

How a small Amish farm co-op came to supply D.C.'s top restaurants

By Scott Rodd June 5

With a crop of curly brown hair that folds under his fraying straw hat, Emanuel Stoltzfus stands beside a split-rail fence at the edge of his Pennsylvania farm and watches a heavy fog scuttle across distant hilltops.

“I was itching to get my fingers in the dirt,” says Stoltzfus, 41, who lives in Doylesburg. “So I grew some winter squash.”

That was 10 years ago. His start with Path Valley Farms — a co-op that connects many of the Amish farmers in Franklin County — was intuitive and unceremonious. He harvested that squash and took it to the co-op’s loading dock, where produce is gathered, sorted and boxed for deliveries.

Before joining the co-op, Stoltzfus picked up work hours at a nearby pallet factory. Other farmers used to bounce between carpentry and construction jobs. But as Path Valley Farms grew over the past decade, the co-op has become a lifeline for this Amish community. Farming has re-emerged as a sustainable venture, which, according to Stoltzfus (now the co-op’s president), helps preserve a central pillar of Amish culture: “Families can work together.”

Washington’s flourishing restaurant scene has been the primary driver of Path Valley Farms’ success. The co-op’s 20 Amish family farms supply vegetables, fruits, herbs and other goods to more than 50 of the District’s best restaurants. As chefs have become more focused on farm-fresh produce, they have grown dependent on the co-op’s curated selection. Some also have forged connections with the farmers, allowing them to fine-tune what they order. It’s a curious, symbiotic relationship: Cosmopolitan restaurateurs and pragmatic, tradition-bound Amish farmers occupy opposite ends of the lifestyle spectrum. But one thing has brought them together: A faith in the sacred produce of the earth.

A Pennsylvania native named Bonnie Wilson started Path Valley Farms in 1999, buying produce from about 10 local Amish farmers and selling to a handful of restaurants in the District. For nearly a decade, she grew her clientele and recruited farmers throughout the valley. In 2007, she stepped down as owner and gave the business to the farmers to run as a co-op.

“There was a fair amount of anxiety when she turned it over to the farmers,” said Katie Joynt, the co-op’s produce coordinator. “They were unsure if it would continue to be successful.”

For the farmers, running a business that required coordination among multiple farms and delivering goods across state lines was daunting. At the heart of the Amish belief system is the idea of separation from the world at large — both socially and technologically. Electricity, the Internet, phones and other technologies are banned in most traditional Amish communities. This posed a significant hurdle when the farmers were figuring out how to run the operation. Additionally, selling produce directly to D.C. restaurants meant bending the commitment of separation. But the payoff was deeply appealing: the opportunity to work and live on the same land that has been the lifeblood of Amish families for generations.

The farmers wasted little time. They set up a board to delegate growing responsibilities and establish bylaws. Board meetings would be conducted in Pennsylvania German and the co-op would have no advertising or Web presence. Even Wilson’s phone number, which had been transferred to Joynt, would be removed from the side of the delivery truck.

The farmers also built by hand a loading dock and icehouse, which serves as a central node for operations. During the winter, a shallow pool outside is frozen over and broken into large blocks of ice, which are packed into the icehouse to keep it cool year-round.

The board appointed a dock manager, who doubles as an accountant, and hired Joynt to manage the communications and deliveries. As a Catholic, Joynt is one of only a few co-op employees who are not Amish, which allows her to communicate with Washington chefs via email and phone. (The delivery driver and one family of farmers are Mennonite, who follow less-strict practices than the Amish.)

“Everyone learned what they had to,” recalled Joynt.

Before long, the co-op was humming along. Every January, growers submit their “commitments,” or what produce that they plan to grow for the year. There are “first growers,” who supply the majority of that item, and “second growers,” who supply additional produce as needed. When chefs submit their weekly orders, farmers typically harvest the produce and send it to the dock on the same day. Thirty percent of the revenue goes toward operational costs, such as purchasing new equipment, and the rest goes directly to the farmers. At the end of the year, if there is a surplus, some of the money is divided among the farmers as a profit share and the rest goes back to the co-op.

When Path Valley Farms became a co-op in 2007, it sold produce to 11 restaurants in the Washington area. But as the number of restaurants steadily increased, so did the number of families who joined the co-op and began to rely on farming to sustain themselves.

Eli, a farmer who helped the business transition into a co-op (and asked to be identified only by his first name), also operates a sawmill and a stovepipe business, but farming has become his main source of income. On an afternoon in early April, Eli walked down a row in his greenhouse, noting the dozens of tiny sprouts. During cold months, his greenhouse remains a balmy 75 degrees, heated by a stove the size of an Oldsmobile that burns scrap wood from the sawmill.

