



Foraging for a Change

A full-time forager for Whole Foods Market, Susan Phinney scouts for environmentally friendly farmers with unique products to add to Whole Foods' repertoire.

By Cherie Langlois

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The verb "forage" is a sciency-sounding word you hear most often in connection with animals and indigenous peoples.

It means "to search for food" and for me it evokes images of hummingbirds zipping among currant blossoms, goats nosing around for Spring's first nettle shoots or Native American women, baskets on their hips, gracefully plucking salmonberries.

I suppose you could say most modern humans in the developed world are still foragers of a sort, although our lives don't depend on our foraging skills anymore. After all, we hunt the supermarket aisles, picking through every imaginable food from all points of the globe to find what we need or want: bananas flown from Costa Rica, red peppers grown in California, frozen fish from China.

If we're extremely lucky, we may even find fresher, tastier, grown-closer-to-home options to forage among—from our own gardens or from nearby farmers' markets and farm stands.

Back in 1980, another local foraging opportunity sprouted when a refreshing, little store opened in Austin, Texas. Its mission? To offer quality foods in their purest forms and promote organically grown and local products. In the years since, Whole Foods Market has expanded to become the world's leading retailer of natural and organic foods, with over 265 locations in North America and the United Kingdom.

Courting Whole Foods Market

Susan Phinney urges farmers and food producers hoping to cultivate a relationship with their local Whole Foods Market to check the company's website at www.wholefoodsmarket.com.

Read about their mission and quality standards, and look at the product category under which you would sell your wares, such as produce, bakery or meat and poultry.

Be sure to analyze their unacceptable ingredient list. For example, the food must be free of artificial colors and flavors, hydrogenated fats, bleached flour or ingredients that sound like part of a chemistry lab experiment, such as cyclamates and sodium sulfite.

Also, if you hope to court Whole Foods Market with meat, eggs or cheese, understand that the company has strict standards for livestock producers (i.e., no growth hormones or antibiotics allowed).

Superior quality in terms of a food's nutrition, appearance, taste and freshness tops the company's priority list.

"The first thing I look for is whether the product meets our quality standards. That's not negotiable," explains Phinney.

Questions she asks herself about the product include the following: How and where is it made? Does it have environmentally friendly packaging? Will the label appeal to customers? Does it fall under one of the food categories they're looking to fill?

In the North Atlantic Region, categories such as granola, jams and jellies, salad dressings and salsa brim with fine



products, so a new contender would have to truly stand out.

Farmers who find an outlet for their goods at Whole Foods Market reap important rewards.

“Selling to Whole Foods Market can give local farmers a market in their community and consistent ordering,” says Phinney. “It can help them expand to a more secure market than they’re used to having. But it takes a lot of understanding and education on both sides.”

TopIt has also become the first big retailer to hire a few honest-to-goodness foragers—people whose jobs entail seeking outstanding, locally produced foods for their regional stores. Susan Phinney, of Cambridge, Mass., is Whole Foods Market’s very first, full-time Local Products Forager.

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Growing Fond of Farms & Farmers

Although Susan Phinney grew up in “suburbia land” and not in the country, her post-high school education and job background are firmly rooted in agriculture.

While attending college at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, she did stints on farms and with the Wisconsin Cooperative Extension Service.

“I worked on a dairy farm at the end of my freshman year—milking, bottling and feeding the Holstein herd—and it just felt right,” she recalls.

After graduating with a degree in agricultural economics in 1984, Phinney landed a job with CARE, a well-known humanitarian organization fighting poverty around the globe. While many of CARE’s positions lay overseas, she worked with U.S. farmers in an education program that aimed to promote understanding and information exchange between farmers in developing countries and in the United States.

The job bolstered her interest in the developing world while also giving Phinney the opportunity to work with the American Farm Bureau, the 4-H Foundation and the National Farmers Union, as well as with women’s groups within those organizations.

“From working at CARE, I started a farm consulting business called AgriLand Concepts that I ran for 12 years,” says Phinney. “People would hire me to write a farm business plan for a specific piece of land. If it wasn’t currently used for farming, I would develop a plan to see what it could grow in that market and what the projected income would be. Generally, the landowner, who wasn’t a farmer, hired me.”

