



There are about 75 breeding karakul ewes at Retreat Farm. The operation supplies several area high end restaurants with meat and produce. Although it is not 'certified' organic, the Gillans practice organic and sustainable techniques.



Jim Darnell and his son Zach ham it up at their Caroline Street vegetable stand. Zack gave up a career as a golf pro to become the third generation of Darnells in the produce business.



Zach Lester and Georgia O'Neal are out early in the morning harvesting before they go to weekend farmer's markets in the Washington, D.C. area.

Some vegetable stands do not sell locally grown produce. They buy it from wholesalers, and they are not listed in the guide. Wiley says, with these sellers, just ask; they'll tell you where the produce comes from. And keep an eye out for dead giveaways, "products out of season," such as tomatoes in April.

There are a lot of enduring reasons to buy fresh, buy local. One of them is travel distance. According to the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State, locally produced food travels an average of 56 miles before it reaches the consumer. Non locally produced food travels 1,494 miles or 27 times further.

That number might go down if we could train ourselves to eat seasonally. Take a fresh garden salad, for example. Here it is, the depths of August. The tomato belongs in that salad. Maybe the cucumber does too. But the lettuce? It got burned up in the first of those heat waves two months ago. It's coming from God knows where, maybe California. Likewise for the tomato; in that same salad this past May; the lettuce could have been grown locally, but the tomato came from Florida. And let's not even mention apples from New Zealand, apricots from Spain, bananas from South America...

One of the most frequently heard complaints at a farmer's market is that locally produced food costs more than in the supermarket. There are a lot of reasons for this, not the least of which is that for the most part, government subsidies are geared toward agribusiness and huge monocultures, not family farms. Keeping the price of mass-produced food artificially low makes good political sense. Labor costs are higher for small producers who cannot take advantage of the economies of scale.

But at the real heart of the matter is the importance that we Americans attach to fresh, nutritious food. In terms of the portion of our disposable income that we set aside for buying food, we are the world's cheapskates. According to the USDA, we Americans spend 9 percent of our income on food. Compare that to 11 percent in the United Kingdom, 17 percent in Japan, 27 percent in South Africa, and 53 percent in India. Food, as a percentage of disposable income, is cheapest right here in the US of A. What do we buy with the other 91 percent of our money? What's more important? Housing; sure. Clothing; okay. Transportation; that's a biggie. Medical; hoo boy. Entertainment and useless made-in-China gee gaws; yup, them too.

Speaking of China, how about those food related scandals? The tainted milk, the poisonous dog food, the toxic pork, the exploding

watermelons! Seriously, the Chinese are injecting watermelons with some sort of growth substance that makes some of them explode. You will not find one exploding watermelon at The Garden Patch. None of the pork coming out of Retreat Farm is toxic. You will not get food poisoning from eating Tree and Leaf's leafy greens.

Are we self-sufficient locally? Molly Visosky says we have the potential to be. She started the first locally grown gourmet produce distributorship in this area three years ago, known as Fresh Link. The name says it all. She's the link between producers in Orange, Madison, and Culpeper Counties and more than 50 gourmet chefs in the Washington, D.C. area.

Her job is a balancing act. "We do the physical distribution and sales of the product, and everything is done in 24 hours." Producers deliver to her at Bending River Farm on Mondays and Thursdays. She trucks and delivers their harvest to D.C. restaurants on Tuesdays and Fridays. "We have to be very good at buying and selling. We buy at the same time we sell."

The people who buy from her, the gourmet chefs (she has one who charges a \$165 per person prix fixe dinner) are notoriously picky. "They are extremely critical." You can almost hear her exasperated eye-roll over the phone. But that is also testimony to the high quality of such Orange County producers as Retreat Farm, Gold Hill Blueberry Farm, The Maples, and Rounton.

When we talked to Molly in July, she moved 20,000 pounds of tomatoes, a ton of melons, 400-600 pints of blueberries in one week. And all of it had to be top-notch restaurant quality. She even has producers doing specialty products, like Paul Gallis with his leeks and beets and hot peppers. As she terms it "This is not an exact science. You have to know the personalities of your growers. What is their plan... We are big on the relationship...We want them to be really proud of their food."

Asked again the are-we-self-sufficient question, Molly responds, "If we cook at home and didn't eat out every day, could we be sustainable? Yeah. And I think our farmers here could support us. But could they support the large cities? No." She pauses a moment and adds, "We could be self-sustaining in our own bubble, yeah, absolutely."

