

# Market Strives to Connect Farmers With Consumers

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Healthy Living Market is an independent grocer with a mission to work with local farmers and producers. The business, based in Burlington, Vt., is nearly 30 years old, and just recently, a second location was added in Wilton, N.Y., just north of Saratoga Springs.

Both stores are 35,000 square feet and stock a wide range of natural and organic produce, meats, dairy, eggs and other staples.

"Healthy Living Loves Local" is their summer advertising campaign.

While large food companies employ representatives or use brokers to place their products in supermarkets, Healthy Living Market sends staff out into fields and to farmers markets.

"When we interview people, we ask: 'Who do you support? Do you have a CSA? What farmer relationships do you bring to the store?'" said Lyndsay Meilleur, general manager of the new store in Wilton. "This is part of our culture. A lot of people who work here were raised on farms. A lot are gardeners, even if it's just an apartment container garden. There's a lot of respect for people who have their hands in the dirt."

One of the farms she solicited was Denison Farm in Schaghticoke, N.Y. This vegetable farm includes a 500-member CSA and the owners sell at the two largest farmers markets in the area, in Saratoga and Troy. While the Wilton store recently opened and the farm and market don't have much of a track record, farmer Brian Denison said that Healthy Living Market has been over-the-top supportive.

Denison Farm is one of many farms featured as part of the market's advertising campaign.

"We do give that recognition," said Karen Villevik, produce buyer for the Wilton store. "Farmers might walk in and see themselves on a poster on the wall. It's important for them to see themselves and important for shoppers to connect to the farmers."

This connection has long been a part of the supermarket's mission.

Katy Lesser founded the first store nearly 30 years ago in Burlington. The store was just 1,200 square feet in size and Lesser stocked the small refrigerator case with produce from the farmers market. Her interest in local food comes from the fact that she wants to keep the area she lives in "green."

As her supermarket has expanded, Lesser has stuck with a foundation that places buyers for each department in support of local producers.

"There's no minimum as far as an order goes," Villevik said. "As far as how many farmers we choose to deal with, there are differences every year."

This year has been especially troublesome for farmers dealing with rain.

"Farmers are in a bit of trouble from prolonged rain," she said. "We truly welcome anybody reaching out to us."

Such is the case for Slack Hollow Farms in Argyle, N.Y. Seth Jacobs and Martha Johnson have four high tunnels, each a half-acre in size. Crops that haven't been planted in the greenhouse haven't done well, as this area has been really wet. As was the case with Denison Farm, buyers from the Wilton store ap-

proached Slack Hollow about buying products for the store.

This is not the first wholesale relationship for either Denison or Slack Hollow Farm, and neither is currently seeking to expand this portion of their business. Both farms have experience selling to the Honest Weight Food Cooperative in Albany, N.Y. This grocery store, founded in 1976, has also long supported local farmers.

Gayle Anderson began buying produce for Honest Weight 25 years ago, cultivating relationships with farmers as she shopped at the regional market in Menands, N.Y. The cooperative opened a new, larger location in June.

"We are open to new people but it's got to be something a little different because we wouldn't want to suddenly stop buying from anyone," Anderson said. "We're real big on loyalty to ones that have done well by us."

Honest Weight doesn't use many contracts with growers, but instead relies on a track record of production, so farmers can predict what to grow. The new store has helped increase sales. But Anderson said it's up in the air whether the growers will have enough to supply the store for the rest of the season.

What the weather holds is another big if. June's rains were unfortunate echoes of the flooding from Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee.

Unlike other supermarkets, Healthy Living Market and Honest Weight do not require farmers undergo third-party auditing or certification, which outline a farm's food safety measures, but can be expensive to implement.

Another area where Healthy Liv-



Photo by Amy Halloran

Christina Davis makes salad at the Healthy Living Market in Wilton, N.Y.

ing Market differs from supermarkets is that there is no minimum threshold of product a grower must produce before the market starts buying from them. While other grocery store chains may set parameters on how many cases of, say, asparagus a farm can deliver before they will entertain buying from them, there are no set boundaries at either store in this small chain.

This freedom allows the markets to help growers become wholesalers.

"We can help farmers get a grasp of how to wholesale," Villevik said. "Because they haven't had wholesale opportunities, they can develop that professionalism."

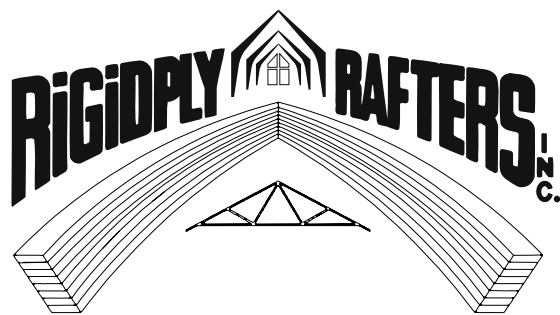
People who know how to direct-market their vegetables might not know how to prepare things for a larger supermarket.

But Healthy Living Market is not just buying fresh vegetables.

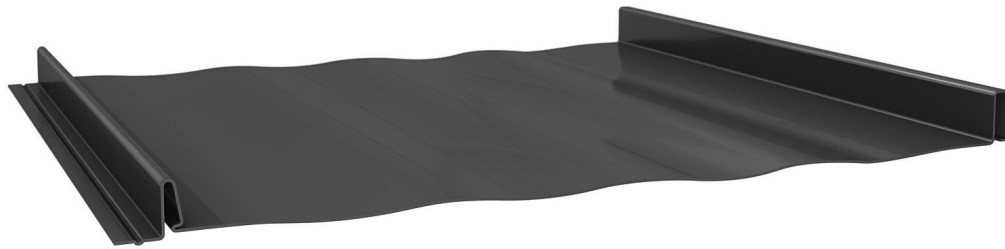
"They're a company that is truly committed to using local products," said Mark Sacco of Buckley Farms, a grass-fed meat, poultry and egg producer from Valley Falls, N.Y. "They don't do it just to attract publicity or as a marketing tool. You'll see restaurants that say they're local, but they have a couple of things."

Sacco acts as distributor for much of his goods, and his refrigerated van can be found in many areas, all the way down to New York City. He's happy to be stocked in a supermarket, and is impressed with the way Healthy Living Market handles its business.

"Healthy Living deals with small suppliers which I think is the bottom line with them," he said. "They're willing to go the extra mile."



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*Thank you to those who participated during the March contests. Each participant was rewarded their \$5 Subway gift card for their entry! Thank you!*



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