During this time, Phinney worked on two diversified vegetable farms and a dairy goat farm. The personable goats must have made an impression on her, for she still likes to spend her free time helping out with a friend’s vibrant milk-goat operation and cheese-making business, and hopes to have her own herd one day.

Although she enjoyed the diversity and challenges her business presented, Phinney decided she needed a change. She returned to school, obtained a master’s degree in agricultural policy from Tufts University and acquired a job with the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources in 1997.

The Farm Viability Enhancement Program she found herself working on had much in common with her consulting business, but it differed in an important way that truly appealed to her: All her clients were farmers.

The “Buy Local” Movement

In recent years, the movement to buy local food has gained momentum—and for some excellent reasons.

When we buy locally produced food commodities, particularly those grown or raised in a sustainable fashion, we reduce our harmful impact on the environment.

Transporting food immense distances devours huge quantities of oil, which generates pollution and contributes to global warming.



Gigantic agribusinesses growing monoculture crops expose us and our environment to a plethora of potentially toxic chemical pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers.

Not only does buying close to home help preserve our endangered and diverse family farms, but it infuses money into our local economy rather than tucking it into the pockets of multi-national corporations.

Plus, you can't beat locally grown and produced food for freshness and sheer good taste.

"People need to remember that buying local isn't just about produce," stresses Susan Phinney.

"Whole Foods Market carries local products 365 days a year. I can buy the entire array of veggies from July through October, but we also have local, fresh cheeses, milk, crackers, cakes, pizzas and every other product group available all year."

Having a tough time finding local anything at your supermarket? Don't be shy.

"Look for local products all year and if you can't find them in your stores, ask 'why not?'" Phinney advises. "We need to make sure our stores know what we want."

Top In this model program, which Phinney says is still going strong, the state pays for consultants to work with the farmers accepted into the program to implement changes on their farms, such as going from wholesale to retail sales or changing over crops.

"I was a point person selecting consultants and pairing them with farmers," explains Phinney. "I'd pull the consultant reports together and weave a business plan."

While working for the Department of Agriculture, Phinney jumped into several other novel farm programs, including one that required her to design a grant program awarding monies to farmers so they could install and implement practices that would improve water quality.

"Through those programs, I got to be really hands-on with farms in Massachusetts," she says. "It was a real joy to work one-on-one with farmers."

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How Phinney Got Her Job as Forager

Desiring another change, Phinney left her position with the Department of Agriculture in 2005. One day a friend of hers spotted a job announcement at a Whole Foods Market for an unusual position called "local products forager."

Although marketing locally produced products was nothing new for the environmentally friendly company, Whole Foods Market had recently asked its 11 regions to increase the number of local products they carried.

According to Phinney, the company works in a fairly decentralized way, and much autonomy and creativity goes into each level; consequently the regions tackled the mission in different ways.

The North Atlantic region, which included most of New England and Phinney's state of Massachusetts, had become the first to decide that expanding their local-food offerings held enough importance to merit a completely new position. They wanted a forager, someone to seek out quality, local food products in the region and cultivate relationships between the stores and local producers.

"The position required knowing how to evaluate products for a market, which I'd been doing through the business-plan writing," says Phinney. It would also take plenty of self-motivation, networking and knowing how to find sources of products—a good fit for a former consultant who had managed her own business. "My friend and I agreed that it would be a great job!"

Despite stiff competition, Phinney scored the position and began working for Whole Foods Market's North Atlantic Region in October 2006 as its first local products forager. Interestingly, during the past year, three other regions have hired foragers and two of those three are women as well.

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The Work of a Forager

Phinney's enthusiasm for her work and employer resonate in her voice. She enjoys the company's team spirit and supportive atmosphere, and Whole Food Market's environmentally compassionate ideals obviously hold a special attraction for this woman who fancies outdoor pursuits like bicycling and skiing in her spare time.

She loves that each work day is different and that even though she has a cubicle, she doesn't actually spend much time there.

One part of Phinney's job involves working in the various Whole Foods Market stores—25 dot the region—and meeting with the regional coordinators to determine what products they're looking to acquire.

