



food



Kathleen Merrigan '82: Pioneer in Organic Food Policy

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for thought

Before farmers' markets, organic agriculture and seasonal produce became mainstream in America, two alumni set out to change the way consumers shop for food.

Barry Benepe '50: Father of the Modern Greenmarket

BY DENISE DIFULCO

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JON ROEMER

The year was 1976, and words like local, seasonal and organic weren't exactly front of mind for grocery shoppers. In urban areas and New York City, in particular, where food was shipped, flown and trucked in by necessity, what passed for a tomato was frequently flavorless and mealy. Peaches were small, hard and pea-colored. So when the first Greenmarket opened in a police parking lot at East 59th Street and Second Avenue, just a block away from Bloomingdale's department store, it was a bit of a revelation for city dwellers—at least for those who had never tasted a fully ripened peach in season.

Today farmers' markets are far more common, especially as consumers have become more culinarily sophisticated and environmentally aware. But when Barry Benepe '50 launched that first Greenmarket, it was a tough sell. All around the New York metropolitan area, farms were failing

and formerly verdant fields being converted into suburban cul-de-sacs, while city dwellers were being fed a steady diet of imported produce. As a planning consultant working on farmland preservation and open-space protection in the Hudson River Valley, Benepe began thinking about the symbiotic relationship that could be had between city and country—how the marriage of the two made sense both economically and ecologically.

He regularly spoke with Bob Lewis, a colleague who was working on a plan for Woodstock, N.Y., about how to stem the tide of farmland depletion. "We began kicking around this idea of farmers and food," Benepe says. "We thought it might be one way to address the issue of the loss of farmland."

The problem was that the city never saw itself as a critical marketplace for regional farm products. With no immediate political or popular support for their idea, the two men obtained an \$800 grant from the America the Beautiful Fund to do a feasibility study for a farmers' market. They eventually got the go-ahead from the office of then Mayor Abraham D. Beame.

The police gave over that tiny parking lot on the Upper East Side every Saturday starting in July 1976. The following month a second location opened at Union Square. Today the Greenmarket, still under the purview of the mayor's office through the Council on the Environment of New York City, operates 46 locations throughout the five boroughs—17 of which are open year-round. During the high season, more than a half million shoppers every week browse stands brimming with locally raised fruits, vegetables, eggs and meat. All told, an



estimated 30,000 acres of farmland have been preserved as a result of Benepe and Lewis' initial efforts.

Although he retired from the Greenmarket in 1998, Benepe is a regular and frequent visitor, especially to Abingdon Square, the location nearest his home in Manhattan's West Village. Sitting at the kitchen table in his fourth-floor walk-up apartment on a bracingly cold January morning, he pulls out a recent purchase: a large, green stalk packed tight with Brussels sprouts. Even in winter one can find a veritable bounty at the city Greenmarkets—honey, maple syrup, meats, baked goods. “Everything we can get there, we'll get there first,” he says, taking a spoonful of applesauce he made himself with Winesaps from the market.

Benepe, now 80, grew up near Gramercy Park on Manhattan's East Side, though he wasn't exclusively a child of the city. His family owned a farm in Maryland, and by age 16 he was driving crops to market during school vacations. When he arrived at Williams, Benepe thought he'd study economics. But he was so inspired by legendary art history professor S. Lane Faison '29 that he switched his major to art by his senior year. After graduation, he took additional courses at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York City, and feeling a pull toward architecture, he decided to pursue graduate study at M.I.T. There he worked closely with noted urban planner and author Kevin A. Lynch. It was that experience, Benepe says, that edged him toward urban planning and helped him develop “a consciousness of looking at space.”

Never entirely comfortable as a draftsman, Benepe landed at a Manhattan-based planning firm where he worked on open-space protection and farmland preservation projects that first got him thinking about the Greenmarket. To this day, he and his wife Judith maintain a summer residence in Saugerties, N.Y., where he has lived part time since 1984 and serves on the comprehensive planning committee and as chairman of the historic preservation commission. Looking back at the early days of the market, he recalls it was equally difficult to persuade farmers that the effort would be worthwhile as it was to convince city officials. When his partner Lewis approached growers in southern New Jersey, they balked. “They thought they'd take full trucks into the city only to return home with empty pockets,” Benepe says. “They were afraid they were going to encounter the Mafia.”

Educating consumers about the advantages of consuming seasonal produce also proved a challenge. “People used to love coming when the market opened in May, but they were looking for



oranges when there really wasn't anything except lettuce," Benepe says. "People didn't understand seasonality." Part of Benepe's legacy is that people these days have come to appreciate the importance of a regional, sustainable food system and its positive impact on the environment. They also understand to a greater extent the connection of such a system with health and wellness, says Michael Hurwitz, the Greenmarket's current director. "Barry is still seen as a pioneer, and his ideas and commitment are as important today as they were 32 years ago," Hurwitz says.

