

# LOCAL HERO AWARD: FARM

## DREYER FARMS, CRANFORD

*The farm down the street.*

BY BETSY HIGGINS

On the street where I grew up, the arrival of spring was heralded by a progression of aromas. The snow and frozen ground would melt and Nomahegan Lake would spill over its banks. The smell of dampness would set in and remain for weeks. Five houses away, the Dreyers would plow their fields and that sharp, deep smell of fresh earth would waft down Cranford's suburban stretches. A few weeks later, manure was worked into the soil and that bouquet of organic tang would curl around the neighborhood on little tendrils. The sight of hay being removed from the strawberry and pansy fields as the weather broke and the first peek of color from the flowers was a feast for our winter-grayed eyes.

Pansies aren't planted on the corner of Springfield Avenue and Penn Road anymore. The 50-year tradition ended at Dreyer Farms when the greenhouse nursery stock became the more profitable crop. For the Dreyer family, it's all just part of the on-going, century-long evolution of their farm—now, the last working produce farm in Union County.

Supply must meet demand and today, according to John Dreyer, “the greenhouse nursery business is the number one most profitable farming segment in the state.” The farm's vegetable business is slowing, largely due to better offerings in grocery stores and competition from “entertainment” farms. Although their peppers, heirloom tomatoes, lettuce and other produce are coveted by locals and restaurants, the Dreyers, like many truck farmers who depend on street traffic and repeat customers, have had to modify their crop mix and product offerings to create a smoother flow of income throughout the year.

Spring is John's favorite season on the farm. The greenhouses are filled with perfect little seedlings, Mother Nature cannot tamper with their growth, and there is an aura of expectation in the air. During the three-month lag time between nurturing those little plants and

bringing the crop to market, payrolls are being met and invoices are still getting paid. The anticipation of a successful growing and selling season and the arrival of the first customers is high.

The challenges in bringing the Dreyer crop to market are varied and often unavoidable. In the 1970s, major summer floods would bring vegetables and hay from the Dreyers' land floating down our street. At their Springfield Avenue fields—the lowest of their five growing locations—the water table is only about 25 feet below the ground surface and a brook running through the property is prone to flooding during heavy rains. If the flooding occurs early enough, the crop can be replanted, and perhaps even salvaged, as was the case with last year's chrysanthemum crop.

By far the greatest challenge faced by John and Henry is the overabundance of deer. Forced from Watchung Reservation by overcrowding, small herds have migrated to any patch of forest available. Nomahegan Park is replete with deer that bed down during the day and forage the farm at night. Although deer fencing surrounds all of the Dreyer fields, the battle is epic. Henry believes that, in addition to development and hunting restrictions, the leashing of neighborhood dogs, even in large open areas, is a contributive factor. Sophie, the Dreyers' English setter, is a sweet yet formidable watchdog, but for the most part, deer are free to roam at will.

As a child, one of my tasks was to ride my bike to the farm on summer afternoons and buy our corn and tomatoes. Mrs. Dreyer was usually working the cash register and always gave a “bakers dozen.” Her passing in October at the age of 94 marked the end of an era. Henry and John Dreyer believe in the farm

as an institution. They couldn't imagine any other life. The rhythm, the challenges and the variety of duties suit them perfectly. John did teach school for one year, but quickly realized he was better suited for farm life. His daughter Jessica has committed to the family business and expectations are that Dreyer Farms will remain true to its roots for its fourth generation and far into the future.

I live in Wall Township now, where several family farms thrive. As spring arrives on these farms, the familiar smells of childhood drift about. This year as I watch the cyclicity of our local planting, growing and harvesting, I'll remember what Henry told me: “Farming is an act of faith, a crapshoot. Atlantic City may have brought legalized gambling to New Jersey, but New Jersey farmers have been gambling for 300 years.”

Dreyer Farms  
831 Springfield Avenue, Cranford  
908-276-1290



John, Jessica and Henry Dreyer

# LOCAL HERO AWARD: RESTAURANT

## A TOUTE HEURE, CRANFORD

*It's all about fresh food from local purveyors.*

BY MILLICENT K. BRODY

You know you've reached A Toute Heure, Cranford's newest French restaurant, because the scent of delicious fresh-from-the-farm and freshly prepared food leads the way. That's right, just park your car and follow the aroma of straight-from-the-oven and top-of-the-stove cooking. Simply designed, the tiny restaurant is reminiscent of a French countryside bistro. Filled with rustic wooden furniture and large paned-glass windows, the focal point of the dining room is a pair of enormous chalkboards listing the daily menu and local purveyors.

"We want people to feel as though they are enjoying dinner in our own dining room," says proprietor and executive chef Andrea Carbine, who shares her love of the restaurant and cuisine with her husband Jim. "We opened in May, and are delighted that so many people have found their way to our special place."