During the hectic holidays, for example, she spends much of her time in the stores stocking shelves and dishing out samples of pies, breads and other delicious local offerings to customers, all the while educating them about the foods' backgrounds.

"With the local program, we do a lot of in-store marketing of the products, telling the stories behind them," she explains.

An important facet of Phinney's work, of course, involves foraging: finding unique, high-quality, local products around the New England area. This requires her to log a whopping 2,000 miles a month traveling to specialty-food meetings, local businesses and places where local products are manufactured.

To her delight, it also involves visiting farms and farmers, where she chats about their products, looks at how they raise their crops and manage their animals, and helps them understand Whole Foods Market's stringent quality, environmental and livestock welfare standards (see "Courting Whole Foods Market").

"I absolutely love being on a farm and talking to farmers," she says. "I love hearing about people who run their own businesses."

Phinney also relishes connecting with farmers and small-business owners in her capacity as regional contact for Whole Foods Market's new Local Producer Loan Program.

In this program, folks already selling products to the company (or who soon will be) can apply for low-interest loans to assist with some mutually beneficial aspect of their business.

For example, the company awarded one loan to Old School Baking Co., a local bakery producing a popular roll that simply flies off store shelves. The loan went toward buying a rack oven, which helped the little bakery cook up more of their rolls and other goodies.

Most recently, Phinney's foraging duties have had her roaming around Rhode Island quite a bit. The company opened a store there in October 2007 and she's been visiting with the producers of some of her newer food finds.

One of these is a local baking mix from a woman-owned business called Bristol Harbor Homemade. Cindy Elder, the creative owner, had been selling her natural gourmet scone and cookie mixes at PTA fundraisers before launching her own business.

"She was featured on a local PBS program, and one of my co-workers saw it and said we should check it out," Phinney says. "She makes a very high-quality product and has good packaging; after I went down and saw her facility, we brought her in."

During the past year, work has also lured her to Cape Cod to sample oysters, cookies and other foods unique to this community.

"I spent one day out at the oyster flats, helping separate the dead oysters from the live ones!" says Phinney, who doesn't shy from getting wet and muddy in the line of duty. "We're seeing if we can help them get their products into the rest of the state."

"I'm two hours away from any store," she adds. "The great thing about this is that I can go to a store with the product in hand and have some face-to-face time. There's a person in every store that I ask to be my contact person, an in-store



forager. I can call that person and say, 'Hey, I have three products—can you take them and hand them off to the right people to review?'"

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Foraging Challenges & Rewards

A foraging lifestyle presents some challenges, whether you're a hummingbird, a Kalahari bush-person or an official local products forager like Susan Phinney.

"I think the biggest challenge was coming from a five-day-a-week business to a seven-day-a-week business," she says thoughtfully. "For many people, the work week ends on Friday, but here there's a big force that works seven days a week. It's more like a farmer or small business owner's experience—there's always stuff to do. I do try to keep that work/life balance, but it's a very exciting job and there's lots going on, which makes it hard to turn off."

Another challenge she faces involves the huge diversity of good, local products available in New England and the decisions she must make about which finds to promote.

The local program, Phinney stresses, is as much about a relationship as it is about a product. She never forgets she's dealing with people, not just a box of veggies or scone mix, and that makes it difficult for her to tell a producer Whole Foods Market can't use their product.

Foraging, however, has some very tasty rewards. Although Phinney refuses to name favorites, she savors many of the local foods from her regional Whole Foods Markets in her own kitchen, from petite pizzas made with home-grown Maine ingredients to a spicy local kimchee (employees get a store discount, too!). She has sampled delectable, locally produced gelatos, bakery products and cheeses, and has compared milk from seven local dairies, introducing friends to the difference between Jersey and Holstein milk.

"I do that a fair amount—bring a product home for my friends to try as a type of focus group," she says. "My friends are involved in food and agriculture, and it's fun to bring home foods for them to try and say 'This is local.'" We should all be so lucky to have a forager for a friend.

About the Author: Cherie Langlois is a Hobby Farms contributing editor who writes from her hobby farm in Graham, Wash.

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