

A Balancing Act

By Jessica Skinner

When you run an inn on a farm, visitors expect fresh, local farm food. The Inn at East Hill Farm has been delivering on this expectation since the mid-1800s, when the farmhouse was built on land that had been farmed since 1785.

Much like its guests from a century ago, today's visitors to the inn and 150-acre working farm sit down to as many as three meals a day — all freshly made at the farm. The typical comfort-food menu can include homemade soup, freshly baked bread, roast turkey and mashed potatoes.

The inn uses not only its own farm products — eggs and meat — but also buys fresh ingredients from other local farms including seasonal produce from Tracie's Community Farm in Fitzwilliam and Coll's Market & Deli in Jaffrey, berries and fruit from Monadnock Berries in Troy and milk from Manning Hill Farm in Winchester.

"We have made the commitment to buying local because it feels right. Consuming as much locally produced anything makes sense," says co-owner Sheri St. Laurent, whose parents met at the farm in 1963 while her father was a cook and her mother a waitress; the couple purchased the property in the 1970s. St. Laurent now co-owns the inn and farm with her husband and brother.

But keeping ingredients local — and still maintaining a year-round regular menu — is a balancing act, says St. Laurent. "Inn visitors expect consistency on the menu," she says. For example: baked chicken on Friday, roast beef on Saturday, turkey on



The Inn at East Hill Farm's family style dinners often feature fresh, local ingredients.

Sunday. This kind of regularity doesn't always lend itself to the spontaneity of what is available seasonally from local farms — except for vegetable side dishes. Local meat in particular, is hard to get to feed as many as 150 people every night all summer long, she says.

One solution to this dilemma, says St. Laurent, has been to create a "Local Farm Fare Dinner" one night a week, which features one meal with as many local ingredients as possible. "We held it on Monday night this past summer, our Italian night, and created a sauce with our own meat in it, which was a big deal for us," she says.


The inn's most popular local food event open to the general public is its annual "Grower's Dinner," part of the New Hampshire Farm to Restaurant initiative. "This is our best local dinner ... and it sells out," says St. Laurent. This year's dinner, held on November 13, featured turkey (raised on East Hill Farm), plus soup, side dishes and salads from local farms. Dessert was ice cream from Connolly Brothers Dairy Farm in Temple, topped with melted chocolate from Unbridled Chocolates in Marlborough.

Another major challenge to serving local food to hundreds of guests day in and day out is the cost. "We plan to continue using as much local food as we can ... but it has to be cost effective too," says St. Laurent.

The innkeepers have found creative ways to incorporate local foods without breaking the bank. For example, milk purchased locally is served to guests only at breakfast; local milk is not used for cooking or other meals.

"That's the balancing part ... and we do what we can," says St. Laurent.

The Inn at East Hill Farm's restaurant is open to the public for dinner at 6 p.m., by reservation only. The gift shop is open to the public and offers its own chicken, meat (beef, lamb and pork) and honey.

— Additional reporting by Marcia Passos Duffy 

Jessica Skinner, a certified biology teacher in the state of New Hampshire, helped organize the Monadnock Menus program between 2010 and 2011 and has since co-founded Re.Root.Ed, a program on the Seacoast of New Hampshire with the mission to grow the local food system through community collaboration.



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