



181 acres of Sussex County cheesemaker's farm preserved

April 5 2011

FREDON TWP. - To understand the appeal of the “local food” movement, look no further than the artisanal cheeses made at Springhouse Dairy in Fredon, Sussex County.

“Our customers really enjoy knowing that I mowed the fields, milked the cows, poured the milk into a cheese vat, made the cheese, and then cut it into slices for them,” said Pete Southway, who owns the farm with his wife, Marilyn. “People identify with a physical place that they can see, touch and feel.”



That place – a dairy farm on Phil Hardin Road – will remain farmland forever. A partnership of Sussex County, New Jersey Conservation Foundation and the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service recently preserved 181 acres, adding to more than 100 acres already preserved.

Sussex County bought the development rights to four lots of the Southway farm, using county farmland preservation funds and a portion of New Jersey Conservation Foundation’s federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) grant. Although the land will remain in private ownership, it is permanently restricted to agricultural use.

“We really love the land, the open space,” said Southway. “To see it someday get developed is something we didn’t want to do.”

“We were very pleased to help permanently preserve this farm, and to protect the rural and agricultural character of Sussex County,” said Greg Romano, assistant director of New Jersey Conservation Foundation and head of its land preservation program.

“We were happy to partner with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, which contributed federal funds to help reduce Sussex County’s cost to preserve this farm,” added Romano.

Donald J. Pettit, NRCS State Conservationist for New Jersey, noted, “The Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program is intended to keep productive farm land in agricultural use. Protecting the Southway farm meets that objective and also supports the USDA-wide initiative ‘Know Your Farmer Know Your Food,’ promoting the importance of understanding where your food comes from and how it gets to your plate.”

From banker to farmer

Southway said he and his wife became interested in preserving the farm while planning for the estate they will leave to their six children, who range in age from 9 to 27.

They subdivided their 330-acre farm into six parcels of 40 to 50 acres each. Two of the lots had already been preserved by a previous owner; the Southways sold the development rights on another 181 acres for \$1.02 million. The remaining 30 acres, including a greenhouse that sells flowers and vegetable seedlings to garden centers, was not part of the preservation project.

A native of suburban North Haledon, Pete Southway said he was always interested in learning about growing crops and raising animals. He and his wife bought the first section of their farm in 1994, while he was working as a commercial banker; they later expanded it when adjacent preserved lands came onto the market.

Wanting a greater connection with the land and more time with his family, Pete quit banking seven years ago to become a full-time farmer. He said it's a busy but satisfying life.

The Southways now keep 50 Jersey and Guernsey cows, whose rich milk is used to make a semi-firm farmers cheese that is flavored with herbs, vegetables and dried fruits. They make batches of cheese once or twice a week and sell it at their stand, the county farmers market, and in local stores.

Southway said it takes about 1,000 pounds of milk to make each 140- to 150-pound batch. "It's neat, taking a vat of cold milk in the morning and having a block of cheese in the afternoon," he commented.

They also grow crops like corn, alfalfa, hay and oat. They sometimes use draft horses to plow the fields and spread manure the old-fashioned way. "It's slower but quieter," said Southway. "A lot of our farm equipment is adapted so we can use it with a horse or a tractor." The greenhouse rounds out the farming operation.

The five younger Southway children live at home and help out their parents. "They're all very active in 4-H and on the farm," said their father. "They all have their chores."

The newly-preserved portion of the Southway farm consists of rolling fields and wooded and scrub wetlands with the Bear Brook, a tributary of the Pequest River, running through it. The farm is adjacent to other preserved farmland and is near the state's Whittingham Wildlife Management Area.

New Jersey Conservation Foundation is a private, member-supported nonprofit that preserves land and natural resources throughout New Jersey for the benefit of all. Since 1960, it has protected more than 120,000 acres of open space - from the Highlands to the Pine Barrens to the Delaware Bayshore, from farms to forests to urban and suburban parks. For more information about the Foundation's programs and preserves, go to www.njconservation.org or call 1-888-LAND-SAVE (1-888-526-3728).