

Freshwise Farms draws praise from area eateries

SEAN DOBBIN
STAFF WRITER

When Art Rogers compares the hydroponically grown greens from Freshwise Farms to those from large-scale, national farmhouses, he thinks it's no contest.

"If anybody took the Pepsi Challenge with the just-picked Freshwise greens next to the generic boxed mesclun greens that most places have, it would really knock your socks off," said Rogers, the owner and chef of Lento Restaurant in Rochester. "The taste just pops in your mouth."

Freshwise Farms, a presence at a number of area farmers' markets since it was acquired by regional food bank **Foodlink** in 2004, is in the process of branching out. While Lento has been using Freshwise vegetables for years — it even makes a point of mentioning the farm as one of its suppliers on the menu — more restaurants are looking around for local, sustainable produce, and Freshwise is hoping to capitalize.

"All these folks that are concentrating on all-natural; if they're serious about it, it could double or even triple our sales," said Jill Rowell, chief of staff at Foodlink.

The nonprofit food bank has always made an effort to market Fresh-

wise produce to area restaurants. But with dieting trends moving toward local, organically grown produce, chefs and restaurant owners are more interested now than they've ever been, and Foodlink has since focused its efforts, said Rowell. The New York Wine & Culinary Center in Canandaigua, Red Newt Bistro in Hector, Schuyler County, and The Pultneyville Grill in Wayne County are among some of their restaurant clients.

"They're all-organic and they taste a lot better," said Carlo Peretti, chef at the New York Wine & Culinary Center. "You don't have any of the

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chemicals, and they're not turbo-washed five times."

Greens are grown year-round, but Freshwise also produces a host of vegetables including heirloom potatoes, onions, spinach, squash, snap peas, fingerling potatoes, cucumbers and carrots.

At their peak in the summer, the farm in Penfield sells about \$10,000 worth of fruits, veggies, and greens each week. The winter is slower, but the farm can still grow fresh greens in its

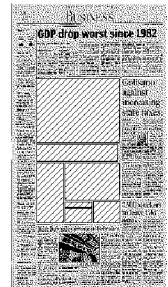
greenhouse, and is able to generate around \$14,000 in sales per month.

Freshwise is staffed by about half a dozen employees, plus a handful of volunteers, and Rowell is hoping that the hydroponic greenhouse can increase its production to match the demand. Sales at the farmers' markets may have to be adjusted to accommodate the demand from restaurants, but Rowell said that Freshwise will still be involved in five to eight markets, and their selection at those markets will not be reduced.

Their produce is more expensive than most, which is a concern in a cost-cutting economy. But Rowell believes that the fight for consumers' dwindling disposable income will force restaurants to increase the quality of their offerings. And Freshwise's produce stands for itself.

"It's clean, it's local, and the flavor is just so abundant and fresh and dynamic over anything that you can buy in the grocery store," said Rowell. "Once you taste this, it's hard to go back to anything else." □

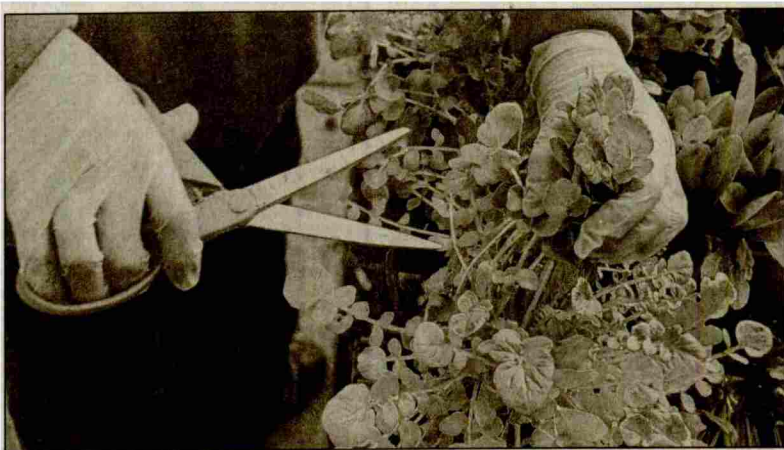
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SHAWN DOWD staff photographer

Tricia Nadiak of Brighton works on a row of greens at Freshwise Farms in Penfield. The firm is working to keep up with the demand for locally grown vegetables. Peak summer months can see sales of up to \$10,000 per week.



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Watercress is among the crops harvested at Foodlink's Freshwise Farms, a hydroponic greenhouse extending its distribution to local restaurants.