches you about work."

New Yorkers who want a briefer look can sign up for farm trips with Farmhands-Cityhands, a nonprofit organization that takes people to farms for a day or even a week. The trips are often transformative. "They fall in love with them-

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selves, with each other and with the farmer," said Wendy Dubin, founder of the organization, which is administered by Food Work, in Manhattan.

Most alluring are the small organic farms, where food is being carefully planted and harvested, absorbing the touch of human hands rather than a blast of chemicals. "Everything these people are doing is politically correct, and being politically correct is sexy," said Karen Schloss Saad, whose public relations work involves many food clients and who is on the board of Farmhands-Cityhands.

Those with a knack for turning sentiment into money are probably already at work on the inevitable: with parties on farms in the not-too-distant future, will we not need farm fashions, farm travel guides, farm furniture -- and farm perfume?

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GRAPHIC: Photos: Farmers like Guy Jones are the food heroes of the 90's. (pg. C1); Waldy Malouf, chef at Hudson River Club, shops at the **Union Square** Greenmarket in Manhattan; Vincent D'Attolico quit his job as an electrical contractor to start a farm in Pine Island, N.Y.; Michele Lerner, a painter, feels that the farmers' market is an oasis in the city. (Photographs by Alan Zale for The New York Times) (pg. C6)

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