



# THE FACTS ABOUT

# FARM

# FRESH FOODS

with Greg Georgaklis, founder of Farmers to You

Greg Georgaklis has been involved in agriculture for over 30 years, as a farmer, business owner and advisor. He served on the Massachusetts Board of Agriculture, and after moving to Vermont in 2007, was hired by several not-for-profit and Vermont state agencies to work directly with and advise organic producers and conventional farmers in need of a new road map. Greg has an MBA as well as several horticulture certifications. He is regarded as an expert in many areas of farm sustainability.

# FARMERS MARKET OR SUPERMARKET? ORGANIC OR CONVENTIONAL? FARM-RAISED OR WILD-CAUGHT?

There is so much information out there – some confusing, some conflicting – about the healthiest and most cost-effective ways to feed our families on a daily basis. One of the most important factors to focus on is where your food is coming from.

This month we spoke with **Greg Georgaklis** of **Farmers to You**, a partnership of over 40 farms providing naturally-raised local foods to families year-round, that grew out of Greg's 35-year career in horticulture and agriculture. "I realized something was missing," he says, "and it was a connection between farmers and families. Farmers to You is our effort to design and invent the model that makes that possible." **Here, Greg deciphers some of the mysteries and myths so you can choose healthy foods with confidence.**



# FRUITS AND VEGETABLES: ORGANIC VS. CONVENTIONAL VS. FRESH

Organic unfortunately doesn't mean as much as it used to, and yet now more people know about it than ever before. The advantage of buying local organic vegetables is that you know the farmer who is growing the vegetables has attended to the health of the soil. And that's important because flavor and nutrition come from the soil.

I used to be a conventional farmer and I know industrial farming methods grow a lot of food for a lot of people – but they rely on chemicals and fertilizers to boost the growth of the plant, which compromises soil health. The soil acts as a carrier for the nutrients the plant should take up, so you want as little interference from the soil as possible. The industrial organic produce we have now basically replaces conventional chemicals with organically-approved chemicals, but then uses the same conventional processes to grow the plant, pounding the fertilizer and chemicals – organic or synthetic – into it in order to grow vegetables fast and in large quantities.

A good organic farmer knows that Mother Nature's a heck of a lot better at managing all of these nutrients and minerals and the biological activity that helps break down this food for the plant; so that farmer is going to attend to a healthy biology in the soil that is not only going to feed the plant well, but break down some of the trace minerals and other elements in the soil that give flavor to the food. The key in buying organic is to buy from farmers you know – with smaller, local farms – as much as possible, because those farmers must, by the nature of the scale of their business, attend to the health of their soil.

We know that truly organic methods grow more nutritious produce. But there's also a huge improvement in taste, because flavor is actually a marker for nutrition and health. All of the hidden nutrients in the flavors that we taste make our bodies say, *mmm, I want more of this – this is really satisfying*. And we need to learn to trust those things again because that's the only real measure that's out there, and it's much more sensitive than anything else. I like to use carrots as an example. The carrots we get from the supermarket are grown conventionally in light, sandy soil. They're fed very

hard and they grow beautifully, so they look gorgeous – and they have no flavor. Because there's no biological activity going on in that soil. There's nothing helping to break down all of those trace minerals and trace elements in the soil to give you that flavor and sweetness, and the plant is not healthy enough to really build that sweetness. The sign of health in fruit and vegetables is sugar content relative to the plant. But it's not all about the sugar. A carrot that is sweet is a happy carrot; it was able to take in all of the nutrients from the air and the soil because it had the right balance of food and minerals, from a good organic farmer who managed the soil and let the soil do the work. These are the subtler aspects that make it taste so good, and this is your body's way of determining that this is densely nutritional, good, healthy food. The conventional carrot grown in sand is a piece of wood; it's all cellulose, and that's what it tastes like.

