



meet the FARMERS

by Judi Burton

As you roll your squeaky shopping cart around the fluorescent-lit produce section debating on what to eat, you feel, squeeze, smell and even knock with your knuckles to make the best possible selections. You care about the quality of the products you buy and feel quite savvy regarding your educated choices. After all, your mother taught you these tricks, and her mother before her, and so on down your ancestral tree.

What your great grandmother ate was quality food because she bought from her local farmer. She knew his name, maybe baked his family a pie now and then or watched their children play together. She trusted him to produce the best possible ingredients for her family.

Today, food is produced in highly technological ways that would appall your great grandmother. Explain to her that the beautiful red tomato you just bought came from Mexico, and was picked green, dipped in calcium chloride, which helps to keep its firmness, then irradiated to make it turn red in three minutes. Tell her they have to do these things because otherwise we could get salmonella or E. coli. What do you think she would say to that? I have a guess she would ask why these foods have to travel so far, and why

they carry these foodborne illnesses. "In my day, we took pride in our food!" she might say. You were always taught to listen to your elders, and darlin', this ain't no exception.

Luckily, we live in an agricultural state where we have lots of local farmers to buy from. We can shake their hands and visit their fields. We can take our kids out to the corn mazes and pumpkin patches, and even buy a share in their seasonal crop. Yet, somehow the ease of just buying all your food in one place seems to win out over supporting your neighbors and strengthening your local economy.

I am going to introduce you to some of the area's farmers so that you get acquainted with them and better understand the lengths to which they go to bring you the freshest, safest food with all of their nutrients still intact.

Millgrove Farm, Georgetown, SC

It was a cool, dewy morning when I drove up to Millgrove Farm in Georgetown. A large caterpillar, built from hay, smiled at me as I approached Mr. Ben Williams, who was in the farm stand sweeping up. He smiled brightly as I walked in. A misty haze hung across the pumpkins, tomatoes, eggplants, red okra and beans, which were displayed artfully on the tables and shelves. He told me he works with

several other local organic growers and sells his food along with theirs at this farm stand and one in town. "We're not organic yet; the land has to stay idle for three to four years from commercial crops to be able to get the Organic Certification from Clemson University. We are all natural, though; we don't use any herbicides or pesticides. Most of our food is heirloom, and we do not use Genetically Modified Organisms, GMOs." Impressed, I scanned the building for anything that might counter his claim, but to my delight, I noticed he had set out cups of apple cider vinegar in a natural way to attract the fruit flies away from the produce. It was a good sign that his statements and his intentions were true. I asked what type of foods we could expect for November, and he replied that Easter egg radishes, broccoli rabe, collards, and black and navy beans were a few. He pointed to a campfire behind the shed, and said: "At night, Captain Sandy Vermont comes out and tells spooky stories. He's been such a hit, we've decided to keep him on after Halloween and through November. We have some birthday parties already scheduled." He spoke of a coffee club where people don't just stop by to get food, but make it a ritual to sit around the fire in rocking chairs and discuss life. We hopped in the truck and rode across his field as I took pictures and listened to his story. He worked

at a paint store in Myrtle Beach for 15 years, then left to take care of a plantation for eight years, but has been part-time farming for more than 30. After, I could see he was itching to get to work, so I bid him farewell and left with a good sense that I will be buying from him in the future and most likely will become a regular member of the Millgrove Coffee Club.

Thompson Farm, Conway, SC

I drove to the Thompson Farm in Conway, just off Route 701, to meet owner Scott Thompson. Flocks of children from the Pee Dee Elementary School created a lively soundtrack to our meeting as they learned about the farm. Antique John Deere tractors, free-roaming chickens and a general store filled with delicious-looking canned and jarred goods made for a rustic backdrop. Scott pulled up with a group of adults on a hayride tractor and shook my hand, explaining he had just shown six area chefs where they would be holding a farm-to-table event in his cornfield. The event is a fundraiser for Coastal Uncorked Food and Wine Festival. It is held annually on Oct. 17 in the corn maze. Heidi Vukov, the mastermind of this event, said, "Our goal is to create awareness for the outstanding locally grown produce and locally fished seafood that is so easily accessible in our area." Scott told me of his passion for educating young people about our farming heritage; he held a Boy Scouts of America camping trip on his farm this October. Scott also had a great idea for people who want to guarantee the freshness of their produce. "I want to lease out plots of land to people for the amount of the taxes I pay for it, so that they can farm it themselves. I'll even give them water to do it." It got me thinking of all the people who are retired and live in condos where they can't even plant a rosebush in their front yard for fear the homeowners' association will confiscate it. What a great way to give those people a place where they can plant whatever they want and benefit from it. We sat outside on big white rocking chairs for a long time, conversing on the state of farms today. Before I left,



