

# The Heartland Food Initiative

## Bringing High Quality Minnesota Foods to Minnesota Tables

by Karen Lehman, Minnesota Project Consultant

Is it possible to eat locally in Minnesota in February? Chefs prove that it is! In early February, Chef Paul Lynch of Fire Lake Grillhouse convened chefs from Restaurant Alma, Goodfellows, La Belle Vie, Solera and Vincent's in a benefit for the James Beard House in New York City.

While chefs from all over the country raise funds for this culinary center, (founded by Julia Child to honor James Beard, the father of American cuisine) this was a meal with a difference. The chefs and farmers who created an outstanding seven course meal did something many Minnesotans don't believe possible in the middle of winter—they crafted their courses with fresh high quality foods, 80% of which came from Minnesota.

Here in the depth of the Minnesota winter were handmade butters in the Old World European style, flavorful hazelnut oil with the same health benefits as olive oil, grass-fed bison, rabbit, wild rice, artisan cheeses, and wild herring.

The marvelous particularity of our local foods and efforts that encourage them are making Minnesota a richer and more exciting place to live in the rhythms of the seasons. At present, most consumers learn about such local-food efforts through direct relationships. You might know young people raising



vegetables in the Youth Farm and Market Project, you might worship at a church that distributes products from the Whole Farm Coop, or you may have personal connections with farmers who sell custom-processed beef, lamb or pork.

More Minnesotans deserve easy access to good, fresh local foods year-round, and the true impact of all of these efforts needs to be more

visible. Perhaps it is time to name what we do in a way that not only raises the profile of local food efforts in Minnesota, but helps unite these efforts in a common purpose? At the James Beard dinner, Chef Paul Lynch and the Minnesota Project announced a call for a *Heartland Food Initiative* that could unite the efforts of chefs, farmers, food processors, food distributors, grocery retailers, nonprofit organizations, and public institutions to: increase the availability of high quality sustainably-produced local foods, expand consumer awareness of the value and quality of these foods, and generate pride in Minnesota cuisine.

By announcing an initiative, we hope to create a space. To be used, that space now needs to be defined. In the coming months, the Minnesota Project will seek partners to convene a series of conversations about the value of promoting a regional food identity for Minnesota and western Wisconsin. Maybe it will help to link all kinds of existing efforts under a set of understandable goals. Hopefully, it will help new people participate.

At the James Beard Dinner and exemplified by Paul Lynch, we witnessed the energy that people have to bring fresh local foods to Minnesota tables. Let's build on that energy and harness it to make this a region known for its food. ☞

### *Local Food Initiatives*

The success of the James Beard dinner highlighted what is happening all over Minnesota as creative people find ways to grace Minnesota tables with local foods. The initiatives have become almost too many to name: farmers in the **Southeast Food Network** in southeast Minnesota provide meat, dairy products, fruits and vegetables to area retailers and restaurants, while farmers associated with **Pride of the Prairie** in West Central Minnesota provide food to the **University of Minnesota Morris campus**. The **Midwest Food Alliance** certifies sustainably-produced foods for retail and food service markets and partnered with the **Minnesota Farmers Union** and local chefs to highlight local sustainable foods at the **Minnesota State Fair**. The **Local Foods Working Group**, convened by the **Minnesota Project**, links sustainable farmers with **Sysco Corporation** to increase availability of sustainably-produced local foods to Minnesota restaurants. The **Minnesota Department of Agriculture**, the **University of Minnesota**, and nonprofits such as the **Land Stewardship Project** provide marketing support and technical assistance for sustainable farmers, and have been instrumental in promoting local food networks. Meanwhile, farmers' markets from St. Paul to Plainview are crowded with faithful buyers committed to finding the freshest foods possible. ☞