You see this in the brassica family too, such as broccoli and Brussels sprouts. If you taste conventionally-grown Brussels sprouts, they're probably going to be bitter, with no sweetness – and then people think, oh that's what Brussels sprouts taste like. I never liked Brussels sprouts until I started eating them up here in Vermont, but they're actually sweet, which was shocking to me. People are also surprised at the difference in size; organic, locally-grown sprouts are smaller because that's the normal size. At the supermarket we see über Brussels sprouts from the West Coast because they pound the fertilizer into them. They breed for size, and that's not always a good thing – because if you breed for one thing, often you lose something else. They don't breed for flavor anymore; they breed now exclusively for size, shelf life, and good looks.

# ANIMAL PROTEIN: BEEF, CHICKEN, EGGS, AND FISH

As a farmer, it's hard to think about managing the soil as a way to produce healthy animals, but it still holds true. Unfortunately our current animal and meat production system is horrible. Many people get up every day and eat diets that are horrible, but animals and humans have this incredible propensity to survive, regardless of what they get for food. Production animal agriculture has pushed that to the limit.

Most animals are fed a very high grain diet, which is essentially like feeding them sugar: they grow very fast, fatten very fast, they're very sick, and it's a race to get them to slaughter before they die. It's really sad because the worst part is that any animal or plant that is sick is producing toxins. That's what makes us feel hung over when we eat feed lot beef, or some of the chicken raised in these huge houses with high heat, pounding grain and antibiotics into them to get them to fatten up faster. We're basically eating meat from animals that are ill. With beef, what we've done is breed huge animals that are fattened up on grain, although their essential digestive system is designed to eat grass. They are not supposed to eat grains because it totally destroys the pH level in their digestive system, so now they really are unhealthy, with liver and kidney illness, among other ills. But we can't feed these cattle on grass anymore because now there's too much animal there, and they can't ingest enough grass in a day to fuel them. And again, the producers are trying to get them to slaughter before they die of those illnesses.



The first time I met our beef supplier, Tom Cope, he was a dairyman with big Jersey cows. One day, he was watching one of them come lumbering down the hill when all of a sudden the cow tripped and tore its massive udder, and he had to put it down. Dan thought, *what is going on that these cows can't even walk anymore?* He started doing research and realized very quickly that we had bred these bizarre animals for high capacity and high production, and couldn't feed them grass anymore. So he started putting together a herd of Red Devon cows, the oldest breed, brought on the Mayflower to the United States. It's a "triple purpose" breed: they acted as oxen for power, made the highest butterfat milk – and everyone wanted butterfat because fat is how we get our energy – and they had phenomenal meat. Dan started breeding these animals, and gave me some of his beef to sample. I wasn't eating a lot of red meat at the time, so I cooked up a small steak he gave me and ate only about 4 ounces. Every bite was so full of flavor – really good flavor, not gamey at all, but really rich, and I was totally satisfied at the end of that little piece. Which points to another benefit of eating quality food: you need less to feel satisfied. You don't need a 12-ounce sirloin steak; 3-6 ounces is more than enough for anyone of this kind of steak, because your body knows it's getting what it wants: various nutrients, omegas (because it's grass-fed), and the energetic component of food, which is what our bodies are really after – so after we get all that in that 3-6 ounce piece, the body then shuts off and says, *you're done, you don't need to eat any more, you're full.* And you feel good. You're not uncomfortable because you've eaten so much until you're physically full. So there's that aspect of food – densely nutritional food, whether meat or produce or otherwise, is going to satisfy you much faster, and you will eat less.

So now let's look at fish. As I mentioned before, you should avoid farm-raised fish, due to the unnatural feeding process: it's like a feed lot under water, feeding them things they're not designed to eat. Most of the cod available now is Pacific Black Cod, caught in huge trawlers, processed in China, double-frozen, then shipped. So these big trawlers go out for weeks and weeks at a time, and fish is processed and frozen – as it comes in. So that fish could be four or five weeks old *just when it gets back to port*. That means the fish we have in supermarkets today, especially the more sturdy fish, can be over a month old by the time you buy it. They catch a lot at certain times of the year, and they hold it because of demand, so a lot of this fish gets frozen. And freezing fish is okay, but it really does compromise it.

