

# Two Area New Hampshire Farms Honored by State: A Tale of 2 farms

By JOSH STILTS Reformer Staff



Chris Caserta of Walpole Valley Farms talks about his farm which was just recognized by New Hampshire as one of the state's Farms of Distinction.

WALPOLE, N.H. - Two farms, across the road from one another, have been honored by the New Hampshire Department of Agriculture for their aesthetics and cleanliness. Alyson's Orchard and Walpole Valley Farm were each selected as a New Hampshire Farm of Distinction last week at the annual Farm and Forest Expo in Manchester.

When Chris Caserta opened the pages of Michael Pollan's book, "The Omnivore's Dilemma," more than a decade ago, he said he had no idea how it would affect his life. "I never had a desire to do anything with farming until I read that book," he said.

Caserta said he was so moved by a grass farmer, Joel Salatin, who is highlighted in the book, that he decided to go to Virginia to learn from him directly. "Chris came back a changed and passionate man," his wife Caitlin said. "I knew at that moment we were going to become farmers."

In 1998, with the help of his parents, Charles and Bonnie Caserta purchased what would become the Walpole Valley Farm and Inn. Between Chris, Caitlin, his sister and brother-in-law, and their parent's, who all now live within a quarter-miles of each other, discussed the proposition and began to purchase beef cattle in order to grow a herd. Additionally they added meat chickens, laying hens, turkeys and in the year, heritage pigs to the operation.

After extensive renovations to the farm's 1774 Colonial home to make it into a bed and breakfast, Chris' sister, Jacqueline, and her husband, Tim Caspersen, opened the doors to guests. With the addition of two three-bedroom cottages and a three-bedroom farmhouse rental, the Inn is capable of sleeping up to 28 guests as well as hosting small weddings, special events and business retreats, she said.

In 2009, the Inn was the first Monadnock Region business to be named Environmental Champion by New Hampshire's Sustainable Lodging and Restaurant Program for extensive green practices used throughout the property. "It's simple, common sense stuff really," Chris said. "It's all about going back to basics."

When the animals do as much of the work as possible, it allows the farmer to be less dependent on fuel and chemical fertilizers and creates larger profits, Chris said. Instead of housing the chickens in a cold barn for the winter, he took a page out of Salatin's teaching, and built a \$4,000 green house to store them in from October to May.

On average, the temperature stays around 70 degrees during the day, he said, and requires no electricity to keep them warm. Every few days they add wood chips to the dirt floor to help process the animal's manure, which they use to grow most of their vegetables during the spring, summer and fall months. During the warmer months, the laying hens are transported twice a day around the 100-plus acres of land in large cart called the Eggmobile.

"That way no piece of land gets over-used and the chickens are always exposed to fresh grass and bugs," Chris said. "My mission is to pasture all the animals." To contain the other animals lightweight, movable electric fences are set up for some time, then transferred to another piece of the property.

"The daily rotation insures that the pastures get nothing but natural fertilizer and the animals get to have their choice of millions of bugs and grass to eat," he said. "The fields have never been healthier and the animals never happier." In the numerous scares of E Coli, mad cow disease or other illnesses, the sources are always the larger commercial operations, not the local farms, Chris said.

"There's this big disconnect between humans and where they get their food," he said. "Responsible farming provides better tasting and healthier food without relying on antibiotics, chemicals or other medicines."

In the past two years the farm's sales have taken off by selling products to local restaurants and grocery stores such as Burdick's Restaurant in Walpole and Blueberry Fields in Keene, as well as directly at the farm.

The N.H. Farm of Distinction program was started in 1997 as a way to recognize state farms that go the extra mile for aesthetics and cleanliness, Caserta said. According to the nomination criteria, a recipient of the award must be a commercial, working farm with signage and appear pleasing, attractive and inviting. Buildings and fences have to be in good repair and painted as appropriate, hedgerows need to be trimmed, fields should be well-tended, orchards mowed, animals need to be clean and healthy and equipment should be stored or parked neatly.

The independent panel of agricultural leaders, historic preservationists and members of the general public didn't have to travel far to see the other farm of distinction this year. Alyson's Orchard, located directly across Wentworth Road from the Walpole Valley Farm was also selected.

The 16,632 trees, across 450 acres, produce everything from peaches, pears, plums, nectarines and more than 60 different types of apples.

"There's nothing the few days before harvest," orchard manager Homer Dunn said. "It smells great and is so beautiful to see all your hard work just hanging on the tree."

During the harvest Dunn said he hires about a dozen seasonal staff, four of which come from Jamaica and stay at the orchard for several months through a state-funded program. Since Dunn took over as orchard manager nearly eight years ago, the four men - Austin Powell, Vivian Wright, Donovan Grant and Errol Tolminson - have been essential in ensuring the fruit is picked at just the right moment, he said.

"They've been with me every year except last," he said. Because of an early spring and a late frost in May, the orchard lost more than 85 percent of its crop, Dunn said. "It was a tough season but we came through it OK. It'll be nice to have some help this year and see those guys again," he said. What kept the business afloat, he said, was all the other amenities they provide.

Bob Jasse, who built the orchard as a retirement project after selling his high-tech company in Boston, Mass., and his wife, Susan, struggled through the first several harvests in the early 1980s. That was until they realized the beauty and serenity of their property, an ideal setting to conduct weddings, event coordinator Fran Imhoff said.

"Many people say that coming here is a tradition, Imhoff said. "They're amazed by the beauty and how much we offer up here." In the following years they renovated an airplane hangar into a 100-person dining area, bought a nearby 1860s farmhouse and converted it into lodging. Each year the orchard hosts about 60 events, 25 of which are weddings, Imhoff said.

Dunn said one of the other draws is old apples, not the previous year's harvest, but more than 100 varieties of antique apples which he has planted. "We have five varieties from Kazakhstan, where most people believe is the birthplace of apples," he said. "We're not your average farm. We do things different."

The orchard is part of a lowspray program called Integrated Pest Management, something Bob always believed in and made sure continued even after he died in 2009, Dunn said. Working with entomologist Kathleen Leahy, tests are conducted on a regular basis to detail what types of insects are on the property. From that information they decide what the lowest impact solutions are so unnecessary chemicals aren't sprayed on the crops, he said.

After the awards ceremony Bonnie Caserta said, "My heart is so full, I feel so proud of my family."

Stoneridge Farm of Bradford and Zorvino Vineyards and Winery of Sandown were also selected.

On the web: [www.innatvalleyfarms.com](http://www.innatvalleyfarms.com), [www.walpolevalleyfarms.com](http://www.walpolevalleyfarms.com), [www.alysonsorcharard.com](http://www.alysonsorcharard.com).

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