he gave me a bumper sticker that said, "No Farms, No Food." Later, I looked it up online and was astounded at what American Farmland Trust had to say. "Ninety-one percent of America's fruit and 78 percent of our vegetables are grown near metro regions, where they are in the path of development. And every hour, we lose 125 acres of farm and rangeland. That's why supporting local food and farms is more important

than ever!"

Indigo Farms, Calabash, NC

The next day, I hiked up to Calabash to meet with owner Sam Bellamy of Indigo Farms. Again, children were everywhere, laughing and learning, petting goats and enjoying the beautiful day. Sam's daughter drove the hayride, while Sam and I sat in the back listening to her lessons on farming. We passed by a thriving strawberry field, and I immediately became curious. "How did you get away with that?" I asked. Traditionally, strawberry is not grown in October to be harvested for Thanksgiving and Christmas. "They're conditioned plants. It's all a part of learning what God put in creation. They're not genetically engineered or anything like that. They're day-neutral plants," Sam responded "it's that they've been conditioned since they were sprouts to be exposed to cooler temperatures and that changes their biological clock. This helps them fruit faster with shorter days". I was impressed with his agricultural savvy, and was excited about strawberries

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for Thanksgiving. "It's about learning all of the mysteries in the plant." We passed by sugarcane, indigo, blueberries bushes, grape arbors, and pumpkin patches. Sam's organic pumpkins were one of the only pumpkin crops in the area to make it through the five-week drought we endured in September. That same month he held the Heritage Day Celebration, during which local historians came to the farms and spoke about things like blacksmithing and basket weaving. "This here is Indigo Run, which is the shortest path from the river to the beach. It's obvious the Indians used this trail as a way to get back and forth. We have to remember these historic things." After our ride, I bought an organic pumpkin from the store and made my way home.

J&W Produce, Aynor, SC

I spoke to several other people on the

phone, such as Josh Johnson, farmer and owner of J&W Produce, and Jannie Dickson from Dickson Organics. They both offer ways to buy into a share of the farms. They pick the produce and deliver it either to your front door, which is what J&W does, or to your local market for you to pick up every week. They both promise less than 48 hours from the field to delivery. "I pick whatever is in season and put it in your bushel," said Josh. "A lot of people come to me and say, 'I would have never bought this vegetable, but now that you've made me try it, I really like it.'"


Dickson Organics, Timmonsville, SC
Jannie and Rockie Dickson started their organic farm as a way to grow good food for themselves, but as time went on, they saw an opportunity to expand and offer it to other people in the



community. They believe in "heritage farming," which uses traditional growing techniques. They rely on rain and sunshine to produce the best-tasting crops they can. You can find their products at the Ovis Hill's market in downtown Myrtle Beach at 8th Ave N, or in Florence at the parking lot for Naturally Outdoors on Highway 76.

So, now you've met them. These are only a few of the local farmers who try daily to grow superb food just for you. They till the fields themselves and sell the fresh-picked produce themselves. With permission, you have access to their land and can own a share if you would like. You may even be invited to bring your family and friends to the farms to sit around the campfire for spooky tales or just sip coffee. They're your neighbors and all-around good people to know. Buy from them, learn from them, and appreciate the heritage they follow. Your great grandmother would be proud.

For more info, contact the farms directly at: Millgrove Farms at 843-546-5075, Thompson Farms at 843-236-1400, Indigo Farms at 843-399-6902, J & W Produce at 843-340-3392 and Dickson Organics, 843-662-0034.



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