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HEADLINE: A TOAST TO STATE FARMERS;
DINNER CELEBRATES HOME-GROWN FOOD, AND PRESERVING THE LAND THAT BORE IT

BYLINE: DEBORAH PETERSEN SWIFT; Courant Staff Writer

BODY:

Elizabeth Wheeler grew up with a vivid understanding of where the food on her table came from. In rural Puerto Rico in the 1960s, Wheeler did not have the typical suburban upbringing. Her family shopped in open-air markets where customers picked out the live rabbits and chickens that would become meals for the upcoming week.

But because most people in Connecticut don't see what they eat until it reaches the grocery shelves or the restaurant plate, Wheeler, director of development for the Connecticut Farmland Trust, seeks other ways to help underline for people the symbiotic connection between farm and food.

And what better way to reach them than through their stomachs? She is busily planning a September spread for about 600 diners, and every dish will be made with Connecticut farm products.

"The entire event is Connecticut-grown except the olive oil," is how Wheeler describes the fourth annual Celebration of Connecticut Farms planned for Sept. 12.

No. We're not just talking corn on the cob. Try strawberry popsicles, wine, cheese, mini-burgers made from grass-fed cows, charbroiled lamb and whatever other creations selected chefs and farmers come up with. The meals are as varied as farming has become in Connecticut, even as farmland disappears at a frightening clip. The meal is certain to dispel the stereotype that all farms are pastures with cattle milling around. Connecticut produces fish, cheese, wine and plenty of other foodie delights.

Some of the state's best chefs will prepare the food, which will be served at the home of conductor Skitch Henderson and his wife, Ruth. Though not farmers, they have preserved some of their land in New Milford for agriculture, and so they offered to host the event on their property this year. Joining Henderson, the founder of the New York Pops, will be actress Meryl Streep, honorary chairwoman Faith Middleton of WNPR and members of the Connecticut Plein Air Painters' Society, who will auction of their artwork.

Dressed in a summery, sleeveless dress, Wheeler sits in front of a PC at the trust's newly refurbished office in a historic brick building on Buckingham Street. Once part of the Hartford Food System and the Working Lands Alliance, the trust established itself as a separate nonprofit group in 2002 and has helped preserve four farms since then. The group hopes to help preserve at least another 1,000 acres of state farmland by the end of this year. Another of the trust's goals is to raise enough money to pay property owners for giving the

trust easements, which put restrictions on any changes that would destroy the agricultural integrity of a piece of land. Currently, the trust is accepting donations of easements from landowners, who, in turn, receive tax deductions for putting the easements on their property.

In preparation for the farm celebration event, Wheeler prints out a list of chefs and then a list of farmers. Her challenge is to match them up. Who can make the best of the milk from six dairy farmers who make up a collaboration called The Farmers Cow? Who gets the pig that John and Binnie Breakell are raising at Break Hill Farm in Goshen especially for this event? And who will transform the lambs donated by the Connecticut Sheepbreeders Association into a tasty dish?

"I started thinking of the idea where I would get chefs to participate and hook them up with producers," Wheeler explains. "So I'm the matchmaker."

It's a job she revels in, and it is hard to imagine someone better qualified. She attended culinary school when she was 17, she has cooked meals on transatlantic yachts, and yes, she has met Martha. (She worked for Martha Stewart's catering business in the 1980s and also worked on the food maven's first book.)

In her conversations with the chefs, Wheeler tries to "jumpstart" them to think up new ways to prepare the farm products. Talking to one chef, for example, she playfully chided him when he said he planned to make creme brulee. Everyone, she says she told him, does creme brulee. How about paneer? she suggested. Nobody else will do paneer, she said. The chef may eventually settle on making something different than the milky cheese of India and Nepal, but Wheeler is pretty confident he won't deliver creme brulee on Sept. 12.

Daniel Chong-Jimenez, executive chef at the Spa at Norwich Inn, already has his recipe in mind for the two lambs he will be in charge of. He plans a two-step cooking method. He'll start by rubbing the meat with a simple mix of garlic, black pepper and herbs and then slow-cook it ahead of time in an oven. Then, at the event, he will charbroil it over an open flame and serve the lamb in bite-size pieces. The flame-broiling will render the fat and liven up the flavor. "It will be a good way to add character," he says.

