





'TIS THE SEASON TO EAT local

Central New York farmers and makers
offer flavorful ingredients for holiday feasts

BY ALLISON KENIEN

Holiday meals have a long history of being farm-to-table affairs, and in Central New York it's easy to keep with tradition.

Our region is one of the most diverse agricultural areas in the state. We feed the nation with milk, cheese, apples, corn, maple syrup and other fresh ingredients. The holiday dinner table is a place to celebrate the gifts that surround us, so filling your table with local foods is a perfect way to show gratitude for our area farmers and culinary artisans.

We are fortunate to have an abundance of food producers in our community. Here are just four of the many who are proud to supply the harvest for tables in Central New York and beyond.

Barb Hamlin, owner of Pied Piper Maple Products, fell in love with maple syrup while visiting a Vermont sugarhouse as a child. She relished the taste of her first maple leaf candy and tried to make the treat last all day in her sticky hand. Many years later, Hamlin was hiking on the southwest side of Otisco Lake when she noticed the area was packed with maple trees. She knew it would be the perfect spot for a sugar bush, so she bought the land, but her dream was put on hold while she raised her children. Her sugar house was

finally built in 2007.

New York state has the most tappable maple trees in the country, and Hamlin taps about 2,000 trees on her 29 acres of land. She bottles her syrup and offers varieties that are infused with all-natural flavors like coffee beans or cinnamon sticks.

"If you're going holiday shopping, maple syrup is the thing to get," Hamlin says.

Maple syrup is certainly a fall favorite and it gives winter recipes a comforting, woody flavor. It pairs well with seasonal staples like apple, sweet potato, bacon or rosemary, and it can be added to cocktails that use whiskey, rum or bourbon.

In addition to being tasty, maple syrup is considered a healthier replacement for granulated sugar; since it's less processed, it retains more nutrients.

Honey is another great sugar substitute that adds a subtle floral sweetness, and local honey can be found in many Central New York stores and along the road at pop-up stands.

Ray Lowe owns Hiwire Honeybees, one of the larger honey producers in our area, and he always has a large supply available during the holiday season.

Lowe was working for a landscaping company when

an employee from Guatemala told him stories about beekeeping at banana plantations.

“I kept telling him it seems like a painful way to make a living,” Lowe says. “He always told me, ‘It’s not like that — it’s rewarding and healthy.’”

Years later, the beekeeper had moved on, but the man’s stories stuck with Lowe and he decided to get two hives of his own. It was a surprise to his wife who knew that Lowe hated bees.



Top, cranberry chevre from Old Chatham Creamery. Above, Hiwire Honey.

“I like a challenge,” Lowe says. “I wanted to prove I could do it.”

Now, about 20 years later, Lowe has 160 hives and he expects to produce more than 7,000 pounds of honey this year. His biggest customer is Turning Stone Resort Casino, which purchases his honeycombs to use in their restaurants. He also sells honey in smaller quantities at the CNY Regional Market and through locally owned shops.

Like maple syrup, honey holds more nutrients than sugar. Not all honey is created equal, though, since the manufacturing process used by large retailers can cause it to lose many nutritional benefits. Local raw honey retains amino acids, vitamins, minerals and antioxidants because it’s not microfiltered or heat processed.

Honey adds warmth to holiday glazes and marinades, and it dresses up a charcuterie board or cheese plate. Just imagine serving the tastes of Central New York to your guests by presenting a spread of maple-coated nuts, local honeycomb and farm-fresh cheese.

Dairy is the leading agricultural product in New York state, and Central New York creameries produce cow, goat and sheep cheeses made using

milk from area farms.

Old Chatham Creamery in Groton produces award-winning products and their cheeses have received acclaim from national outlets like the New York Times, Food + Wine, The Daily Meal and the BBC. David Galton and his wife, Sally, own the creamery as well as the dairy farms that supply the sheep, cow and goat milk. The couple decided to acquire the creamery in 2014 at the tail end of David’s 33-year career as a dairy science professor at Cornell University.

Old Chatham Creamery makes festive Wegmans cranberry chevre, which is often prominently displayed at the front of the store in November and December. They also make the “Professor’s Brie” for Wegmans, which is a mixture of cow’s milk, cow cream and sheep’s milk.

“There are very few sheep milk creameries in the country,” says Galton. “It’s unique and it’s a niche market.”

Sheep’s milk is higher in protein, calcium, potassium and vitamins than cow’s milk, and it has less lactose. Plain yogurt from sheep’s milk is a healthy substitute for sour cream and it can be used in recipes like potatoes au Gratin, green bean casserole or coffee cake.

Wegmans also sells the creamery’s herb chevre and honey chevre, which can add pizzazz to your seasonal salads. Pair it with a local dressing or vinegar, like the ones from Clean Slate Farm.

Holiday meals and gifting served as the original inspiration for Clean Slate Farm. In 2014, Joanne and Dave Lenweaver wanted to make Christmas gifts that were handmade at their micro farm in Apulia. Dave is a professional chef trained at the Culinary Institute of America, and he developed a fig balsamic vinegar that they bottled to share with friends and family.

Dave went on to experiment with other infused vinegars using their home-grown garlic and locally sourced maple syrup. After developing a wide range of flavors, the Lenweavers started selling at farmers markets and local stores like 20|East in Cazenovia and Rhubarb Kitchen & Garden in Skaneateles.

In addition to vinegars, the Lenweavers make spice rubs, marinades and CinnaMaple, a cinnamon-maple sugar blend. They recommend their Matson blend to bake a holiday roast that has a nuanced balance of sweet and heat.

PHOTOS BY AMELIA BEAMISH



Top, infused vinegars from Clean Slate Farm. Above, maple syrup from Pied Piper Maple Products.

Both Dave and Joanne had prior experience promoting food products. Before launching their own culinary line, they owned a marketing and design firm where they served clients like The Stilton Cheesemakers' Association, Parmigiano Reggiano and Vermont Cheese Council. Given their past ventures, it's no surprise that their new business took off quickly.

"We are supposed to be retired and we are working more than ever, but we are having a fun time and meeting so many great people along the way," Joanne says.

Joanne's sentiment captures the spirit of buying local ingredients for holiday meals. Whether it's rub for your roast, cheese for your charcuterie, honey for your ham or syrup for your sweet potatoes, a table that's covered with regional treats is more than just a table full of food. It tells the story of our community and it unites us as neighbors.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- » Find Pied Piper Maple Products at the Fayetteville Farmers Market or place orders via email: barbhamlinpiedpiper@gmail.com.
- » Find Hiwire Honeybees products at the CNY Regional Market, Carol Watson Greenhouse, Green Planet Grocery, Tully Market and in store and online at BeeKind.
- » Find Old Chatham Creamery products at Wegmans, Whole Foods, GreenStar or online at oldchathamcreamery.com.
- » Find Clean Slate Farm products at the Fayetteville Farmers Market, Cazenovia Farmers Market, 20|East, Carol Watson Greenhouse, Rhubarb Kitchen & Garden, Oliver's Produce, Salt City Artisans, Tully Market and online at cleanslatefarm.com.