The name, "A Toute Heure," comes from a French saying that, loosely translated, means "at any time."

"Our menu is not fixed," adds Carbine. "We feature what's freshest at the market, or at the farms."

"My love affair with fresh food began while working at a popular Washington State restaurant located near a farm stand. Each morning, I'd visit the farm and choose the fruits and vegetables we were going to serve that day. I believe the presence of fresh produce actually enhances the flavor of every dish."

"My first employer's husband was a salmon fisherman. He'd do a primary catch in Alaska. Our restaurant would get the first catch of Copper River salmon. Nothing was more delicious."

After cooking in many of the country's finest restaurants, the creative chef enrolled in Manhattan's French Culinary Institute. While honing her skills, she became a personal chef and caterer. The next step for the Carbines was a restaurant of their own.

"I've always been inspired by chefs like Alice Waters of Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California, known as the mother of farm-market-to-table restaurants," Carbine says. "I started visiting Union Square Market in Manhattan. It wasn't long before I realized most of the farmers were from New Jersey. They were very excited about our featuring fresh produce and vegetables at A Toute Heure. We started working with John and Henry Dreyer, who run Dreyer Farms in Cranford."

"We always let Andrea know what's coming up in our garden," says Henry Dreyer. "That way, she can adjust her menu to what's being picked that day."

"We build our menu around our purveyors," Carbine explains. "If a farm provides us with fresh corn or fresh peppers, we'll serve a dish that features each of these vegetables or combine them for one special dish."

"We're especially delighted with the first spring vegetables. We look forward to fava beans, mesclun lettuce and tiny spring peas. Very often, I'll arrive early enough to greet the farmer as he is picking his first crop."

"I also knew I wanted to serve Copper River salmon. Vince Bruns, proprietor of Westfield Seafood in Westfield, was happy to source it in its prime season. We feature it for about a week and a half in July."

"The Copper River salmon is a wonderful fatty-tasting fish," says Bruns. "Andrea does her best to focus on local seafood, in addition to sourcing out the unusual. She always presents her clientele with whatever seafood is at its peak of the season."

Meat comes from John's Meat Market in nearby Scotch Plains. According to Vinnie Losavio, who owns the market with his brother Nick, Andrea seeks "the finest cuts" for her



menu.

Spotlighting their local partners is always high on the list at A Toute Heure. On Wednesday nights, they serve up complimentary bites of a favorite grower or supplier's products. The BYOB restaurant also presents cooking classes and special events, such as five-course wine dinners in partnership with Cranford neighbor NJ WineSeller.

As visitors enjoy their surroundings, they're often busy discussing menu options, which frequently change daily. Open Tuesday through Saturday nights for dinner, A Toute Heure recently began offering Sunday brunch from 11 a.m. – 3 p.m.

And don't forget to ask the Carbines about their newest acquisition.

"I'm proud to say that we're growing our own tomatoes, beans, herbs and lettuces," quips Chef Andrea. "Our little 'farm' is close to the restaurant."

"The best way to describe our food is honest."

A Toute Heure  
232 Centennial Avenue, Cranford  
908-276-6600  
atouteheure.com

Photo: M.K. Brody

# LOCAL HERO AWARD: FOOD ARTISAN

## BLACKWELL'S ORGANIC, RED BANK

*Pure flavor and good intentions.*

BY JENNIFER PAPALE RIGNANI

**M**arcia Blackwell meets me at the Red Bank kitchen where she and family members whip up 700 pints of dairy-free gelato and fruit sorbetto each Tuesday and Wednesday. Dressed in the comfy clothes of a person unafraid to get messy, Blackwell's cheerful, unassuming attitude is kind of like her products. "We just keep things simple here. No more than five or six ingredients in each kind and never any artificial flavorings," she explains as she opens a shipment of vanilla beans. Holding up a bunch of the pungent sticks, she invites me to smell them. The sweet, familiar scent drapes the small working kitchen.

We talk about food and fair trade and farming as she putters about the space she co-leases with three other area food businesses. She is

genuine in her commitment to the Earth and to farming. "It just doesn't take all that much to be conscious of what we put into our bodies, where we grow it, where we buy it and how we make it. For us, it's not just about making a good product but about doing good." The couple succeeds in their aim of running a business that has minimal impact on the environment and uses no preservatives.

Blackwell's Organic was born in 2005 when, after Marcia found herself out of work after her long-term telecom employer closed its doors, the couple decided to turn their passion into a business. Working directly with local and area suppliers and distributors, and with help from Rutgers Food Innovation Center, their goals have been met and by the end of 2008 a profit is expected. Though Blackwell points out that they aren't making organic gelato to make a killing, "just a living."

