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## Hudson Valley farmer points out path to success

BY STACEY SHACKFORD • CORRESPONDENT • DECEMBER 10, 2008

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ITHACA — Weathering the economic storm may seem more daunting to farmers than any frost or deluge, but Sam Simon was on hand to provide proof that it could be done.

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The former orthopedist retired and bought a milking dairy in the Hudson Valley. After five years facing declining prices and increasing production costs, he got fed up and decided to take action.

“It was costing \$18 per 100 pounds to produce the milk, and we were getting \$14 for it. I thought it was time for farmers to stand up for themselves.

“We’ve been raised to think milk is a commodity. But all milk is not created equal. We had a value-added product, but we were getting only \$0.03 extra per pound. That’s an insult.”

So he formed Hudson Valley Fresh, a non-profit dairy co-operative. He started with a handful of local farms who all adhered to high quality standards. They contracted with a local production plant that agreed to bottle their milk separately, and then sold the milk on to specialist markets, at slightly higher prices. Each member of the co-op was paid \$20 per 100 pounds of milk sold, which provided a living wage for their workers.

He said the enterprise has been a success. In three years, the co-op has gone from selling 400 pounds per week in six local stores to 40,000 pounds a week in a market that has expanded into New York City and retailers like Whole Foods and Stop and Shop.

He told conference-goers the biggest challenge is educating consumers and convincing them to spend a bit more for the added quality. To this end, he said taste testing has proven invaluable.

“Let the consumer put it to their lips. Let the consumer meet the farmer. Then when they take the product from the shelf, they will wrap it in their arms and become a dedicated customer.”

Cornell professor Todd Schmit encouraged farmers to look further afield and take advantage of a new technological take on an old means of transport — the railroad. The company Railex has started a refrigerated, 55-car train service that crosses the United States from Rotterdam to Washington and then to California in five days and is more environmentally sound than truck, plane or ship.

Profesor Miguel Gomez said innovative marketing could be key in a bad economy. Although fruit juice consumption has been on the decline overall, aggressive marketing of grape juice has led to a 25 percent rise in sales, he said. And 10 Riesling wines produced in the Finger Lakes received scores of 90 or above in a recent article in Wines and Spirits magazine, publicity that local vineyards could capitalize on.

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He said businesses should also turn bad news into good opportunities. The nursery market, for example, could soon suffer as municipal planting projects get cut, aging baby boomer gardeners become too old to manage their own lawns and new homeowners opt to spend their [money](#) elsewhere. He suggested nursery owners find new ways to sell their goods, such as marketing plants as stress relievers, environmental modifiers or symbols of friendship, or by providing services like landscaping.

His colleague, Bradley Rickard, said local farmers could also benefit from making the most of food trends. He predicts "phytochemicals" will become popular for their disease-fighting properties, and pointed out that many of them, such as polyphenols and quercetin, are found in locally-produced staples such as grapes and apples.

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