

Source: http://www.thecountrytoday.com/farm/country_options/article_e44ac7f4-9d73-11e3-9461-0019bb2963f4.html#.Uw1TC0HYXXk.facebook

Farmshed event makes community connections

By Sara Bredesen, Regional Editor | stbrede@gmail.com | Posted: Monday, February 24, 2014 10:51 am

STEVENS POINT — The prospect of hot potatoes and local food specialties had 600 to 700 central Wisconsin residents packing the halls and dining commons of the Stevens Point Area High School Feb. 13 for the Central Rivers Farmshed's seventh annual local food fair.

“The biggest piece of this event and why we want to do one every single year is that it creates all of these connections,” explained Farmshed Executive Director Layne Cozzolino. “There's bakeries here, there's farmers who grow grain here. There's all these different interactions that happen. It's an incredibly rich experience.”

The food fair was a mix of winter farmers market, energy trade show, educational seminar and food court with 42 farm and business vendors and 17 restaurants taking part.

“It's more than just people that would be at a farmers market. It's all these different pieces of the network that are together in one place,” Cozzolino said.

She said Farmshed's focus is on local food, but the takeaway message of the fair is how important it is for consumers to support their local economy and how it contributes to a thriving community.

Chris Mallak, a fourth-generation potato grower from Rosholt, provided 550 pounds of organic potatoes that were baked and offered free to the visitors, who could buy toppings from one of the restaurants in attendance.

Mallak said the potatoes were an example of what could be found only 14 miles away in Rosholt.

“We strive to provide a very nutritious potato, so we hope the people here will be able to discern that from the way they taste,” Mallak said. “That's how you determine whether something is good; by its flavor and its nutrient density and what that provides.”

A sad irony to the event for Mallak was that his potatoes were also an example of what happens when consumers don't look to local growers for their food. They were from his final harvest. He is going out of business after 12 years of marketing efforts.

"We weren't making any money," Mallak said.

He said there was limited demand for organic potatoes in his area, and his profit margin dropped too far when he had to ship excess potatoes through a broker.

"People are so used to food being so cheap that it's hard to get them thinking what the true cost of food is if you pay up-front," he said.

Mallak's 150 acres of certified organic land — part of the family's Century Farm — will instead be used by a cousin and maybe nearby dairy farmers for hay, he said.

Seeds of change

This year's food fair, subtitled, "Share the Seed, Share the Story," featured a first-ever seed exchange.

"Most gardeners have a number of seeds they just don't use," said Torri Bradley, a Farmshed volunteer. "I think part of it is you want to share the wealth of what you already have and have the opportunity to sample other people's varieties."

She said a seed exchange is a way to create diversity of crops among home growers, something that is being lost over time.

The event showed diversity of another kind in the types of businesses represented. Many were farms with consumer-supported-agriculture businesses or direct-to-consumer marketers with products that included poultry and eggs, coffee, beef, goat meat, bakery, handmade soaps and health products, honey, syrup, dairy products, fruits, vegetables and forest products.

Others offered homeschooling information, investment services, farm-to-school food networking, resource conservation and renewable-energy options.

Cozzolino said the event is not intended to be a fundraiser. It is a way for people in the community to come for a free potato dinner and accidentally be exposed to other messages.

"It's to be more accessible," she said. "Outside of the people who already know what we're doing, it's to open it up to a broader community."