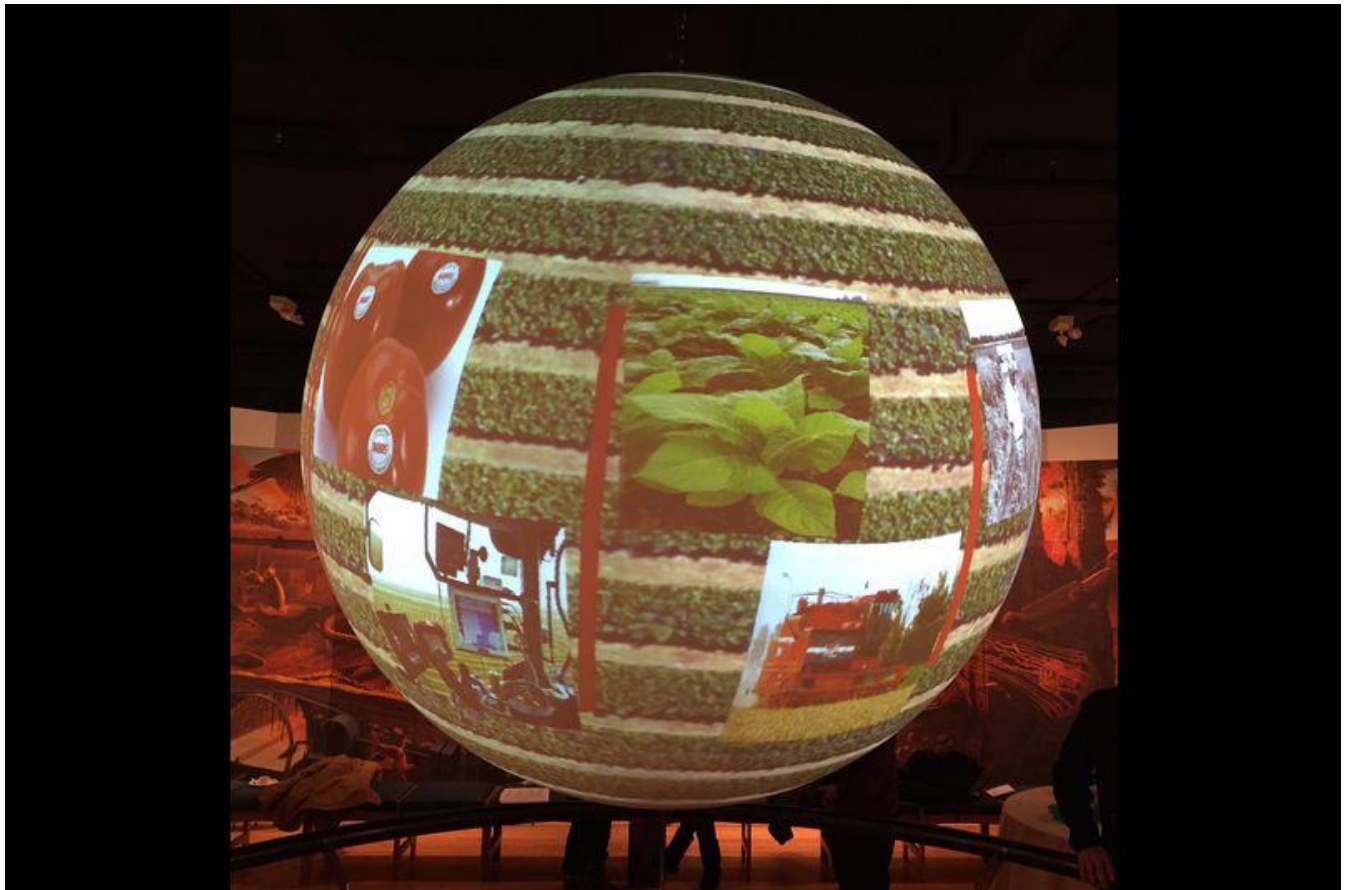


Demand turning locally grown food into hot commodity

By DAN SULLIVAN

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Farm-to-table fare in high demand

A large sphere at the Nurture Nature Center in Easton depicts a timeline of the history of agriculture from the Mesopotamian era to present day. The center was the scene of a forum on getting locally grown food from farms to restaurants and institutions on Monday. Panelists included Tim Stark, owner of Eckerton Hill Farm in Hamburg, Lee Chizmar, chef of Bolete restaurant in Salisbury Township, and Andrew Puglia, procurement manager at Common Market food hub in Philadelphia. (DAN SULLIVAN / SPECIAL TO THE MORNING CALL)

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It was standing room only Monday night at the Nurture Nature Center in Easton as local food producers, buyers ranging from restaurateurs to

institutional food service providers, and the general public met to discuss challenges and opportunities for getting Lehigh Valley-produced food to local restaurants and institutions.

