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'Know your farmer, Know your food'

by Lynn Meredith

As you prepare Thanksgiving dinner for the ones you love, do you stop to consider where the turkey, the pumpkin, the potatoes, or the cranberries come from? Do you know where the animals were raised, the produce grown, and by whom? As we buy foods in the supermarket, chances are that we don't stop to consider these questions. We don't stop to hear the story behind the foods we eat.

With concerns about the safety of the food we consume rising, knowing that the Thanksgiving dinner you prepare comes from local producers can ease your concerns. We live in an area with many family farms, some of which raise livestock, produce, eggs and dairy products, and grow

produce in a way that can provide us with healthy alternatives.

Heritage Prairie Market and Education Center on Brundige Road off Route 38 in unincorporated Kane County near Elburn offers a unique opportunity to find out the story behind the foods you eat. It's a place where you can purchase food that will create for your family a truly local Thanksgiving meal.

Heritage Prairie Market opened in April of this year, and has everything you need to prepare a fresh, healthy Thanksgiving dinner. Most of the food is raised, grown, or produced locally in the immediate vicinity, in Northern Illinois and Wisconsin. Its mission is to help re-establish the local community's connection to land and nature by promoting sustainable, community-based food production.

"Part of what we're about is to produce food here, but also to act as a conduit to connect with other farmers in the area," said Bronwyn Weaver, who is the owner of the farm, store and education center. "A large part of what we do is pursue others to grow for our store."

Heritage Prairie works with about half a dozen local farmers including Erehwon farms on the nearby Garfield Farm and Burgin Farm of Maple Park. It buys from about a dozen producers in Northern Illinois and from another dozen producers nationwide.

The key is to know who your producers are, store and administrative manager Sarah Harmon said. That way even if the product is not officially labeled organic, Heritage Prairie knows that it is grown naturally and without pesticides. The farm believes in the idea: know your farmer, know your food. "If you don't know the farmer, then the 'certified organic' stamp is important. But when I can go out and talk to Tim (Fuller of Erehwon), then I know the foods are grown organically," Harmon said. "I don't need to see a stamp."

Even with its producers in other parts of the country, Heritage Prairie has a face-to-face relationship with them. "We don't have any almond farmers locally, so we buy from Maisie Jane's in Chico, California," Weaver said. "I have visited the farm and know they are doing things the right way. I can talk with them directly if the customer has any questions."



Large, pale yellow pumpkins are scattered in the yard in front of the small cottage that houses the store on the Heritage Prairie farm. These are not your typical bright orange pumpkins meant for autumnal display. These pumpkins are grown by the Illinois Extension Service on the research farm at the corner of Route 38 and Peck Road. They are meant to be baked into pumpkin pie.

"They are an heirloom variety," Harmon said. "They are pale and very pretty."

You won't see turkeys at Heritage Prairie, but you will see chickens and goats. Turkeys, sold frozen, are an heirloom breed raised naturally on a family farm in Belvidere.

"The turkeys we are excited about," Weaver said. "They are grown locally by R Family Farms and are an heirloom breed called 'Red Bourbon.'"

Most turkeys in the United States are raised on 7,000-plus turkey farms across the country, according to the USDA. They are white broad breasted turkeys and have been bred to achieve maximum breast meat.

"A heritage breed is the equivalent of a heirloom tomato," Harmon said. "Heirloom turkeys are bred to keep the breed, rather than to increase a certain characteristic. They are more expensive, but they are raised more ethically than at factory farms where space and time are minimal, and where they just want to get the bird out." R Family Farm pastures the turkeys instead of penning them. That means the turkeys eat grass, which keeps toxins at bay, according to R Family Farm.

"Grass helps reduce the animal feed intake by about 20 percent. This helps us raise animals that are significantly higher in nutritional value and lower in fat," according to information released by R Family Farm. The turkeys are also fed freshly-ground grain that is specially mixed using corn, roasted soybeans, oats, flax, and other natural ingredients.

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To round out the turkey dinner, Heritage Prairie Market sells a selection of squash, potatoes, cauliflower, broccoli, cabbage, salad greens, and apples from local and family farms. In addition, you can purchase eggs, beef and pork that was raised and processed at Burgin Farm in Maple Park. According to information in the store from Burgin, eggs come in brown-, white-, blue- and even green-shelled varieties. Certified organic milk and cheese from family farms in Wisconsin are also sold at the market.

In an effort to increase their connection with farmers, Heritage Prairie seeks out Farmers' Markets to find products it can sell in the store.

"I am going to Madison for their Farmers' Market this weekend," Harmon said. "I'm going to bring back cranberries in bulk. I want to connect with local vendors. One thing I'm looking for is farmers who use integrative pest control and positive predators."

In other words, she is looking for produce and products that haven't been exposed to pesticides.

Working with the farming community to bring sustainable food products to market is another part of the farm's mission.

"Education is an important component of our mission, not only educating the consumer to the importance of naturally-produced foods, but also educating farmers and sharing information on how to grow organically and sustainably," Weaver said.

To that end, the farm has put in a commercial kitchen which is moving from the back of the store and expanding into the farmhouse. Weaver hopes to provide a space for local farmers to bring their products to market in a way that appeals to consumers.

"Farmers' Markets are very free-style, and that's part of the fun of going to them. We're all a bunch of characters," Weaver said. "But when consumers come to a grocery store, such as ours, they expect items to be labeled and packaged. We do some hand-holding here."

She said the kitchen was developed in response to the community of sustainable farmers. Here is a place where small producers can come to bottle honey or make jams.

"The commercial kitchen we're building will allow the farming community to use a real commercial facility and achieve a level of professionalism," Weaver said.

Heritage Prairie Market and Education Center is a part of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) where about 140 subscribers buy a box of produce a week. Some join in to help prepare the soil, plant, weed, harvest, and clean up at the end of the season—all in an effort to support natural food production.

"Natural food is food that has a story. It requires a different way of thinking. It is food that nourishes the soul and feeds people's lives. It requires investing the time to make it healthy," Weaver said.

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