She hopes that people will realize after tasting their gelato that vegans and dessert aficionados alike are her customers. I'll admit, the idea of organic, dairy-, cholesterol- and gluten-free gelato made this Italian dessert addict nervous. Visions of cold tofu swirled in my head as I entered the building. But my fears were unfounded. Blackwell's Organic really, truly transcends categorization other than that of a great dessert.

In addition to Blackwell's popular mango, coffee, chocolate, peanut butter and strawberry flavors, which I devour guiltily, today the first-ever batch of blackberry is on the table in all its purple-pink glistening glory. A taste of this sour-sweet stuff transports me straight from January to July—and it's good.

The Blackwells' gelato is utterly pure, made from original recipes that use strict certified-organic processes and ingredients. This thoroughly modern business is explained by that centuries-old adage that necessity is the mother of invention. Necessity in this case came in the form of Tom Blackwell's lactose intolerance

combined with his love of gelato. Dissatisfied with available nondairy desserts, in 2004 he bought an ice cream maker and began tinkering with recipes. To mimic the milk in gelato, he experimented with rice milk, almond milk and water, finally choosing soy milk because it can thicken to a creamy texture when heated. Already an advocate of locally grown organic produce, he began adding strawberries to some batches and Jersey blueberries to others. Popular flavors like coffee are also custom made using triple-certified (fair trade, organic and bird-friendly) coffee or pure organic FairTrade cocoa. Blackwell's never uses fillers or extracts, preferring to see just how much real fruit or chocolate they can pack into a pint and still make it scoopable.

The Blackwells' commitment to making the world around them a better place doesn't end with licking the spoon. They live in a 100-percent solar-powered house and their company is a fixture at charity functions, where they regularly donate time, product and money. Their efforts seem infectious. As we chat over our gelato, a neighboring woodsmith pops his head in the back door to ask, how's it goin'? A lively discussion ensues about the benefits of wood mulch and composting. With the fragrance of vanilla and goodwill in the air, here on this chilly day in the middle of a busy world, this simple food and its creator seem to honor life as it should be.

Blackwell's Organic Gelato is now on the shelves of over 40 stores statewide and available in a growing number of restaurants. The company also ships throughout the continental USA through its online store.

Blackwell's Organic  
9 Catherine Street, Unit D, Red Bank  
732-229-8899  
blackwellsorganic.com  
gelatobymail.com



Tom and Marcia Blackwell

# LOCAL HERO AWARD: BEVERAGE ARTISAN

## SMALL WORLD COFFEE, PRINCETON

*A world of local community.*

BY LAURA SAYRE

Arriving as a new graduate student in Princeton in the fall of 1994, it didn't take long for me to locate the best coffee shop in town. What was surprising was that it too was a recent arrival: Small World Coffee opened its doors at 14 Witherspoon Street on December 22, 1993, ending (as I was told) years of inexplicable good-coffee drought in the Princeton area.

Before long, I had also heard the story of Small World's founding: trained at

a celebrated coffee shop in Ann Arbor, Michigan, partners Jessica Durrie and Brant Cosaboom had spent the better part of a year touring the country in search of a good college town in which to start a café of their own.

"Our criteria were that it had to have a walking downtown, with plenty of foot traffic, and that there be no other café in sight," recalls Durrie. Walkability was central to Durrie and Cosaboom's vision for the business as a community focal point.

"My belief is that places like Small World can fill a needed role as a third place—besides home and work—where people can enjoy serendipitous social interactions," Durrie explains. That's been a traditional role of the coffeehouse since the 18th century, but these days it requires intentional effort.

Small World engages the local community in every way it can. With a new artist's exhibition on the walls every month and live music on Thursday and Saturday evenings, the café serves as a stage for local artistic expression as well as a meeting ground for diverse segments of the local population, both town and gown. It regularly hosts book club gatherings and other events. And it relies as much as possible on local sourcing of ingredients.



"We try to use the food as a way to connect with people in the community," says Durrie. Cider from Terhune Orchards, eggs from Runnin' Free Organic Farm and seasonal produce from Cherry Grove Farm are just a few of the local items on the menu. This summer Durrie hopes to start buying herbs from the Princeton School Garden Cooperative, a network of kids' gardens at Princeton elementary schools.

"We don't claim to be all-organic or all-local, although we try to do that as much as is economically feasible. But everything we serve is real, authentic, clean food—no preservatives, no additives, everything made from scratch," says Durrie.

As for the coffee, Cosaboom says, quality goes hand in hand with environmental sustainability and social justice. "A lot of what are perceived of as socioeconomic variables can be tasted. The kind of coffee trees that provide the best flavors are also the most delicate, so you can't mono-crop them. They need to be grown at altitude, with windbreaks, so they're also going to be bird-friendly. To get the best beans, you have to harvest up to 20 times per season, so they need to be grown by farmers who care about quality."

rather, it was designed to achieve two things: to bring food preparation back to the retail level (space constraints had made it necessary to make the café's soups, sandwiches, cookies and other items in Rocky Hill); and to provide more opportunities for employees to grow within the company.