Hurwitz says he occasionally consults Benepe on issues related to the Greenmarket, but the way Benepe tells it, "I stick my nose in from time to time."

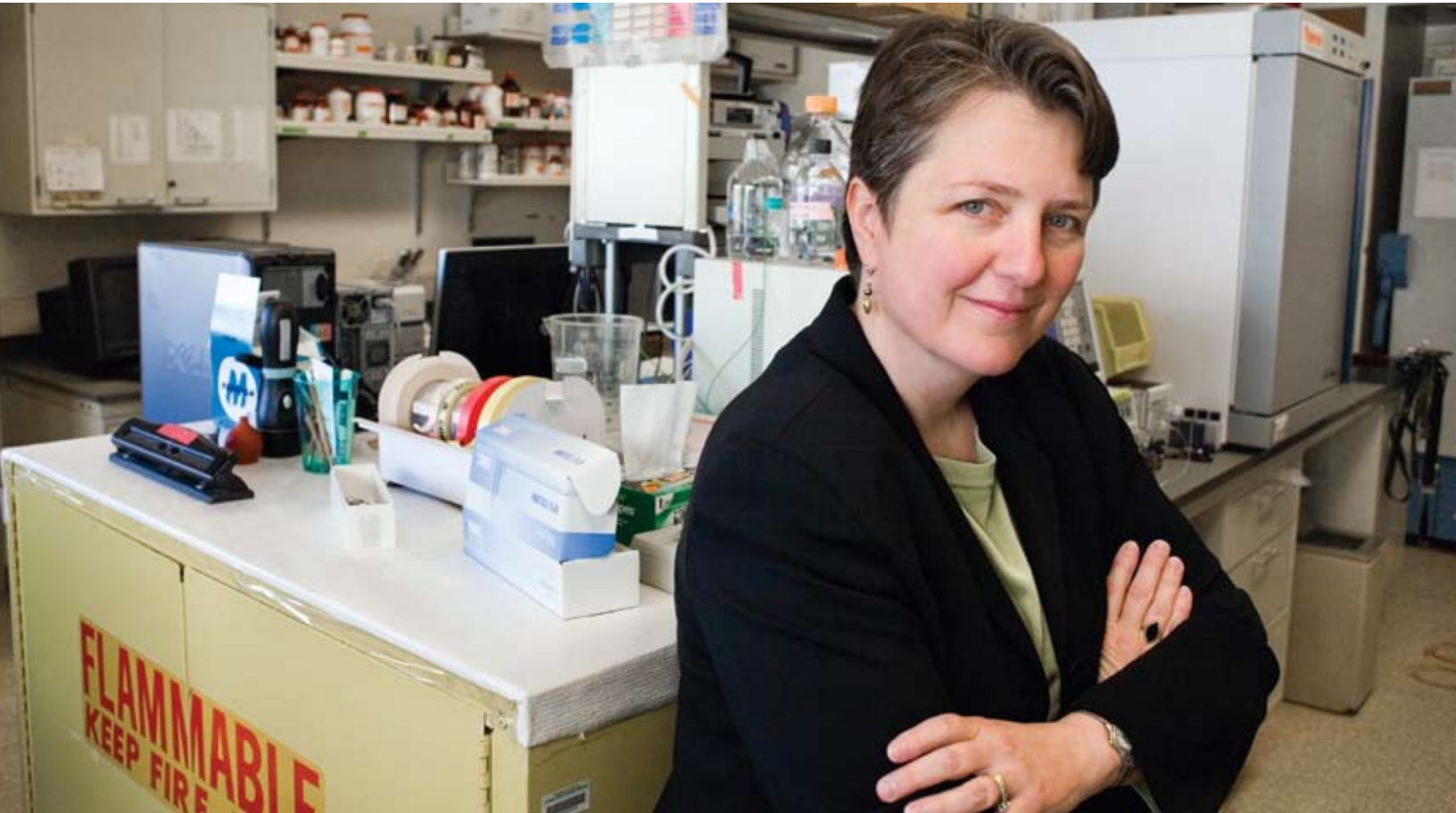
In his retirement, Benepe also enjoys whispering loudly in the ear of his son Adrian, one of his five children and commissioner of the city's Department of Parks and Recreation. Benepe has long championed the movement to rid Central Park of vehicular traffic. A founding member of Transportation Alternatives, a civic group that promotes bicycling, walking and public transportation, he led demonstrations during the administration of Mayor John Lindsay that resulted in the city closing park roads at certain hours to all traffic except bicycles. One day he hopes the park will altogether cease to be a

"Barry is ... a pioneer, and his ideas and commitment are as important today as they were 32 years ago." —Greenmarket Director Michael Hurwitz

through route for automobiles commuting to midtown. "I talk to Adrian about it," Benepe says. "While Parks has jurisdiction over the Central Park Drives, over the years the Department of Transportation has influenced traffic policy."

