

# Getting back to Easton's roots

By **Laura Modlin**  
*Correspondent*

A group of local parents feels that not only are the town's farms an important part of Easton's culture, but they also provide an ideal way to help nourish children as they learn and grow.

Victor Alfandre, father of two Samuel Staples Elementary students, is spearheading an effort to create a farm-to-school program in Easton.

The Connecticut Farm to School program "is a statewide program designed to use Connecticut-grown fresh fruits and vegetables in your schools' cafeteria meals and snacks," according to the state Department of Agriculture's Web site.

Schools from more than 15

districts throughout the state participate, including Bridgeport and Fairfield.

And according to the National Farm to School network's Web site, more than 2,000 school districts participate in Farm to School programs across the country.

"A Farm to School initiative [in Easton] is a win-win-win situation," said Alfandre, who has been delighted with the "overwhelming enthusiasm" he has received for the idea.

It was actually several ideas coming together at once that led him to pursue this.

For one thing, he believes the program appeals to people who feel that "the quality of food



Laura Modlin

Natasha Sherwood, 6, looks on as her father, Tom Sherwood, gives Jason Alfandre, 8, and his brother Evan, 5, a sample from Sherwood Farm's corn field.

- see **Farming** on page 18A

# Farming

Continued from Page One

in the school cafeterias is abysmal."

There is also the issue of questioning what will become of the town's farmland as we march toward the future.

Alfandre believes it's not enough to preserve the land.

"Then it becomes overgrown," he said. "In order to have farmland you need to have farmers."

And Alfandre believes giving local farmers a guaranteed source of income will help keep them in business by improving the "economic viability of farming."

In addition, with fuel prices climbing higher by leaps and bounds and conservation on the minds of many, Alfandre sees fiscal and green incentives.

"Most of the food in the cafeteria comes from a warehouse in Chicago," said Alfandre, while there are several farms providing an array of food, including produce, eggs and honey in Easton and the neighboring towns.

"Candee's is across the street and we're getting tomatoes from Mexico ... it doesn't make sense," said Alfandre, who sees the town decreasing its carbon footprint by buying locally.

But one of Alfandre's littlest reasons for doing this is his son, Jason, 8, a third grader at Samuel Staples Elementary.

And Jason, who believes that "the school's food is worse than candy nutritiously," is behind his dad on this idea 100 percent.

"If the school changed the food to locally grown food, kids could buy school lunches and have it healthy as opposed to artificial flavors," Jason said.

His parents make lunches for him to take to school, but Jason used to buy the occasional meal at the Staples cafeteria. However,

when he found out that his favorite dish's main ingredient is trans fat, all that changed. Trans fat, a type of unsaturated fat generally made from partially hydrogenated oils, has been linked to an increased risk of heart disease.

Jason refuses to eat the school's food now.

"I stopped eating it," he said. "You can't digest trans fat properly, so it's bad for you."

The family frequents local farms and Jason eats some vegetables that are grown locally.

"My favorite green is asparagus," he said.

Jason believes using locally grown food in the school cafeteria "would be healthy and fresh."

He also thinks having science class in a greenhouse someday would be much better than in a classroom.

"Staples would start to look like Hogwarts in 'Harry Potter,'" Jason said.

But getting food locally is not a made-up story or even such a new idea.

Tom Sherwood grew up in Easton and remembers local food at the schools.

"Milk came from Snow's farm," he said.

Sherwood runs Sherwood's farm, which has been owned by his family since 1713. It is across the street from the Helen Keller Middle School on Sport Hill Road.

Sherwood thinks "it's a good idea to get people some fresh food" and would be pleased to participate in the program.

"I'm happy some people are finally taking an interest," he said. "Other towns are taking an interest, too."

He believes the students would enjoy eating locally grown food.

"Local vegetables are grown for taste, not shipping ability," he said, noting that seed catalogs sell different varieties of seed classified by whether you need the food to taste good or last longer.

Sherwood noted that even though the growing season in

Easton is mainly during the time school is not in session, "you can freeze just about any vegetable" and have it throughout the year.

Victor Alfandre has also considered the growing season in his plans.

"The growing season can be dramatically extended," he said, bringing up such options as heated greenhouses, freezing food, and creative menus and planning.

"Squashes store for a tremendously long time," he said. "You could make soup from vegetables and freeze it."

But Alfandre recognizes that it's a long road to get there and there are hurdles to overcome.

"The training, etc., will have to be planned," he said. "We'll have to train the cafeteria staff to be cooks. The whole system will have to undergo some type of reinvention and retooling."

He feels something like a salad bar is a shorter term goal since it "doesn't require a lot of training."

The bottom line to Alfandre is that this is about community.

"It's about Easton," he said. "It's much more than a food issue." Alfandre sees it as a way "to make Easton a more vibrant place to live" and to address "core issues we all have in common."

"My whole motivation is to strengthen the Easton community," he said.

Toward that end, Alfandre has been approaching town groups.

Earlier this month he met with the Democratic Town Committee. After some discussion and a lot of positive feedback, the group voted unanimously to "support the concept."

Tuesday night he presented the idea to the Land Preservation and Acquisition Authority, of which he is a member, and they also happily voted unanimously to "support the concept."

Alfandre's next step is to continue rallying support en route to an Easton Board of Education meeting later this year.

"I'm really looking forward to

presenting this idea to the Board of Ed in the near future and working with them to make this happen," he said.

The local school district's food service contract is with Sodexo Inc. and that contract is due to expire in June 2009.

But Alfandre says he has every reason to believe the company could accommodate a Farm to School program for Easton.

He says the company "is flexible and supportive of this type of thing" and works with school districts "on bringing in local vegetables."

So far about 60 people outside of town groups have expressed their interest in this program to Alfandre.

"It feels like I'm tapping into pent-up demand," he said. "People are eager to have this happen. They're just waiting for someone to take the initiative. That's the impression I get."

He would like to start slowly, maybe arranging for something as basic as apples from Silverman's, but hopes this will grow well beyond that.

"We can either get local farmers to dedicate a greenhouse or maybe Staples can build their own," Alfandre said, observing that "the school is built to look like a farm" and has "all that farmland."

He looks to the Bloomfield school district as his ideal.

They have incorporated farming and local food into their curriculum, going so far as to have students interacting with local farmers and even growing food for the school.

"New England was settled by farmers," said Alfandre. "This is an opportunity to connect kids to the land. It's good stewardship."

Alfandre feels this is a way to help safeguard the future.

"It's a great way to teach our children to take better care of themselves, the town and their planet."

For more information e-mail Victor Alfandre at cava@sprintmail.com.



**G** Easton Courier - Getting back to Easton's roots - October 16, 2008  
Copyright Easton Courier 2008, used with permission. All rights reserved.