

THE CATERED CROP

Food Biz NOW HERE'S A FIRST. THERE ARE CHEFS WHO ARE REGULARS AT FARMERS' MARKETS AND CHEFS WHO CONTRACT FARMERS TO GROW A SHOPPING LIST ESPECIALLY FOR THEM. NOW A NEW YORK CITY CATERER HAS TAKEN IT ONE STEP FURTHER AND BOUGHT HER OWN FARM.

LAURA STANLEY GOES TO THE COUNTRY WITH LIZ NEUMARK. PHOTOS BY ALEXANDRA GRABLEWSKI.

"Who wants to try some romaine?" Liz Neumark, founder and CEO of Great Performances catering, was harvesting lettuce for a gaggle of Manhattan schoolchildren on a farm in rural Putnam County in upstate New York. Eager hands reached out – everyone wanted to try it, and everyone wanted to be first. Most of these youngsters had never seen vegetables picked before, much less visited a real farm. Most didn't usually clamor for lettuce, either. After a taste, they raced about in the morning sunshine, up and down rows of pole beans and bell peppers. It was a lovely warm day, and they had pent up energy after their long ride from the city.

Neumark, a luminous, clear-eyed woman with close-cropped gray hair, corralled her charges and exhorted them to sample nasturtium petals: "Everybody at once. Ready? One, two, three..." They chewed with interest, expressions thoughtful. Eating flowers is weird, the group decided, but maybe OK. "Spicy," conceded a tall boy. "I like spicy."

Taking elementary students on a farm tour may seem a small thing, but for Neumark this was a watershed event. It was late June 2006, and this was Great Performances' debut crop of organic vegetables, destined to feed people at hundreds of events throughout the New York metro region. And this class, from PS 3 in Greenwich Village, was the first of what will someday be dozens. Neumark looks forward to the day when many more city kids will tumble out of buses to roam the grounds of a much bigger farm, her company's own, in Columbia County.

Purchased a few weeks after this school visit, in mid-July of 2006, it is the first ever to be owned and run by a major catering operation.

Farming and agricultural education? At first glance, these seem peripheral to the business of hosting parties and running art gallery cafés. "What we're planning here is not the kind of thing that most rational people in my line of work wake up and want to do," admits Neumark. But she has her reasons. Great Performances' 60 acre farm (now moved

from rented acreage in Putnam County to its permanent home in Kinderhook in Columbia County) is a bold undertaking that will surely make a mark in the intensely competitive world of New York catering. More important, at least to Neumark, is the role it will play in reaching beyond the bottom line, to a greater goal that can't be measured in dollars and cents.

At 27, Great Performances is a \$30 million a year industry leader, producing more than 1,500 events annually, from intimate weddings to corporate affairs for thousands of people. When it started, as an agency for performing and fine arts professionals in need of a flexible work schedule, it was a women-only catering resource. Today the 285 member staff includes both men and women,

many of them still creative professionals who rely on GP, as they affectionately call it, to tide them over between commissions and gigs.

Over the years the company has become, as president Dean Martinus puts it, "part of the fabric of New York," a regular presence at high-profile media events (think MTV and Emmy Awards dinners) and major political gatherings. The firm runs nine cafés in partner locations,





Previous page: Liz Neumark and head farmer Faud Bin Aziz sample Great Performances' first crop of cherry tomatoes. Right: Last season's harvest included French radishes, fingerling potatoes, purple potatoes, and white turnips.

mid-size cultural institutions such as Jazz at Lincoln Center, Sotheby's, and Brooklyn Academy of Music. Each café is headed by an executive chef, who prepares a distinct menu from scratch, with culinary ambitions well beyond what one expects to find at a museum lunchroom. **Café Opaline**, at the Dahesh Museum of Art in Midtown, draws most of its business not from the galleries but from the office towers in the neighborhood – white collar regulars who are attracted by a lunch selection that may include a creative selection of mezze (chicken/pecan/bulgur cakes with raita and fava bean dip) and main dishes like beef carpaccio or veal scallopine “napoleon.” Uptown, at the Asia Society, the menu lists items like organic pan-roasted salmon with a vine-ripened tomato curry and a seasonal fruit tart made with cardamom pastry cream. Last September, guests at some cafés could even order dishes created by chefs visiting from the Apicius Culinary Institute of Florence (liver terrine with vin santo and figs, cocoa-scented ravioli filled with olive oil radicchio mousse), through a partnership sponsored by The James Beard Foundation.

At this point, how much of this complex operation will eventually be supplied by the farm is anybody's guess. For now, the safe answer is “a lot.” Still, the company isn't counting on ever growing all its produce itself, and customers who ask for mangoes, avocados, and jicama will never be turned away. But the abundance of local bounty in season is already attracting attention and winning business. One new client, Jacqueline Egan, chose Great Performances to cater her daughter's autumn wedding because the vegetables offered at the tasting were so evidently fresh. “That cauliflower puree! For once, there was no mistaking it for mashed potatoes!”