Chicken is difficult because here in the United States, if I sold you a real pasture-raised chicken, your kids would be complaining because it would be tough, and very flavorful, as in slightly gamey, and hard to cook. In the U.S. we're used to the Purdue bird, which is all breast. The chicken has few if any instinctual skills, so if you actually let that bird out to free range, it would be dead in a day. Misty Knoll, one of our partner farms, does the best job of anyone we know. They have large barns which are clean and light, and the birds are inside, protected from the elements because they can't defend themselves, and they're well-fed. It's conventional grain, but it's high quality. There are lots of different qualities of grain and feed – *lots*. It's all a matter of degree, and I really believe it's the best out there. I tell people to judge how they feel, and judge how it tastes, and they'll know.

Egg farming is another really interesting subject. Chickens laying eggs are supposed to be scratching, eating food scraps, bugs, and little if no grain other than what they can get out of weed seed and spent grain in manure. When they do that, the eggs are incredible, the flavor is wonderful, the yolks are bright orange, and the yolks and whites stand up and don't break. If you've ever tried to poach a store-bought egg and watched the whites explode everywhere, you've seen they don't coagulate. But then you get a good egg from one of our farmers who are feeding some grain, but their

chickens are also out in pasture digging and scratching for themselves too, and the whole egg holds together beautifully – that's the difference. That tells you it's a fresh egg. Eggs can last months, and often eggs at the supermarket are old.

Egg allergies have become a huge problem. And there is reason to believe those originate with the feed. A lot of feed that's out there — in animal food, dog food, farm feed — has a lot of toxins in it. Some of them are naturally-occurring – they're phytotoxins, which is what fungus gives off to protect itself, and they're very nasty. There are a lot of things that come through in chickens that are fed pure grain. We're working now to set up a couple of our partners with a no-grain feeding model, because the eggs are so superior. There's a related question about whether it's healthy to raise children on totally animal-free, vegan diets: Children need the dense nutrition found in good (not processed) dairy, butter, cheese, eggs, and meat to help them get the fat and protein that they absolutely need to build their growing bodies (Adults need it too, but we need less of it unless we're doing a lot of heavy, physical labor.)

**So essentially what you want to do when you're getting your protein from animal products is to find people who are raising the animals in ways that are natural to the animal. I saw a bumper sticker the other day: "eat cheap food and die." That's essentially true – if you buy cheap beef, chicken or fish, you're getting a lot more than you pay for: you're getting a horrible dose of stuff that's very unhealthy. Again, know who and where and what, and ask the difficult questions. And if they can't answer your questions, don't buy it. Buy something else.**

**Editor's note:** Mia, the founder of StayBasic, follows a vegan diet, but feeds her family fish, chicken and eggs from time to time to ensure her kids receive all of the nutrients found in these foods that children need during their growing years. She sources these from Farmers To You!

# What is the most important thing you have taught your children about food?

One of many important things Eva and I have taught our children about food and eating is to learn to trust and develop their senses around food – the taste, sight, and smell, and the overall sense of what it feels like when you eat healthy, densely nutritional food. We have conversations at the family table about how something tastes, or looks or smells — especially when it is something new. With meat and dairy we try to smell and taste the grasses and flowers — they are there! With vegetables we try to taste and see the sweetness and brightness of the minerals and soil, and with fruit — the sweetness and freshness. We've raised healthy eaters because they and their bodies now know the difference and find the heavy sugar and salt of prepared foods to be very unappealing.

We are grateful our children are conscious of what they are eating, and we know the more good food we eat together as a family, the more healthy food they will eat for the rest of their lives. - *Greg Georgaklis, Founder, Farmers To You*

# COMPARING COSTS

We spend more per year on health care than on food; we spend more on automobiles and gas than on food; we spend more on entertainment than on food. When we go to the grocery store we impulse buy because that's the way the whole grocery store is designed. If we were just to buy meal ingredients and then cook, we would spend so much less on food, even if we spent twice as much for each of those ingredients as advertised at the grocery. Grocery stores have very sophisticated pricing models: they pick the items they know you're looking at to judge whether they're high- or low-priced, and then they sell them at or below cost.