What's in store for the future? A new coffee bean roasting machine, recently arrived from Portugal, will not only make it possible to roast more pounds of beans at a time but will offer roast masters Cosaboom and March the ability to exercise greater control over the many variables that go into a perfectly roasted bean. They're also planning some additions to the menu, including all-natural homemade doughnuts.

But whatever changes are made, the café's friendly, lively atmosphere will stay the same. As Durrie puts it: "For our kind of small business to thrive, it has to have a sense of place."

Small World Coffee  
14 Witherspoon Street  
254 Nassau Street  
Princeton  
609-924-4377  
smallworldcoffee.com

Photo: Nancy Painter

# LOCAL HERO AWARD: NON-PROFIT

## SLOW FOOD NORTHERN NEW JERSEY

*Takin' it slow—and not a moment too soon.*

BY PETER CONWAY

My first introduction to Slow Food was at a Gambero Rosso wine event in New York City in 2006. I was so impressed by their purpose and success that I immediately joined the Northern New Jersey chapter. An outstanding organization completely made up of dedicated volunteers, Slow Food NNJ is gaining real momentum toward reviving the rich food and farming traditions of our “Garden State.”

Their success comes none too soon. With so much of our local fresh food sources severely diminished by aggressive development of corporate parks and suburban sprawl, along with the alarming growth of cheap mass-produced food, it is a time for action.

The international Slow Food movement was founded in Italy by Carlo Petrini in 1989. Shocked by the arrival of fast food establishments in Rome, Petrini embarked on a mission to inspire a global rediscovery and preservation of the traditions, ingredients and flavors of regional cooking, and banish the degrading effects of the industrialization of food.

Slow Food chapters are called *convivia* (the singular is *convivium*), a word derived from the Latin roots *con-* (with) and *vivere* (to live). A convivium, with the connotation of “sharing life together,” is a feast or banquet, a getting together with friends for a meal. Over 800 Slow Food *convivia* have sprung up worldwide, and Petrini says, “It is through these local groups that our philosophy of conviviality is best expressed.”

Each *convivia* sets its own mission and objectives. Slow Food NNJ strives “to connect earth-friendly farmers, food producers, and chefs with New Jersey palates by spreading awareness and nurturing appreciation of slowing down to enjoy healthy, locally grown food.” The group’s efforts last year included hosting events at New Jersey restaurants, such as an artisan cheese and beer tasting, as well as farm- and agriculture-related activities. In September, their volunteers turned out in force



Margaret Noon (r.), Slow Food NNJ leader, with Amy Kalafa *Two Angry Moms* producer.

to present the second annual Farm and Food Open House, cosponsored by the Foodshed Alliance, Northeast Organic Farming Association and Whole Foods Market.

But to think of the group as just about food events is too narrow a view.

Margaret Noon, the leader of Slow Food NNJ since 2007, has a bigger vision. By bringing media like film and books into the mix, Margaret and her steering committee are engaging members in a deeper social dialog and building action plans to address important issues like the terrible state of many New Jersey school lunch programs.

A recent event featured a screening of the film *Two Angry Moms*, a documentary that asks the question: What happens when two fed-up moms try to change the school lunch program? In spite of a snowstorm, over 65 people turned out to see the film and participate in the lively post-screening discussion.

“It is no secret that the food we serve our children is not up to healthy nutritional standards,” says Noon. “We use the film to raise awareness and gain support for addressing this

critical issue.” But Noon recognizes that stirring up protest is not enough. “We give people tools and information that enable them to address the problem in a realistic way.”

Slow Food NNJ also provides support through generous fund-raising efforts. This past spring, an event at the Van Vleck House and Gardens in Montclair raised over \$10,000 to benefit the Living Laboratories program of the Greater Newark Conservancy.

These events are fun as well as educational. What could be more enjoyable than a book club gathering at the Terra Tea Salon in Montclair, or a tomato tasting at the Frelinghuysen Arboretum in Morris Township (which attracted hundreds of people last summer)?

The increase in activity has generated attention and new members. “We are thrilled by the diversity of programs we are now offering,” says Pam Tonucci, Slow Food NNJ treasurer who also serves on the group’s steering committee with her husband Gary. “As a result our membership has grown by over 50 percent.”

Many exciting events are planned in the coming months. With the help of groups like Slow Food, scores of local farmers, winemakers and food artisans, as well as dozens of restaurants, farmers’ markets and retail stores, are succeeding while being part of a wholesome path of food production and enjoyment.

If you are passionate about food, consider joining Slow Food Northern New Jersey or its sister organization, Slow Food Central Jersey. Read, attend, join or volunteer. Your heart, health and palate will thank you. □

[slowfoodnnj.org](http://slowfoodnnj.org)