We're lucky people. Here in Orange County, if the Great Recession turns into a Greater Depression, if the terrorists pull off another 9-11, if the oceans rise or a madman pushes the button, we have a better chance than most of surviving. Why? Because we can plant, till, harvest, sell, buy and eat our food locally.

Plant, till, harvest, sell, buy, eat LOCAL



We've seen the bumper stickers. We've opened our mailbox to find the *Buy Fresh, Buy Local* annual guide. New local pick-your-own outlets have sprouted well, not like weeds, but you get the idea. And thanks to letters to the editor and the efforts of the Orange Downtown Alliance, the Saturday morning Orange County Farmer's Market is showing signs of life. An *Insider* on all of this is way overdue.

But the first thing we've learned is there's no way we can feature all of the deserving producers; there're just too many of them. We can't go down every little farm lane with a hand-painted "Tomatoes 4 sale" sign. It would take us months. Besides, if we tried to list them all, we'd probably miss one or two.

Instead, we picked a representative three: The Garden Patch, Retreat Farm and Tree and Leaf Farm. One is a traditional vegetable stand with roots going back to 1975 and before. Another has been here a dozen years or so and has found its special niche as a CSA, (Community Supported Agriculture), a kind of fresh produce club. And, the last is a massive undertaking that produces fresh veggies year round and sells them in Washington, DC. All three have a different approach to planting, tilling, harvesting, and selling locally grown food.

5 reasons to buy your food locally

From the www.buylocalvirginia.org web site

- ☞ Local food is fresher and tastes better than food shipped long distances from other states or countries. Local farmers can offer produce varieties bred for taste and freshness rather than for shipping and long shelf life.
- ☞ Buying local food keeps your dollars circulating in your community. Getting to know the farmers who grow your food builds relationships based on understanding and trust, the foundation of strong communities.
- ☞ There's never been a more critical time to support your farming neighbors. With each local food purchase, you ensure that more of your money spent on food goes to the farmer.
- ☞ Knowing where your food comes from and how it is grown or raised enables you to choose safe food from farmers who avoid or reduce their use of chemicals, pesticides, hormones, antibiotics, or genetically modified seed in their operations.
- ☞ Local food doesn't have to travel far. This reduces carbon dioxide emissions and packing materials. Buying local food also helps to make farming more profitable and selling farmland for development less attractive.

The localvore movement has been around this area for quite awhile, but the brand, Buy Fresh, Buy Local started here just in 2007. Organized nationally by a group called Food Routes, individual chapters are tailored to their communities. Around these parts, the Piedmont Environmental Council administers the program.

PEC's special projects director, Melissa Wiley says it started in Charlottesville and was immediately "embraced with incredible enthusiasm." Now it has spread to the other counties in PEC's domain, including Orange.

The idea behind the program is "to provide marketing support," for local farmers, freeing them to do what they do best, which is grow fresh wholesome food. To that end, every year in March, a Buy Fresh, Buy Local guide is mailed to 70,000 households in the PEC area.

According to that guide, 13 Orange County producers (Liberty Mills Farm, Miller Farms, Shady Oaks, Doug Harris, Gold Hill Blueberry Farm, Skyline Premium Meats, Honey Hill Orchard, Hill-n-Dale, Everona Dairy Cheeses, Marshall Farms, The Garden Patch, Retreat Farm and Tree and Leaf Farm) have signed up to be part of the program. Also, five restaurants and caterers (Beggars Banquet, Elmwood at Sparks, Real Food, The Light Well and Palladio), and the Saturday morning Orange County Farmer's Market are listed.

But the Locust Grove Sunday market is not; nor are several other local producers. Melissa Wiley says she tries to update the list yearly, but some slip through the cracks, particularly those who do not sign up. She urges producers, CSAs, retailers, restaurants, and farmers markets to go to www.buylocalvirginia.org to become listed in the Buy Fresh, Buy Local guide.

About the only requirement is "that the products are grown on local land and that they sell directly to consumers." She adds that although sustainable agricultural practices are encouraged, they are not required. "For some people it's not a priority to have organic produce," points out Wiley. "That's not our place to come in...Our first and foremost priority is to support local farms." She adds that if organically or sustainable agricultural practices are important to you as a consumer, ask the producer; go visit the farm.

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Jim Darnell shows off his pumpkin patch on his river bottom farm. For some of these giant pumpkins, the seed cost 60-cents apiece.