Back at the company's 5,000-square-foot downtown production kitchen, Neumark hands a visitor a sprig of dill. A single nibble delivers a payload of racy mouth-filling spice. “You can't buy this,” she says. Great Performances' homegrown herbs and vegetables, harvested at dawn, are washed, packed, and trucked off to venues by late afternoon.

“When we first started using greens from our own farm, salad began selling like crazy,” says **Tim Sullivan**, executive chef at Café Opaline. “You could really taste the difference.” For customers who requested the kitchen's secret to vivid flavor in summer tomato soup, Sullivan gave them some of his many excess tomatoes. Even with giveaways, the organic produce the company grows itself is significantly cheaper than

the organics it buys. Purchasing through a vendor, says Martinus, would cost about 40 percent more.

Neumark, for her part, doesn't like to discuss any prospective financial gain, at least not yet. “The benefits are more than monetary,” she insists. “I'll be very happy if we can just break even on this. There's something about farming that awakens joy and the best sense of our humanity. In this crazy, crazy world of always selling more, always going after more contracts and events, I feel the need to go back to the basics, like lettuce from the ground.”

Her voice trails off a little, revealing a hint of the life-changing anguish that helped to catalyze the project. In August 2004, Neumark

and her husband, Chaim Wachsbarger, lost 6 year old Sylvia, the youngest of their four children, to a brain aneurysm. “She was my best helper in the garden,” says Neumark. “She loved animals and nature. And I found that, in the weeks and months that followed her death, what gave me incredible peace was being at the farmers' market or at the farm picking up my co-op share. So this seemed like a good, healing thing to do.” The farm is called Katchkie, the family's pet name for the little girl; the education facility, a nonprofit



Left: Summer offerings of pan-roasted wild striped bass and roasted bluefoot chicken feature homegrown collards, tomatoes, okra, and herbs. Right: Neumark divides her time between her Manhattan office and her Columbia County farm.

that will draw on the talents of growers and catering employees, will be called the Sylvia Center. It's the kind of response to tragedy that one might expect of Neumark, given her can-do character and lifelong history of entrepreneurship. “I'm a person of action, not thinking,” she explains. Her grief, still very near the surface, is a strangely empowering thing. “From now on,” she vows, “I'm going to live Sylvia's life for her.” Fund-raising for the center, which will include a large teaching kitchen that opens onto a children's garden, is already underway.

At the farm, Neumark has enlisted the help of Fuad Bin Aziz, a Bangladesh born organic grower she knew well from her farm co-op. Aziz, who trained at the University of California at Davis, sums up his key role modestly: “A lot of people ask me how I grow such tasty things. But I don't grow them. I take care of the land, and the food that comes out of it is the by-product.” His goal, for the long run, is a “diverse and integrated” system that will include aquaculture (using the farm's two-acre pond). There will be apiaries for honey and to service fruit trees.

In the city, at the receiving end, is chef and cookbook author **Katy Sparks**, who has been signed on as a full-time culinary visionary. Sparks, who made a name for herself in the 1990s cooking at the Quilted Giraffe,



Tim Sullivan plates appetizers for a private dinner party at Café Opaline at the Hugh Hardy–designed Daheh Museum of Art. By day, the stylishly luminescent dining room is a popular lunch spot for neighborhood businesspeople. Photo by Bernard Handzel.

Bobby Flay's Mesa Grill and **Bolo**, and her own restaurant, **Quilty's**, hopes to “bring some restaurant sensibility to catering” by using raw materials from the farm “to go for the jugular in terms of flavor – make the food really memorable.” She works closely with marketing staffers, arming them with the knowledge they need to sell foods like grass-fed beef and wild-caught salmon – sustainably produced offerings that will, over time, become more closely associated with the Great Performances brand.

In another effort at branding, Katchkie Farm products will begin appearing on gourmet shop shelves in the year to come – tomato sauce, pickled beets, chutneys, and (perhaps) salad dressing. The farm's Thunder Pickles (Classic Dill, Olive Oil, Sweet-and-Sour), offered for the first time last summer, have proven effective ambassadors, earning kudos from the *New York Times* and brisk sales at the city's new outdoor Real Food markets. “We're not looking to make a lot of money on these,” says Martinus. “They're more about getting the word out.”

“With everything we're doing now, we have to take the long view,” says Neumark. It's August, two months since her inaugural Sylvia Center class and just a few weeks since the purchase of Katchkie went through. It's also the second anniversary of Sylvia's death, and, for Neumark, there's no better place to pass the day than the farm. She cups her hand over her eyes, against the blinding midday light. The property is beautiful, with deep cool woods fringing open fields and a splendid view of the Catskills to the west. But the place is unkempt, with nothing but neglected cover crops growing in what will be Aziz's vegetable beds. For the present, the Sylvia Center is just an empty garage and a big dream; a second lifetime of hard work lies ahead. Neumark sighs. “I'm learning soil language. A little bit at a time. I'm a city kid, after all. And this...this is a *big* responsibility.”

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