



Talking Farms, Irene, And Eating Local With Just Food's Jacquie Berger



Despite its name, the nonprofit [Just Food](#) is about more than just food—it's a network of farmers, educators and volunteers and working together to get all New Yorkers access to locally grown food. With Tropical Storm Irene [devastating many farms](#) upstate, Just Food's work is particularly important now—they're working on providing [relief funds](#) for many local farms, and looking for all the help they can get. On a slightly happier note, Just Food is also preparing to host their annual [Let Us Eat Local](#) event, a giant dinner party featuring chefs from ABC Kitchen, Back Forty, Northern Spy Food Co. and more. LUEL honors [local food heroes](#), like a high schooler raising chickens in the Bronx and a Harlem grandmother who teaches canning classes. We spoke to Just Food's executive director Jacquie Berger about the many ways that New Yorkers can get more involved with their local food system.

What programs or projects do you run to get New Yorkers in touch with locally grown food?

We do that through a pretty broad and integrated complement of programs. We've really championed the [CSA movement](#) in New York City. When we were founded there was one CSA—back in 1995—in all the five boroughs. Today, there are well over a hundred. That's just one of the projects.

Before you go any further—what is a CSA? A CSA, Community Supported Agriculture, is a relationship between a New York City community and a local farm. The way that the partnership works is: the households within the community make an up-front investment with a farm and usually the payments are all given to the farm in the spring. In exchange for that upfront investment, the folks here in New York City get weekly deliveries to some central community locations of fresh, locally grown, organic produce every week throughout the harvest season.

What are the other programs like? The CSA program is just one of six programs that we run. We also do [City Farms](#), which is dedicated to helping New Yorkers grow, market, and distribute more food in their community gardens. We do a lot of farm-to-food pantry work through our [Fresh Food For All](#) program. We do [food education](#)—that program really integrates into all of them, from the work that we do with food pantries to the work that we do with farmer's markets, to CSAs, and health fairs as well. We have a [food justice](#) program which is our policy and advocacy program. Last but not least, we recently introduced [Farm School NYC](#). It's our newest program and it was born out of a collaboration. It's an ongoing partnership with non-profit organizations and urban farmers across the city. It's a two year certificate program for adults and it provides comprehensive professional training in urban agriculture and food justice. All of the programs sound different, but they are all very closely

interrelated and interconnected and feed off each other and really are more robust as a result of the partnership between those projects and programs.

Tell us about this big event you have coming up. This is our fourth annual [Let Us Eat Local celebration](#) and we hold it to invite our whole community to come out and celebrate the best flavors at the peak of harvest season. Harvest resonates very deeply with us and with our community. We've been very fortunate to have support from some of the finest restaurants in New York City, the finest chefs, they all source locally for this event. They celebrate their farmers. That was really what the concept for this event was—to give a platform to celebrate not just great food on the plate, but the origin of the food and to celebrate the farmers and the chefs side by side. We also wanted to take the opportunity to honor the heroes in our community that are advancing the movement at the grassroots level.

Eating locally and sustainably is so hot right now. What would you say to someone who thinks this is a passing trend? I think it is exciting that even if you are in the restaurant world you can eat locally. I think consumers are much more aware about where their food comes from, concerned about where their food come from. There's really no better way to increase the safety and resilience of the food system than sourcing locally and really knowing your farmer and where your food is coming from... A lot of restaurants are taking steps to educate their customers about the merits of local food and that's a wonderful thing for them to be doing. People want to recreate that experience at home.

What can New Yorkers do to change the food system? What Just Food has the opportunity to do is reach out into communities and to support leaders at the grassroots level. I've been the executive director for five years and that's what has been the most inspiring part of my job—seeing the people who are taking time out of their busy lives, families, job, community responsibilities; on top of all that, they do all this work to increase access to healthy food within their communities. There's infinite levels of investment that we've seen and we work really hard to engage those people in actually giving us input and feedback and helping us to advance and shape the direction of our organization in terms of where we need to go. We're really built from the outside in and all of our ideas and creativity is community driven energy. It's not just one person on a pedestal shaping the movement, it's all of those people working together and advancing incremental change in their own communities and that's really important and so fundamental.

Contact the [author](#) of this article or email tips@gothamist.com with further questions, comments or tips.

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