The night began with a ground-floor opportunity for buyers to meet the farmers, orchardists, vintners, dairymen (and women), brewers, foragers, salsa makers and other local food artisans who are providing the experience more customers are demanding — one that pleases the palate while at the same time protecting the environment and preserving local farms.

Next it was upstairs to the historic building's Delaware Gallery for a panel discussion exploring steps, requirements, potential difficulties and opportunities along the food value chain.

The discussion comprised Tim Stark of Eckerton Hill Farm in Berks County, chef Lee Chizmar of Bolete restaurant in Salisbury Township, procurement manager Andrew Puglia of the nonprofit Common Market, a food Hub in Philadelphia, and a lively and inquisitive audience.

Using proceeds largely from heirloom tomato sales, Stark outbid a developer six years ago to buy his sprawling 57-acre Eckerton Hill Farm in Oley Valley, panoramic photographs of which graced the walls around the room. Stark has been farming for two decades and is a recognized national pioneer of the local food movement.

Traditionally, Stark has sold most of his tomatoes at Union Square Greenmarket and to high-end chefs in New York.

"Twenty years ago, I couldn't get anyone to buy heirloom tomatoes locally," Stark said.

But times have changed, he said, and local food consciousness has finally come home to roost. Now his business includes an 80-member CSA (community supported agriculture) in which buyers pay upfront for produce all season, and a local farmers market in Reading. It's a drop in the bucket, he

concedes, but Stark said he's open to shifting more of his business even closer to home as the market dictates.

Chizmar opened Bolete seven years ago with the goal of serving locally produced, farm-fresh food and has been hugely successful. Recently Bolete was named one of 105 hottest new restaurants internationally by Conde Nast Traveler magazine.

Chizmar said he found serving that goal was a little tough initially because he didn't have time to go look for local farmers.

"There are parallels between farmers and chefs, and one of the things I feel is that they both work very hard," he said. "So I feel funny about saying, 'I need you to come knock down my door.' "

Common Market's stated mission is to strengthen regional farms while providing the infrastructure to connect the public, businesses and institutions to local sustainable farmers.

Puglia said he came on board as the nonprofit was negotiating with a large food service company that had specifically requested Lehigh Valley farm products for its Lehigh Valley institutional buyers.

"That's one of the reasons why I'm here tonight and one of the reasons why I've been coming to visit quite often and hopefully set up some of the relationships in the Lehigh Valley, because it's requested that they get your product, which is good news for you and for us as well."

One big challenge for farmers selling to institutional buyers is that the product needs to be both better and cheaper, Puglia said, considerations he suggested are somewhat offset by the opportunity to consistently move volume.

Willingness to deliver to one of two aggregation points — one being set up in Fleetwood, Berks County, and another planned for the eastern Lehigh Valley — or directly to Common Market in Philadelphia for redistribution back to the Valley offers another plus for doing business, he said.

During a Q&A session, one audience member unmasked himself.

"My name is Jon Middleton, and I represent the company, I think, that Andrew mentioned earlier asked Common Market to come to the Lehigh Valley. I work at Muhlenberg College for Sodexo. Sodexo represents 46 pieces of business in the Lehigh Valley from hospitals, and health care facilities to colleges ... I don't know what the exact number is, but it's probably \$200 million in sales annually."

Middleton said it's a simple equation — consumers are demanding healthy local food and that equals business for farmers, distributors, restaurants and institutions.

"Basically this is the way we see it: We want really good local nutrient-dense food," he said. "People who know me are pretty tired of me talking about spinach and how spinach loses most of its nutrient content in the seven days it takes to get here from California or Florida or Texas."

The event was sponsored by the Nurture Nature Center, Easton Farmers Market and Buy Fresh Buy Local of the Greater Lehigh Valley.

Dan Sullivan is a freelance writer.