Chong-Jimenez figures that using local products is good for everyone. "You consume the foods from the area you are from, thereby helping the growers maintain their livelihoods and helping you put your best foot forward product-wise by providing the freshest ingredients," he says. Any time food is transported, it gets damaged, so the shorter the trip it makes from farm to plate, the better it tastes and the more nutritional value it provides, he says. At the spa, he uses Connecticut-produced products such as oysters, little neck clams, ricotta cheese, mushrooms and apples.

He says he looks forward to the farmland celebration. It is one of the few times the chef gets out of the kitchen to be with the people he cooks for, says Chong-Jimenez. That means he can see diners react to his culinary creations. "It's full contact."

And because he cannot resist making dessert, Chong-Jimenez also promises to serve strawberry milksicles: ice milk popsicles. He plans to get the strawberries and fresh milk from Fort Hill Farms in Thompson.

Of course, the event is about more than food. Wheeler sometimes gets philosophical about her dual role as an event planner and preservationist. She recalls what the executive chef at the Iranian embassy in Washington told her several years ago. "My job is the most important job because I set the tone," he said. Crucial conversations occur over the meals he serves. "The setting and ambiance I create with my operation has an important effect on how events transpire," Wheeler says he told her.

Wheeler feels a similar responsibility. "Restaurateurs all understand," she says. "It's stage craft."

Connecticut residents, polls show, are concerned about losing farmland, she says. With about 360,000 acres in Connecticut, farmland is less than 12 percent of the state's land base and is disappearing quickly. The trust estimates that 21 percent of the state's farmland has been developed in the last 20 years and that if the current rate of development continues, any farmland that is not preserved will be gone within two generations. Sometimes Wheeler gets calls from people who worry when they go to the farm stand and see that the farmer running it is near retirement age. What will happen to the farm when he calls it quits?

"It's an indication of how much concern there is and awareness of how fast things are being gobbled up," she said. "What I've observed is people are very much aware of this change going on, and they feel quite powerless of what to do about it."

She suggests "the usual. Get active. Get political." Some towns devote attention to farmland preservation, but many do not, she says. Also, she suggests that the person talk to the farmer about preservation if he or she knows the farmer well enough to broach the topic. Wheeler warns people to tread lightly, however. "That's a very touchy subject. It's their land. For most farmers, it is their only asset, and that is the rub," she says. The farmer might need the land to sustain them through retirement. "Or they think that," Wheeler adds.

There are several ways to guarantee that land will not be developed after the farmer is gone. And one of them, Wheeler hopes, has to do with showing people just how tasty farm-fresh food can be. The 2004 Celebration of Connecticut Farms, Food, Wine and Art will take place Sept. 12 from 12:30 to 5:30 p.m. at Hunt Hill Farm, 44 Upland Road, New Milford. Sponsor tickets are \$500; general admission tickets are \$125. To request an invitation, send your name and mailing address to info@ctfarmland.org, or leave a message at 860-241-0873. For more information, visit www.ctfarmland.org.

GRAPHIC: PHOTOS (3): COLOR, SHANA SURECK / THE HARTFORD COURANT; PHOTOS (3): A CELEBRATION OF CONNECTICUT FARMS in September will pay tribute to the state's farmers. Among the participants are Robin Chesmer of Graywall Farms in Lebanon, center foreground, where this picture was taken. In second row, from left, are chef Michel Nischan, Bill Peracchio of Hytone Farm in Coventry and Ned Ellis of Mapleleaf Farm in Hebron. In back, from left, are Diane and Paul Miller, Fairvue Farm in Woodstock; Elizabeth Wheeler, director of development for the Connecticut Farmland Trust; Lincoln Chesmer, Graywall Farms; Peter Orr, Fort Hill Farms in Thompson; Jim Smith, Cushman Farms in Lebanon; and Tim Slate of Lyman Acres in Lebanon. Below, it's milking time (automatically) at Graywall Farms.

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