



HERITAGE FARMING
Jim Schultz at his Red Shirt Farm in Lanesboro enough says, "Farmers love to farm but don't receive salary for the work they do." BAV is the incentive.

Food Visionaries

BERKSHIRE GROUP'S PUSH FOR HEALTHY FOOD FOR ALL //

By ANASTASIA STANMEYER

FARMER Jim Schultz, food distributor Nick Martnell, and Berkshire Agricultural Ventures executive director Cynthia Pansing encapsulate what the national food movement strives to be: Regionalized. The business of food movement. The business of locally grown food has many implications—protecting lands, creating jobs, improving local economy, becoming more socially conscious, being healthier. A New England Food Vision report holds that this region can produce 50 percent of the food it consumes by doubling production of farm areas. Striving toward that reality, organizations like the Berkshire Agricultural Ventures (BAV) in Great Barrington, once a program of Berkshire Grown and the Carrot Project, are addressing an array of food security issues, engendering support for entrepreneurs and farms through technical help, assisting in grant writing, and giving direct financial support. In 2016-17, BAV invested \$150,000 in the form of loans, startup capital, and land acquisition and provided \$95,000 worth of technical assistance. If a farmer or entrepreneur has a vision, BAV will find someone to work with them to develop a business plan or enterprise, or expand and improve what they already have.

Take Schultz, with Red Shirt Farm in Lanesborough, who believes that his heritage-breed birds and pigs can feed our Berkshire population and preserve and strengthen the farming culture here, "providing employment for local people because it's more labor intensive," he says. Farms like his, which is also a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture), now accept SNAP and HFP benefits and do the transactions with a reader on an iPhone. A half-share of his produce is \$425 for 20 weeks—cheaper than shopping at Guido's or buying organic.

"The biggest challenge is educating the consumer and changing the mindset," Schultz says. "They are so accustomed to dirt-cheap food and so seduced by that, the cycle of ill health and people buying bad food goes on and on."

On Saturday, October 7, at 10 a.m. at Dewey Hall in Sheffield, BAV brings two national figures for a talk on "A Path Forward: Growing Our Local Food Economy for Regional Food Security." The speakers are Andy Fisher, author of

Big Hunger, and Brian Donahue, lead author of the collaborative New England Food Vision, and co-author of the just-released report *Wildlands and Woodlands: Farms and Communities: Broadening the Vision of New England*.

Historically a strong agricultural region, the Berkshires has seen a decrease in agricultural land as it transitioned to a manufacturing and cultural-asset base. As food-growing areas feel a rate of pressure from increasing population and climate change—witness drier conditions in the South—the Northeast is experiencing a push toward food growing.

Three percent of all Massachusetts farms have annual gross sales of \$500,000 and above, while almost 70 percent gross less than \$10,000. Small- and medium-sized farm and food businesses are often constrained in their ability to grow and scale up because they lack technical resources, capital, infrastructure, and/or land. By supporting farms and food businesses, BAV strives to open new markets, increase revenues, and make healthy food accessible to all.

For example, a large number of animals were once raised here. But the young animals were sent to feed lots in the Midwest, and with them went our ability to produce our own local meat. That's changing. More people are raising a small number of cattle and selling them to local butchers and restaurants. The biggest challenge is that no slaughterhouses are found in the region—there are not enough cattle to justify the expense and people don't want butcheries in their backyards—so farmers must book slots at locations farther away.

Some farms are doing it on their own. Red Shirt Farm raises heritage chickens and turkeys and processes them in its mobile unit. They are sold whole because they can't be parted unless it's in a USDA-certified plant. (Thus, the need for a slaughterhouse here.)

BAV has lent its assistance to Schultz, helping him with marketing and business development, especially for his heritage breeds. And grants from the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service have allowed him to pay for two high tunnels; BAV has just allocated money for technical assistance and a climate battery (subterranean heating and cooling system) for the second tunnel. A workshop is set for November 13.

"Farmers love to farm but don't necessarily love to market," says Schultz. "BAV is that missing link."

Nick Martnell is another beneficiary of BAV. He began Marty's Local just under a year ago, with

the idea of linking the region's hundreds of high-quality farmers and producers with businesses that offer food. "The concept was to shorten the supply chain," says Martnell, once a lawyer for Governor Deval Patrick. "BAV is playing an important role. They have resources. People who are running a farm or food business don't necessarily have a business background, and the numbers side of the equation is critical, as well as financial resources. That bridge loan or just a little bit to get to the next point makes all the difference."

Fisher's *Big Hunger* lays out a vision to end hunger, not manage it. He views Walmart as a clear example of the latter. It has a big PR problem because of its labor and environmental practices, he says. In response, it pumped up its foundation arm, committing in 2010 to donate billions to anti-hunger groups. It's also the largest redeemer of food stamps.

"We need to change the idea of giving free food, and think of it in a more upstream way," says Fisher. "The Berkshires is an important example of a local economy focused on local food. We need to highlight and reinforce the positive nature of that."

And BAV is ready to lead this collective vision to make healthy food, a fundamental human right, accessible to all. ■

As Seen In
the October
2017 Issue of
**Berkshire
Magazine**
A TownVibe
Publication