

# Marketing Marlborough

## Rural agriculture proves a musk for city dwellers

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From left: Farm owner Rick Lawrence, Joe Curran, owner of the Brickhouse of Marlboro restaurant, and chef Robert Bufano.

The town of Marlborough may not have the name recognition as other municipalities in the mid-Hudson Valley, but a marketing collective of farms and businesses is trying to change that.

Meet Me in Marlborough, a nonprofit organization that promotes local agriculture through education and tourism, currently has 15 farm members and 30 supporting members, most of which are businesses. Founded four years ago, the group hosts several annual events, has a Web site, had advertised in New Jersey and New York City newspapers and has distributed a brochure with a map and self-driving tour.

"I was concerned about the loss of farmland," said founding member and executive director Sheila Mannese, a village of Marlboro resident. "I talked to farmers and got to know them more. I went to California and saw a similar collaboration and suggested creating an umbrella group to absorb some of the costs of advertising. At first it was just the farmers, but we opened it to businesses because basically they complement what we have."

Located in the southeastern corner of Ulster County, Marlborough (the township still adheres to the old spelling of the name) is unfortunately associated in the minds of many with the unattractive, helter-skelter development along 9W. But get off the highway the town's northern boundary is just south of Poughkeepsie's Mid-Hudson Bridge and there's another world of country roads, centuries-old farms and sleepy hamlets.

As elsewhere in the valley, farmers here have had difficulty surviving. The sale of farmland for development is a constant threat. Meet Me in Marlborough is a way for farmers to remain viable, by collectively marketing the area as an attractive destination for day-tripping urban and suburban tourists who've never seen a strawberry plant.



"The synergistic effect of Meet Me in Marlborough is beginning to take off," said Steve Clarke. He and his wife, Judy, own Prospect Hill Orchards, whose dwarf apple, peach and cherry trees are cultivated exclusively for the pick-your-own market. "When people from the city who come to pick their own ask what else they can do, we can send them to a winery or restaurant." Clarke said he viewed other pick-your-own farms not as competitors, but as partners. "If I run out of something, I'll send them there. We're getting more customers and enabling them to have a better experience."

Agri-tourism has already proved to be the salvation of several local farmers. Rick Lawrence of Lawrence Farms Orchards, which offers stunning panoramic views from its hilltop setting, said he's "trying to control the crowds and steer people to the midweek." With the help of his father, wife and two sons, Lawrence has shifted completely out of commercial farming and made his farm into a destination by adding many more pick-your-own vegetables and fruits. He has constructed out of wood boards cut at his own sawmill a miniature village, complete with church, jail and schoolhouse for kids. The farm has a picnic area, an indoor maze of hay bales, a pond with turkeys, ducks and chickens and rides in a carriage or sleigh (depending on the season) pulled by Belgian draft horses. Lawrence does a booming business in birthday packages and attracts about 80 school groups a year, coming from as far away as Brooklyn and Long Island.

"We educate a lot of people about how things grow," he said, noting that dealing with visitors requires a different set of skills than simply growing and harvesting crops. "We put in a lot of hours. I've only got eight weekends to make enough money for the whole year, but if I was in the commercial end I would have been out of business years ago." Meet Me in Marlborough's mission to promote agriculture "is good for everyone," he added.

The group has an annual budget of about \$10,000, which is supplied in part by annual dues. Farmers pay \$400 less if they have belonged for three years and other members, who don't receive the same degree of promotion, pay \$200. It has also gotten a little state money through the efforts of state Sen. William Larkin and Assemblyman Tom Kirwin and is pursuing state grants, said Mannese.

The group's events include Meet the Farmer, held at the Milton elementary school in April. At this year's event, about 30 farmers and organizations, including the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Ulster County and the New York Farm Bureau, set up displays to explain various aspects of farming, from beekeeping to making wine to the importance of pruning. A similar event showcasing local produce along with crafts booths, called the Hudson Valley Bounty Festival, will be held in a Milton park in October.

Over the fall the group hosts a "harvest celebration" in which local restaurants are paired with farmers to concoct a special menu. The event is publicized through ads in regional publications and also through flyers

handed out at farmers' markets in the city, which many of the farms participate in.

Meet Me in Marlborough also participates in the Hudson River Valley National Heritage's Fall Ramble, a promotion of events and destinations over several weekends in September, with a self-driving tour highlighting the farms, wineries and restaurants and other member businesses. The tour is listed on the Web site of the heritage group, which is a state organization. A brochure has been printed containing a map and listings, and signs with the group's signature logo have been posted on the route.



On Nov. 3, the group will hold its first fundraising gala, which will feature artworks of the local landscape by 30 artists. Meet Me in Marlborough will get a commission on the sale of each painting. The event is also designed to underscore the connection the artists have with the farmers and will include photos of the painters on site.

Meet Me in Marlborough also has invited travel writers to the area for press tours, picking up the bill for meals and accommodations. So far, it has hosted two writers. Last year, the group held a press conference at the Explorers' Club in New York City and distributed press kits to members of the travel media.

Group president B.J. Mikkelsen said the effort of sustaining the volunteer organization "is not a dance on roses. There's hours of labor and meetings and putting up posters," he said. "We're trying to bring in more people in the organization willing to put in the time."

Mikkelsen and his wife, Maria Conte, own Willow Tree Flower Farm, a perennial flower business that was started on land the New York City couple bought in 2000.

"We have about seven to eight months total we can attract thousands of people from New York City," said Mikkelsen, describing the group as a kind of chamber of commerce. It also draws from residents in the surrounding areas. Willow Tree's customer base, for example, is primarily across the river in Hyde Park and Cold Spring.

Another member, Sarah Higgins, owns Raspberry Fields Farm with her husband, Tim. The couple distributes their raspberry granola, made with fruit harvested from their canes and organic rolled oats and flaxseed, at local groceries, including Adam's Fairacre Farms. In a recent coup, they signed on with Whole



Foods and are beginning to sell the granola through the chain's 15 Northeastern stores.

Higgins said the selling point of Meet Me in Marlborough has solid appeal. "People trip over themselves to come up here to buy local and visit the farms," she said. "They experience a wonderful connection to their food."



The farmers' partnership extends beyond publicity. Higgins sells neighboring farms' products in the store on her property, and in turn another member farm sells her granola at a farmers' market in Sullivan County. The collective presence of the group at regional events, such as the Taste of New Paltz, also is creating a groundswell of interest. "We've seen a huge increase of visitors in the last two years," she said. "Collectively, we offer a lot in a small area."