

LOCAL FARMERS TEAM UP TO CREATE NATION'S FIRST-EVER GRASS-FED INTERNSHIP PROGRAM

Once a term tossed around by a few radical farmers and foodies, grass-fed meat has become a household word across the country. Nationwide, interest has hit a fevered pitch, sending restaurateurs, shop keepers, socially and health-conscious families and gourmets alike scouring the countryside in search of reputable farmers capable of producing top-quality meat on lush green pastures.

While America's leading food thinkers are crying out for high quality meat, rural communities are searching for a new generation of farmers who can safeguard the rural landscapes, protect the soil and water, and help to ensure a safe, nourishing local food supply.

Not surprisingly, the solution to both quandaries can be found right in Schoharie County.

Home to some of the most respected grass-fed meat producers in the country, Schoharie County is now going to host the first internship program in the United States geared specifically toward teaching a new generation of farmers how to raise environmentally responsible, healthful, humane meat.

"Raising grass-fed livestock isn't just a matter of opening the farm gate and forgetting about the animals 'til fall," says Shannon Hayes, educational coordinator of the Grassfed Interns program, and author of The Grassfed Gourmet. "A good farmer monitors his or her grasses constantly, making sure the animals are getting perfect nutrition while the land is being properly stewarded. Today's grass-fed livestock farmers need to have creative marketing strategies. They need to be sophisticated about cultivating sales venues without squelching fellow farmers' marketing efforts. They need to understand meat science, animal science, and the culinary arts. If they're going to make it, they've got to understand how to work within their community. They've especially got to learn how to get along with their farming colleagues."

Hayes should know. Sap Bush Hollow Farm has been grazing livestock since her parents, Jim and Adele, bought the property in 1979. Since 1999, the family has been involved with MADE in Schoharie County, a community coalition of pasture-based livestock producers dedicated to supporting one another in whatever capacity necessary as they pursue the ideals of sustainable farming. Since its inception seven years ago, many of the farmers in MADE have flourished, leading to the Grassfed Interns Program.

"The trouble we face," says Carol Clement, Grassfed Interns project leader and co-owner of Heather Ridge Farm in Preston Hollow, "is we've gotten pretty darn good at what we do, but we're not getting any younger." Like so many other farmers across the country, the farmers of MADE are faced with a need for energized, enthusiastic and helpful labor. "What's more," adds Clement, "we can't steward our land forever. We need to find the next generation and help them learn how to properly care for the earth and the animals."

And that is how the Grassfed Interns Program was born. Four different farm families, the Chichesters of Nagimor Farm in Warnerville, the Hayes-Hoopers of Sap Bush Hollow in West Fulton, the Clement-Harrisons of Heather Ridge Farm in Preston Hollow and the Norths of Northland Sheep Dairy in Marathon, came together to design an internship program with a formal educational component, which was funded in part by a nine thousand dollar grant from USDA's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program.

Throughout the summer, the interns, recruited from across the country, will work on their respective host farms, then come together two or three times each month for a series of workshops designed to provide formal education on a number of critical topics, including Holistic Management, meat science, monitoring the farm ecosystem, business planning and marketing, grazing land management, financial management and holistic livestock health.

The farmers of MADE are all hopeful that this will be the first of many years of the Grassfed Interns Program. They are partnering with Mick Bessire of Greene County Cooperative Extension, with aims to expand the program to several neighboring counties. "We know there are a lot of farmers in the area who could benefit from this program," says Bessire, "and we learned from this year's applicant pool that there are lots of talented young folks who want to learn from them. So we really want to see this program grow."

The farmers of MADE have opened their summer workshops to the public. The \$35 fee includes a homemade lunch and full-day seminar. For information on times, dates, topics and locations, visit www.grassfedinterns.com. Farmers interested in hosting interns for the 2007 season should contact Carol Clement at (518) 239-6234.