“We’ll have our tomatoes ready in another two weeks,” he said, rubbing one of the leafings between his dirt-caked thumb and forefinger. “We have pineapple tomatoes, Cherokee purple tomatoes — all kinds.”

The farmers grow specific types of produce in a kind of inheritance system. Those who grow something one year have first dibs on it the following year. If they elect not to grow it again, they can gift the selection to their children or another family. Eli’s 16-year-old son, for example, has taken on more responsibility, and Eli expects to hand off some of his produce to him in the coming years. His daughters help plant horseradish and herbs such as purple basil, horseradish leaves, mint and parsley.

During winter, Eli’s wife uses a homemade incubator of wood pallets, a plastic tarp and a kerosene lamp to help speed up the germination process. The temperature inside the incubator can be modulated by adjusting the length of the lamp’s wick. She also helps grow flowers, which restaurants use for decorations and garnishes.

For all the pride that Eli takes in the produce he grows, he hasn’t eaten at any of the restaurants that feature his produce. Some offer samples to the men during deliveries, but there’s no time for a full meal.

“Usually, we’re just too busy,” Eli said.

The farmers take turns riding in the truck and deliver produce to as many as 35 restaurants in a single trip. For diners, the sight of men clad in straw hats and suspenders can be a little jarring.

“I usually tell people there’s a horse and buggy out back,” said Nick Stefanelli, chef-owner of Masseria near Union Market. “A lot of people fall for it.”

Stefanelli learned about Path Valley Farms the way many chefs around town do: through word of mouth. When he opened Bibiana downtown in 2009, one of his line cooks recommended the co-op after working at another restaurant that ordered from it.

“The ability to talk to the person who’s providing what comes through the door is phenomenal,” he said. “I can say to a grower, ‘Can you harvest these beets a little earlier so they can be slightly smaller?’”

By communicating directly with farmers, Stefanelli can tailor produce before it hits the plate. A signature dish at Masseria, the pinzimonio, is a canvas of mini vegetables, edible flowers and other seasonal produce offered by the co-op.

Joynt, the produce coordinator, helps facilitate these conversations. But her role is much bigger than managing delivery orders; if Path Valley Farms is a wheel, one farmer said, “Katie is the hub.”

Joynt first encountered Path Valley Farms shortly after it launched, when she was the co-owner of a small, organic grocery in D.C. called Good Food. She bought excess produce right off the truck when the farmers made deliveries to restaurants and soon she started ordering regularly.

After Joynt and her husband had their first child in 2000, they decided to raise their family in a quiet setting and moved into a house near Bonnie Wilson, whom they had met through Path Valley. Joynt spent her first few years in central Pennsylvania raising her children and working as an apprentice to an Amish midwife. When she took the position at Path Valley, she assumed many of Wilson's responsibilities, including growing the clientele, overseeing deliveries and orchestrating communication among farmers and chefs.

Today, Joynt serves as a kind of midwife between the soil in central Pennsylvania and the table in Washington. She also works to introduce chefs to produce that isn't available through other vendors.

Esther Lee, the chef at Obelisk, recently ordered — at Joynt's suggestion — wild garlic that was foraged from the woods of central Pennsylvania.

"I wasn't sure what to expect," said Lee, who has been a customer for over a decade. "But the garlic worked out really well when I used it to braise a suckling pig."

While high-volume restaurants would struggle to meet demand if they relied solely on Path Valley Farms for produce, the co-op caters to small restaurants such as Obelisk that emphasize variety and attention to detail.

"I struggle to make the minimum order from other vendors," Lee said. "But I can order smaller amounts from Path Valley Farms; a couple pounds of watercress, for example, instead of a couple cases."

As evening settles over the city, guests file into Obelisk's foyer before being seated in the converted rowhouse's cozy dining space. Recent dishes from Lee featuring Path Valley Farms produce include ravioli with a green tomato sauce and nettle suppli. Across the city, restaurants buzz as the patrons leave another workday behind.

That's the time of day when activity starts to slow in Path Valley. On the Byler farm on a recent weeknight, a newborn calf settled into a hay bed near its mother and the family's children gathered inside before dinner. Mr. and Mrs. Byler, who requested that only their last name be used, made one last round through the greenhouse out back. Mrs. Byler led the way and shone her flashlight on a plow in the corner. Her husband had converted it from a tractor plow into a horse-drawn plow; before that, their sons had to spade the field with shovels.

The flashlight strobed across the greenhouse, illuminating nascent basil, sorrel, fernleaf dill and flat parsley. By now, the sun had disappeared below the hills; the day was done.

"The mission of it all," said Mrs. Byler, "is to make a living while working at home on the farm."

"It's been our heritage to think that way," her husband added.

Rodd is a Washington writer who bartends part-time at Red Hen in Bloomingdale.

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