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Farm Aid visits the Big Apple

After Sept. 11, 2001, some Missouri farmers went to the Farm Aid concert in Indianapolis and then trucked about 6,000 pounds of pork to New York. Things were so topsy-turvy in those sad days that the roasts and bacon and ham never did make it directly to rescue workers at Ground Zero. Instead, they were cheerfully distributed by churches to needy families in Harlem.

The city folks were undoubtedly surprised and pleased to receive this bounty, a vivid illustration of what a solid connection could mean between small farmers, who often need a helping hand themselves, and urban dwellers who hunger for home-grown meats and vegetables.

Now Farm Aid 2007: A Homegrown Festival is coming to New York this Sunday. For weeks, a caravan that emphasizes that connection has been crossing the country, visiting small farmers, cheese makers, pie bakers and hometown cafes. The odyssey will end at the concert at Randalls Island, the first time in Farm Aid's 22-year history that the event has been held in New York City. Willie Nelson, Merle Haggard, Ray Price, Neil Young, John Mellancamp and a host of other singers are on the bill, and so are farmers who will show their stuff.

Caravans are a Farm Aid tradition. But this time, the connection between farm and city has been played up dramatically by a 38-day Eat Well

Guided Tour of America from California to New York. The road trip, led by Sustainable Table founder and director **Diane Hatz**, on a bio-fueled bus, stopped at farms, farmers markets and restaurants that use local food. (Sustainable Table promotes agricultural practices that do not harm the environment.) The trip will end at the Farm Aid festival.

The theme of the journey has been "Pie Across America," according to Hatz, who directed the films "The Meatrix," "Meatrix II" and others about where meat comes from. In fact, the Pie Ranch, a farm in Pescadero, Calif., made a deep impression on Hatz, she said, because the group on the bus went into the fields with scythes and harvested wheat

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that was then stripped, winnowed and milled by hand to make whole grain flour for the crusts for berry pies.

"Pie is a metaphor for local food," Hatz said in a phone interview, "for bringing people around the table." The ingredients for pie, she added, tell stories about the people who bake them and the communities whence they came.

In Lincoln, Neb., home cooks brought quiches, pizza with goat cheese and all manner of other food made from local ingredients to a potluck at Maggie's Cafe. "Lincoln is winning for the most food fed to one person in one day," Hatz said.

At the Mission Pie Shop in San Francisco, which gets its flour from the Pie Ranch, walnut pie was "a taste sensation." Peach pie in Wyoming was "the best crust I had," Hatz said, and tasted purely of peaches.

But "to truly experience a pie, you need to first harvest and bake it, as we did on Pie Ranch," where the road-trippers "harvested long stalks of golden wheat. With the warm sun on the back of our necks, we walked down rows of strawberries, blackberries and raspberries, harvesting fruit for our own pies."

In the Teton Valley in Wyoming, Sue Muncaster, who helped pioneer the Farm to Restaurant and Slow Food movements there, told Hatz and the group, "Even the farmers who have lived here in the Tetons for generations can no longer afford to farm and are selling out to developers. . . . We can no longer buy local milk from the cows we pass on the road, and all our organic produce comes from Los Angeles." Muncaster aims to help change that, reconnecting local producers to people who want to eat local.

Hatz said the people she has met on the trip "have given me so much hope. It's not just a movement anymore. It's here, Sustainable Food is here."

Hatz, who plays Willie Nelson's "On the Road Again" between every other song on the bus soundtrack, said Nelson "is our inspiration on the road."

In New York, a separate Upstate-Downstate Caravan was to set off at the State Fair on Labor Day. Stops include the biodynamic Hawthorne Valley Farm in Ghent and Ooms Dairy in Chatham. At Indian Ladder Farm in Altamont, a New York State agricultural policy announcement is scheduled to be made tomorrow.

On Friday, at a harvest BBQ at Gigi Market at Greig Farm in upstate Red Hook, the Farm Aid tour and the Sustainable Table tours will hook up.

For more information on events, many of them open to the public, or to learn how to get tickets for the festival, go to farmaid.org. To see pictures and a blog of the cross-country trip by Sustainable Table, go to sustainabletable.org/roadtrip.