The Garden Patch

"I love it. It's in my blood. It's fun and it's magical." Jim Darnell can still say that even though he has been doing this since his dad encouraged him to sell veggies during summer vacation back in 1975. Twenty six years ago, he established The Garden Patch, and over the years, bought "and paid for," two truck farms, one in Montford, the other on the Robinson River bottom. Now, a third generation of Darnells is involved.

Zack Darnell has made some changes to this classic traditional veggie stand, with the old pickup truck display and accidentally-on-purpose misspelled sign, turning The Garden Patch into a down-home haven from the madness of modern day living.

His Dad, Jim can barely conceal his pride. "He's done some things that I couldn't or wouldn't do. So, he's added a fresh new perspective to things." Growing veggies really is in the Darnell blood.

"It's all genetics," says Jim of the perfect peppers and tomatoes and squash and eggplant and cucumbers and melons coming off his farms every day. "Seeds and variety means everything. I'd rather have a \$1,000 in good seed than a \$1,000 in cash anytime." He puts his money where his mouth is. The giant pumpkins, the ones that come due in October and weigh in at 120+ pounds, cost 60 cents per seed! But he adds with a sly wink, "They usually stop traffic pretty nicely."

Regarding his farming techniques, Darnell says "I'm a minimalist," when it comes to spraying; "little or none." He uses composted leaves to enrich his soil and weeding is done by tillage, which this year, because of all the rainfall and the

fact that not one but two tractors broke down at the same time, has been a headache. Still, he says, this has been a magnificent growing season.

A regular at the Orange County Farmer's Market, Jim Darnell says "I wish the community would support it more." Of the low attendance, he says, "I'm thinking for the summer time, either 10 or 20 percent of the community is on vacation every week."

Believe it or not, fresh locally grown produce is not the Garden Patch's bread and butter. Bedding plants and vegetable sets are. Why do customers travel 20 miles or more to the Garden Patch for plants they could easily buy for less at Wal-Mart or Lowe's? "Because they know we have the best plants," answers Jim without a moment's hesitation. "Again it comes down to genetics, especially our vegetable plants...Our vegetable plants, we're using some super seeds...I have excellent varieties and the customers have grown accustomed to that and know that."

His prices are pretty competitive too. In late July, the Garden Patch was selling tomatoes for \$2.49 a pound. That same week, they were \$2.69 at Food Lion, and \$3.00 at the City Market in Charlottesville. "What I tell people is we have a price on our produce and our quality and freshness is free...You can't duplicate that quality anywhere. Sometimes you can come by the Garden Patch and the stuff is minutes old. And that's what we're selling; we're selling freshness...For the quality, you can't beat it at any price."

As we drive back to town from the river farm, Jim points out his "favorite pickup truck." There it sits, loaded to the gills with extras, a 2008 model for \$39,995. Jim Darnell sums it all up. "Can you complain about the price of food?"



Frank Gillan explains that the Retreat Farm CSA is like a fresh food club, where members pay a monthly fee to come and help themselves to everything from fresh eggs to veggies from the yellow bins in the cooler.

Retreat Farm

Frank Gillan of Retreat Farm in Rapidan poses the same question, as he tells a story about when they were growing zinnias and selling them for 50-cents a bloom. People would buy them by the dozen and then complain about a 50-cent tomato.

Retreat Farm was started in 1999 when the owners brought in Frank and Cindy Gillan to establish a diverse and sustainable truck farm. Over the years, they turned an old horse pasture into a pristine five-acre garden with four 100-foot square rotational beds for annual veggies, 1,000 asparagus crowns, raspberries, fruit trees and other perennials. Later they added sheep, cattle, laying chickens, and now pigs. "There's a lot that happens here," understates Frank.

Although they sell directly to most of the area high end restaurants, Retreat Farm is primarily a CSA. Frank Gillan translates. "You give a farmer a certain amount of dollars for a season which then entitles you to a certain amount of vegetables or fruits each week through the growing season." It's like a membership in a club. Retreat Farm has 40 members (there's a waiting list), who pay a \$50 deposit at the beginning of the season and then \$100 a month May through September. They come to the farm once a week with their shopping bag and help themselves from the bins in the walk-in cooler at the Barnyard store. This week you can take six tomatoes, two eggplants, a pint of raspberries etc.

Although Retreat Farm is not 'certified' organic (too many hoops), it practices all the principles of sustainable agriculture. They use compost instead of fertilizer and they spray "with organically approved stuff," from Orange County's own St.