As for the future of the Greenmarket, Benepe says he'd love to see some of the current marketplaces become dedicated pedestrian environments, "so when the market is not there, it's an inviting public place." Currently, Union Square is the only site with that setup, though Times Square, Cooper Square and Madison Square all could be redesigned to be more friendly to the public. "The future of the market is connected with urban space," he says. "We need kinder urban spaces." ■

Denise DiFulco is a freelance writer and editor in Cranford, N.J.



Although she's not a farmer, Kathleen Merrigan '82 has cultivated organic agriculture for nearly 20 years.

Kathleen Merrigan '82: Pioneer in Organic Food Policy

INTERVIEW BY JENNIFER WEEKS '83
PHOTOGRAPHS BY GABRIEL COONEY

Kathleen Merrigan '82 was the lead Congressional staff author of the 1990 Organic Food Production Act, which directed the U.S. Department of Agriculture to develop standards for certifying organic foods. Later she rallied critics when the USDA initially proposed weak guidelines for its organic seal of approval. From 1999 to 2000 she headed USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service and oversaw publication of a final organic rule. Now an assistant professor at Tufts University's Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, she's still stirring the pot. Here she shares her thoughts about rooftop gardens, eating local and bitter melon.

Q: Organics are the fastest-growing segment of the food and beverage market. Would you have predicted that in 1990?

A: We didn't expect the law to be so successful. Organic production was heresy to mainstream agriculture. It challenged conventional thinking, and a lot of farmers

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and ranchers saw it as an implicit criticism of their methods, even though we were careful not to knock other production systems. And a lot of early organic prophets were counter-culture types who lived alternative lifestyles. But we worked hard to get grassroots support from farmers, and environmentalists joined in because the bill addressed issues like water quality and pesticide use. So it passed much faster than we expected, which is one reason why it took 12 years to finalize standards. We barely had time to catch our breath before we started debating the details.

Q: Can the industry get much bigger?

A: It's still a baby compared to mainstream agriculture. Organic production gets a lot of press for its size, but less than 1 percent of agricultural land in the U.S. and less than 2 percent in Europe are farmed organically. Right now organic farming is getting beaten up because people are looking at issues like food miles [the environmental impact of shipping food from farm to market]. It's true that some organic products travel a long way, but it's still a small industry, and that will change as production expands.

Q: Organic agriculture is better for soil than chemical-intensive farming, but are organic foods actually more nutritious than conventional products?

A: This is a pretty new research area, but several studies (including one of mine) have shown that organics contain higher levels of beneficial plant chemicals like polyphenols and other antioxidants than conventional products. There's also some evidence that organics are more nutrient-dense.

We need more work on these issues, but we know some important things now. First, organic foods are raised without synthetic pesticides,

which are a health problem. The Environmental Protection Agency's limits on pesticide residues in food often are violated and aren't strict enough in any case. Second, organic production doesn't use antibiotics or hormones. And third, organic agriculture is the only production system that has rules for using manure as fertilizer. Farmers have to wait for specified time periods before they harvest so that food won't transmit infectious agents like *E. coli* 0157:H7.

Q: How much organic food does your family eat?

A: We don't buy 100 percent organic because sometimes the cost is just absurd. There are a lot of middlemen in the process, and farmers get a very small share of retail prices, so I don't see any point in paying ridiculous markups.

Q: Are locally grown foods a good alternative?

A: They can be, although some arguments you hear about eating locally aren't very well thought out. Some people say it's more sustainable than buying organic, but if everyone gets into their car and drives 20 miles to a farmers' market, the impacts add up.

Q: What other issues are you researching?

A: I'm very interested in all kinds of urban agriculture, from rooftop gardens to school gardening programs. My program at Tufts has a garden-based learning project at a Boston school where 80 percent of students are from families below the poverty line. We're studying whether teaching through gardening actually raises kids' scientific literacy and encourages them to eat more fruits and vegetables.

Tufts also runs a program called the New Entry Sustainable Farming Project, which helps immigrant farmers get started in Massachusetts. Many of them are from Asia and Africa, and they raise their own traditional crops. When I visit our farmers' markets to support our trainees, I always come home with tons of produce. It's great, although I'm still trying to figure out what to do with bitter melon. ■



Jennifer Weeks '83 is a freelance writer in Watertown, Mass.