

THIS WEEK'S FOOD REVIEW

The Farmers and the Chef

To market with the Beekman Street Bistro's Tim Meaney, on the trail of tonight's menu ingredients

By Amy Halloran

Farmers' market aficionados know that the best food goes fast. Diligent shoppers arrive before the bell rings to survey the offerings. Once the selling officially starts, they know what they want to buy, and where they want to buy it.

Chef Tim Meaney tries to get to the Saratoga Farmers' Market early, but the late nights of restaurant life don't mix well with mornings. Still, the owner of the Beekman Street Bistro is at the market Wednesdays and Saturdays year-round, stocking his kitchen.

Meaney starts at New Minglewood Farms, where he has a standing order for mesclun mix, and asks about arugula and turnips.

"Is three pounds too much?" the farmer asks, holding a sizeable amount of small greens.

"No, I'll use it," Meaney says. He writes a check for the vegetables and carries them to his next stop, Saratoga Apple. He buys a gallon of cider, and two pints of raspberries, and easily balances his load on the way to the car. Although it is warm, he doesn't use a cooler; his goal is to get in and out of the market, and back to the restaurant. This goal is frequently interrupted.

"I'm sixty-six years old and I tell you that fish stew you made me the other night was as good as any I've ever had, anywhere," a man says. His expression shows that this praise is an understatement, and Meaney, a Massachusetts native with a gift for understatement himself, takes this praise with a little smile.

"A Spanish version of Bouillabaisse," Meaney explains, closing the trunk of his car.

"Great meal last night," a customer says as Meaney makes his way back to the market.

"Did you get to the show on time?" the chef asks.

"Yes, *Madame Butterfly*, it was great," the diner continues, and the shoppers part.

"Let's see what Anna Mae has," Meaney says, referring to a woman who is known for her jam. He buys two quarts of blueberries, a few pounds of tomatoes and a flat of tall basil starts, for the raised beds he made last fall. Arms full, he heads back to the car, unloads and returns to the market, pays for eight dozen eggs and leaves them at the vendor, and moves on to Denison Farms.

"Is that the last of the golden beets?" he asks a woman who works at the stand. She says yes, and he says, "Gone."

Meaney steps behind the tables to get out of the way of other customers. He fills a bag with radishes, peels



Buying local—and fresh:
Beekman Street Bistro's Tim
Meaney.

Photo: Martin Benjamin

for him. Meaney will use the mini eggplants, which are so pretty they do look like they come from a fairy tale, as side dishes to meat entrees, or the centerpiece of a vegetarian plate, stuffed with ricotta and lentils.

This scene repeats itself at the Kilpatrick Farms, another large stall. The chef stocks up on new potatoes, squash blossoms, carrots, sweet salad onions, and more tomatoes. He checks his list, and gets one more item, shell peas, from another vendor who advertises them as the season's last. The peas will go into a pasta dish with pancetta, mint and cream that will disappear from the menu once this batch of peas is history.

The pancetta is available more regularly, but Meaney goes to the trouble of making it himself, from pig bellies he buys from Flying Pigs Farm in Shushan. Flying Pigs' Tamworth and Black breeds are heritage animals notorious for their high fat content; the breeds fell out of favor for commercial production when lard did.

Meaney rubs the pork bellies with salt and seasonings, and sets this homemade bacon to cure in the refrigerator for two weeks. The salt effectively cooks the meat, and the process must take place when it is not humid. Once completed, he cuts the pancetta into small squares and wraps them for freezing.

The chef makes other ingredients, too. When Sungold tomatoes are in, he buys them for salads and buys the seconds, too, which he slices in half and dehydrates to use throughout the year. Same with Romas, some of which he dries, and others he roasts into a conserve; both of these he saves under olive oil in the walk-in. Even though the tomatoes come in during his busiest time of year, Tim takes care of them. Timing is everything when using ripe, local foods.

"A guy came in here last week looking for strawberry rhubarb pie that he'd had the week before," Meaney says in the restaurant's backyard, piling bags onto a picnic table. "Happens all the time, people want what they had. I say, sorry."

Meaney learned about seasonal ingredients from another chef, Dan Spitz. The two met while working at the Flying Fish, a restaurant in Lake George. Spitz had worked previously in Portland, Ore., where he was very involved in the farm-to-chef collaborative. Meaney had been working in restaurants for nearly 20 years, but Spitz introduced him to local foods. Eventually, the pair opened the Beekman Street Bistro together. Spitz has since moved on, but Tim continues to focus on a seasonal menu, one that can change daily.

Meaney doesn't just shop at the market. Staples such as olive oil and Parmesan he gets from Provisions, a distributor in Vermont. Fish comes from Boston via Earth and Sea, another distributor. Farmers deliver to him, too, from as far away as Oneonta. He likes to spread his money around and support a variety of farmers. Rabbits come from nearby Wanabea Farm, mushrooms from Wiltbank Farms.

"Local food makes such a huge difference," he says. "The farmers are selling food that just came out of the ground, not stuff that's been sitting in a warehouse. It costs a little more money, but I make the effort because I think it makes a difference in flavor."