

**Meet the Let Us Eat Local 2011 Farmer Honoree:
Deborah Kavakos of Stoneledge Farm CSA**

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L-R: Brenna Kavakos, Deborah Kavakos, Pete Kavakos Sr., Peter Kavakos Jr., Arliss Keyser

Editor's Note: Besides our own events (the next being [Edible Escape](#) on October 19) there's a few we look forward to each year, mainly because of the fine organizations they support. One of those is Just Food's [Let Us Eat Local](#) on September 21. Not only one of the better walk-around tastings in town, featuring local produce and proteins from all the places that know exactly what best to do with it, it supports an organization that is at the forefront in getting better, fresher, more nutritious food to more of the city.

In honor of the organization, we're profiling a few of the folks who work for or with Just Food on so many of their very cool projects. Today's is an Upstate farmer who supplies several city CSAs, and one the food leaders Just Food will honor at their event next week.

[Deborah Kavakos](#) has farming in her soul. Whether the harvest is peas, radishes or squash, she toils happily at [Stoneledge Farm](#), her organic certified 200-acre farm located in Catskills, Greene County, New York, which she runs with her husband. When disasters hit, as hurricane Irene did on August 28, and rendered her 2011 harvest unfit for sale, Kavakos plows on and hopes that 2012 might be Stoneledge's "best harvest ever."

Just Food connects farmers and NYC residents through CSAs that deliver produce to cities. Kavakos, has worked with [Just Food's CSA program](#) since its inception 16 years ago. Stoneledge “has been going strong ever since,” she says of the 18 CSAs her farm supplies, nine of which are in New York City. Together those CSA's support 1400 shareholders.

Stoneledge's fields, next to Catskill Creek, got inundated with up to 14 inches of rain during the hurricane. The farm was taken by surprise, and Kavakos has spent the weeks following the storm cleaning up the debris. The worst was when she was informed of the FDA and Cornell Cooperative Extension's recommendation that Stoneledge should refrain from continuing to sell their produce.

“This is the peak of harvest season” Kavakos says “and to not be able to harvest all that produce is heartbreaking.” Usually harvest season last for 24 weeks. Stoneledge was 12 weeks into their distribution when the hurricane derailed their plans to provide their CSA members with their bounty of leeks and peppers. Until Irene, Kavakos has “never had a loss before” and ruefully informs Edible this is probably one of the most difficulty situation she and Stoneledge has faced.

Read below to find out more about how the CSA model helped launch Stoneledge to what is today:

Q. Stoneledge Farm been involved with Just Food's CSA program since 1996. Tell me more about that partnership, and how being part of a CSA program helps your business:

We were a family that did not did not inherit a farm or farmland. We started from scratch and the CSA model really gave us the footing each year to slowly but surely purchase farmland and equipment to get to where we are now—a beautiful 200 acres farm and 1400 share member CSA as of this season.

... Some of our members having been with us this entire time. It's this huge network of people working together; the members support the farm and the farm supports the community.

Tell me about your unique partnership with the Chelsea CSA and P.S. 11:

That occurred through the Chelsea CSA, one of the CSA groups that we deliver to. Debbie Osborne runs the [PS 11 Farm Market](#) through the school. The school purchase shares, and Chelsea and Stoneledge both donate a share. Each week the kids work with the different vegetables received, and figure out how it's used. They have a guest chef who helps them with recipes, and the next day the kids have a farmers market to sell the produce. They do business and math. It's a huge all-encompassing project

Even after Irene's destruction, you managed to make deliveries to PS 11:

We did. But now that's the end, which we didn't know at that time. It was tough. We always feel that it's our responsibility to do the very best for our shareholders. Monday was the hardest as that was the day after. We were scrambling. However, we made all our deliveries for last week. Now we have really been shut down.

Why do you farm for a living?

I've always loved being outdoors and marveled at things growing. I love growing stuff. If my fingernails aren't dirty, I feel I haven't had a good day. I loved farm work even as a child, at my uncle's farm. It's all I could ever think I wanted to do.

After teaching and having a slew of kids, at some point in the 80s during another recession time, my husband and I just said, 'we know we can farm, so lets do this.' It wasn't clear at that time to us that this would be the rest of our lives... We started and threw all caution to the winds. Now thinking about it and being older, what a chance we took! But that's where the CSA came in. People were always there for us, and we've made it this far. Hopefully Irene is not our undoing, but I don't think it will be.

I know you're worried about the aftermath of Irene, but you aren't a Just Food honoree for nothing! After 16 years of doing CSAs, what do you see for Stoneledge's future?

I think Irene is going to take its toll a little; it's going to be a little difficult for a while. But whenever there's a challenge, you can learn from it and make things better. That's truly what we are trying to do. I can see things just growing and growing. We are at our maximum; we can't do anymore than what we can now. We partner with other farms already, at our CSA group, who brings in other products that we don't grow. That's kind of links have already started to be made, and I think that makes CSAs stronger, to have a base of farms and not just one farm.

For many farms, the farmers are getting older, and then who's going to be the farmers for the next generation? We are so proud that our family will be able to continue with that.