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Speak up, if you want your (Jersey) asparagus

by **Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco/For The Star-Ledger**

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As the mercury inches upward and the local asparagus season heats up in response, in the upper reaches of Bergen County, Ron Binaghi, Jr., of Stokes Farm in Old Tappan tries to steer clear of his 15 rows of green and purple-tinted spears. "I can't pick it because when I'm out there, I keep eating it," he said.

Through mid-May, he hopes to sell as many bundles of asparagus as can escape his own dinner plate at three New York City Greenmarkets.

Down in Cumberland County, Susie Dare and her son, Lewis DePietro, of Cherry Lane Farms in Bridgeton, are busy tending their 10 acres of

asparagus, which they'll sell at the Union Square Greenmarket in Manhattan until early July. "We farm in New Jersey, but we go strictly to New York," said Dare. "We do better in New York; there's more volume of people."

At Riviera Produce, a produce distributor in Englewood, Joel Somerstein is looking forward to sourcing locally grown asparagus. "When you get a big beautiful box of asparagus, it's easy to sell," he said. "Anything grown and consumed soon to when it's picked is going to be better, especially a perishable product like asparagus." Most of the asparagus he handles will go to restaurants -- across the Hudson River.

Meanwhile, area supermarkets are promoting white asparagus from Peru, "spaghetti" asparagus from Mexico, and jumbo asparagus from California. The local crop, explained Somerstein, "isn't such a bumper crop that it'll make it to the supermarket level." And yet, with about 1,000 acres planted with asparagus, New Jersey is the nation's fourth largest producer, albeit a distant fourth behind California, Washington and Michigan.

Local growers started cutting asparagus about two weeks ago. "The quantity has been up and down because of the temperatures. But from now until late June, we're going to have asparagus," reported Wes Kline, a vegetable specialist with the Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Cumberland County. "Once you have a straight week of really warm weather, then it comes on crazy," said Dare.

Several supermarkets, such as Kings, plan to stock New Jersey asparagus as soon as it's more readily available. Whole Foods and Wegmans will, too, along with pre-washed and trimmed asparagus from Sheppard Farms in Cedarville, packaged in microwavable 10-ounce pouches developed in conjunction with Rutgers University's Food Innovation Center. "It's convenience. The asparagus holds up really well in there. It's a breathable package as well as microwavable," said Tom Sheppard, who cultivates 150 acres of asparagus.

Finding locally grown asparagus may not be so convenient for many New Jersey consumers, however, unless they live near a farm that grows it. "Stores want year-round supply. They don't want to deal with a lot of little farmers," said Scott Walker, president of Walker Brothers Farm in Pittsgrove in Salem County, who harvests about 30 acres of asparagus spears. If Gov. Jon Corzine succeeds in eliminating the state's Department of Agriculture, the situation will worsen, predicted Binaghi. "Any time you see Jersey Fresh, that's the Department of Agriculture. They help get Jersey produce in stores," he said.

"It's a totally different marketing system than we had 30, 40, 50 years ago," said Steve Garrison, professor emeritus at the Rutgers Agricultural Research and Experiment Center in Upper Deerfield and head of the university's asparagus breeding program, one of only a few worldwide. "The local store buyers, for the most part, don't have a choice where they buy from. They have national buyers who buy for their whole chain. Sometimes they may buy some from New Jersey, but chances are they want to use a constant supplier, and usually that's a California supplier or a combination of California and Mexico supplier. It's very difficult for local suppliers to get into local stores."

Much of the asparagus processing industry has moved to Peru and Mexico, he added, resulting in shrinking asparagus acreage out west. And that trend has affected his own work.

the U.S.A.," he said. Whereas he once focused on developing such varieties as the ever popular Jersey Giant and Jersey Knight, which thrive under local growing conditions, his goal has shifted to the development of hybrids that will flourish in the warmer climates south of the border, where asparagus can be produced more inexpensively than it can be grown here.

For smaller growers, the lack of locally grown produce in area supermarkets can be a plus, however. "I like it because that means my competitors won't have it," said Greg Donaldson of Donaldson Farms outside Hackettstown. In the 20 years he's been growing asparagus, demand for his acre and a half of asparagus has increased to the point where he has stopped wholesaling it and sells it exclusively at his farm market. Peter Giller, proprietor of Pietro's Villa, a restaurant in Hackettstown, is an enthusiastic regular customer.

"As much as he could cut, I use," said Giller. "His asparagus is the best asparagus I've ever tried. It's tender, it's sweet, it's any size you want. I put it on the menu, and it's like hot cakes."

"There's no comparison (between locally grown asparagus and that which has been shipped long-distance). Until you try it yourself, you don't realize it can taste that different," said Walker.

Asparagus spears become tough as they develop fibers in their vascular system, which are designed to support a mature plant, explained Garrison. "The higher the temperature, the more rapidly the fiber develops. It starts at the base and works up to the tip," he said. Expressed as an equation, he added, toughness is the result of temperature times time. Ideally, asparagus should be chilled to about 35 degrees after picking and eaten as close to harvest as possible. Some stores stand asparagus in water or display it on ice to help prevent it from becoming fibrous. But all too frequently it's set out in cardboard boxes under hot lights or in full sun, depleting both its flavor and tenderness.

For this reason, said Donaldson, most people think the thicker the spear, the tougher the asparagus. "People got that thought from the stuff that's trucked here. Any asparagus gets tough if it's been sitting around for a week."

Ultra-thin asparagus, often marketed as "spaghetti" asparagus, is not necessarily of better quality and can, in fact, simply be the offspring of tired plants. "As the field gets old and weak, the asparagus gets very skinny," said Walker. In short, the circumference of the spears isn't a reliable indicator of quality. The best tasting asparagus will look firm and vibrantly colored and sport tight tips and moist bottoms. The less time spent traveling from field to stovetop, the better.

"Until the customer tells the store 'I'm not shopping here unless you carry Jersey produce,'" most supermarkets will continue to devote most of their shelf space to asparagus from out of state, even at this time of year, said Binaghi. "The customer has to be vocal."

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