They pressure the farmers for more and more discounts, keep them just barely able to survive, then sell it to you around cost, so you think that the prices at the grocery store have something to do with what it costs to grow the, and there is almost no correlation. Grocery stores make all their money on prepared foods, health and beauty aids, and a few specialty items. They lose money on produce, they lose money on meat, they barely make money on packaged goods. So the question of the "affordability" of food is really important because we need to first be honest about what we're buying. People complain about how expensive food is, but if you look closely, on a cost-per-meal basis the processed, packaged food many people buy is extraordinarily expensive. Think about those little single-serving frozen tacos; then consider a taco dinner made with really high-quality hamburger, good cheese and fresh vegetables, a little sauce you make up yourself – when you think about the nutritional value and the amount of food you get making it yourself, the cost is very reasonable.

Quite a number of families who subscribe to Farmers To You told us that initially they were hesitant because the pricing seemed expensive. We let our customers know that all of our pricing is directly related to what it costs the farmer to grow this product. So if you're buying it cheaper, it's either because the farmer is not getting paid well; or the grocery store is deciding to work at no profit just to make you think it's cheap; or, more likely, it's being produced in a very cheap way where the quality is being compromised. Most of those families who were initially concerned have told me that after

a while, they add up what they're spending in a week for food and it's the same or less than what they used to spend at the supermarket.

I can use myself as an example. For my two grown boys, my wife and I, we order about \$120-140 worth of food each week. Everything we can get from Farmers to You comes to our home, and we visit our fantastic local co-op to get some additional items – such as crackers, tea, chocolate, and bananas. And so each week we're spending maybe up to \$200, maybe a little less, which is right on target with the USDA numbers for a family of four. So we're not spending any more, and the quality of the food we're getting is so much higher. So when people tell me it's too expensive, then my reaction is, Well you must be buying a lot of other items that are very high-priced – and the truth is, a lot of people don't cook fresh food anyway, so they're not buying this kind of food. They're buying the cheap, processed foods. When you think about buying local, consciously-grown, fresh food versus conventional or processed foods, you want to think about not just the cost of food, but the value of the food you buy.



# FINDING “FARM FRESH” FOOD IN WINTER

We’re seeing more winter’s farmers markets, and more year-round partnerships like Farmers To You. When we think about getting food in the winter, I would again emphasize knowing who’s growing your food, getting your food from people you know, more than “farm-fresh.” We’re in New England, where nothing grows for six or eight months, so the storage crops are fantastic. In the wintertime, we eat more root crops and there’s a biological reason for that: we tend to become a little more sedentary, thoughtful, receptive to thinking about very complicated, deep thoughts and ideas. It’s a lot of intellectual, thoughtful work and the root crops and root vegetables support that.

Eating seasonally has a lot of benefit, and helps you deal with the season you’re in. The crops that grow under the ground are the crops that help us develop our intelligence, intellect and senses. The leafy crops and crops that grow above the ground help us develop our strength and our rhythms, our respiratory and digestive system.

Eating seasonally has a lot of benefit, and helps you deal with the season you’re in. It’s even getting to the point now where eating things like lettuce in the middle of the winter just doesn’t taste right to me anymore – but eating those fatty stews helps when I go outside and it’s 18 degrees out (like it was here this morning!). In my family we eat a lot of lacto-fermented vegetables during the winter; we make cabbage salad with some apples or dried cranberries thrown in, and make a lot of soups with carrots and potatoes, celeriac, beets, onions...

So we enjoy lots of rich, comfort food flavor over the winter months. I love this time of year, making stews and soups and fresh bread and grains and beans – those flavors and textures are fantastic, and that’s part of what makes us joyful. I know who grew it, and we know where it’s coming from. And so something like what we’re doing is what you need to find for yourself. And if you can’t find it, then start it yourself – start something, because eating this kind of food is essential for your family’s health.



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