Gabriel's. "The thing with organics is you really have to stay on top of the insects, because once they get out of hand, you'll never get them back...You have to be proactive because reactive doesn't help," says Gillan. He actually goes up and down the rows and squishes by hand individual egg masses on the undersides of leaves.

With that kind of labor intensity, prices at Retreat Farm are certainly higher than Food Lion. That's also because they are so diverse; they can't take advantage of economies of scale. He points to a grocery store tomato that was picked green, gassed to ripeness and shipped 1,000 miles here. "It looks the same as mine, but really mine ripened on the vine and is at the maximum flavor...People who are on a budget and people who can't afford to make that change to organic or locally grown or sustainable agriculture, my comment to them is, 'well you just do it where you can.'"

He suggests starting with the "dirty dozen," a list of fruits and vegetables with the highest pesticide residues. This year, the following are on that list: apples, celery, strawberries, peaches, spinach, imported nectarines, imported grapes, sweet bell peppers, potatoes, blueberries, lettuce, and kale/collard greens. Frank Gillan says eating his food will not prevent disease, but it will help you fight disease. "Look at it as an insurance policy," he says of locally grown food. "The healthier you are, the stronger you're going to be to fight illness. And then your doctor bills, your medical bills and all that sort of stuff theoretically should be less."

Every week, the overage at Retreat Farm and the Garden Patch goes to the Food Pantry. Deliciously ironic, isn't it, that folks the least likely to afford this nutritious locally grown food can reap its benefits.



Zach Lester of Tree and Leaf Farm treats his soil as if it were a living organism.

Tree and Leaf Farm

It's 7 a.m. on this July Friday, one of the hottest days of the year and already Georgia O'Neal and Zach Lester are dripping with sweat. She's picking exotic long asian beans; he is pulling summer carrots. Their young son, Eoin, which is how the Irish spell Owen, is still abed asleep.

Things are busy around here at Tree and Leaf, down in the lower end of the county, about halfway between Danton and Gold Dale. Tomorrow is Saturday and they will load up the truck and head for Falls Church where they will sell their produce at the farmer's market near the courthouse. Sunday they'll do the same at DuPont Circle.

The two markets are as different as night and day; one with lots of seniors and families with kids, the other brimming with what Zach terms "hipsters and poseurs, Phds and celebrities." Georgia rolls her eyes. "I think the urban people think they know a lot more about food," she says of their DuPont Circle customers, which includes several restaurants. It's been an educational challenge for them to explain "the ebbs and flows, the seasonality, the labor issue."

But every Saturday and Sunday these guys are there. And they are there every other Saturday and Sunday during the depths of winter, because they are still growing stuff, lettuce mostly and root vegetables and "massive areas of kale and collards and brussel sprouts," much of it in long plastic-covered tunnels.

The winter markets are almost better than the summer ones. There's less competition. People stand in line in the rain and cold and "when they see the food and they've made it into the tent and

there it is, psychologically, 'I really need some of that food.' So that's a cool experience," nods Zach zen-like.

Not that they're doing so badly in summer. Since the third week of June, Tree and Leaf has been moving heirloom tomatoes with names like Black Prince, Green Zebra, Cherokee Purple, Striped Roman. At this time of year, in two days he'll sell 1,400 pounds of tomatoes at \$5 a pound, "and I feel it's justified in terms of the work that we put into them." Whatever's left over they'll drop off at a long established CSA in Vienna before rolling for home. What tomatoes he doesn't sell, he saves for seed.

Tree and Leaf came to this 45-acre tract a year ago Christmas, after farming on leased land in Northern Virginia for a dozen years. Already they have 10 acres under intense cultivation, all of it pesticide, herbicide, and fungicide free. They use a wide variety of techniques, including ridge till, no till, living mulch, compost, drip irrigation, crop rotation, legume cover crops, companion planting; the list goes on. Asked what are the sprayers for and Zach launches into an impassioned discourse about pro-biotic soil dynamics and foliar feeding that sails right over this poor scribe's head.

For Zach Lester it is all about the soil. He treats it as a living organism, and the problem he has here in the lower end of the county is "getting the soil to digest. I've got this stagnant gut here, this soil." It's got something to do with calcium exchange and low phosphorus. "So I'm reviving this with organic matter, the enzymes in the soil, digestive principles." In the meantime, "to move forward with the farm, I have to work with the plants and their leaves."