

FRESH ON THE FARM

By Bob Shaw, Pioneer Press
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Kirstin Durow certainly seems like a farm girl.

She has straw on her T-shirt. She uses her sleeping dairy calf as a pillow when she takes a nap. She doesn't flinch from the smells in the State Fair dairy barn.

"I just love the animals," she shouts over Shania Twain blaring on the radio.

But the 16-year-old Hastings High School junior is from a nonfarm family, part of a large-scale urban migration - literally and figuratively - back to the farm.

Durow doesn't own the calf, but rents it for the fun of raising it. Experts say she's typical of Minnesotans who aren't farmers but are increasingly involved in local agriculture at fairs, classrooms, markets and restaurants.

"We have finally hit a point where people care where their food comes from," said Helene Murray, director of the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture, sponsored by the University of Minnesota and other groups.

In addition to rent-a-cow programs, signs of the back-to-the-farm movement abound:

Agriculture exhibits are booming at county and state fairs. Officials were flabbergasted when the State Fair's Birthing Center drew almost a million visitors last year - more than half of everyone who attended the Fair.

Enrollment in high school agriculture programs is growing.

Farmers' markets are thriving. The newest ones - only weeks old - are in Eagan and on the University of Minnesota's East Bank.

Restaurants and supermarkets are advertising locally grown fare. To tout locally produced ingredients, the Minnesota Cooks Event was Tuesday at the State Fair, featuring chefs from restaurants such as Muffuletta in St. Paul.

The May Farm CSA near Stillwater delivers locally grown produce to 320 customers across the metro - a number that has quintupled in three years.

"I call it the adopt-a-farm movement," said Henry Fox, who leases cattle on his Dakota County farm to a Rosemount family - in exchange for chores.

Many city dwellers who dabble in farming feel a twinge of nostalgia for a time when families worked together in a wholesome environment.

"Livestock helps grow good kids," said Dakota County Fair manager Bill Minnehan. When he was a farm kid, he said, "I learned to work long and hard and learned the facts of life - living, dying, giving birth."

GOOD EATS

The back-to-the-farm movement also is driven by worries about food safety. Fears of pesticides, pollution and E. coli outbreaks are making shoppers think before they eat.

By eating locally, they gain a sense of control, said Steve Pooch, deputy general manager in charge of State Fair competition. "They ask: 'What is safe to eat? Why aren't more farms going organic?' " he said.

The eat-locally movement shares goals with the environmental movement. Local foods have a smaller carbon footprint because they require shorter trips from field to table.

Murray said consumers increasingly think Minnesota farms are local businesses deserving support and that local food is fresher and more nutritious.

Supermarkets are responding to the demand.

"It's a sign of progress when my niece says, 'Look how Lunds and Byerly's are promoting local food!' " Murray said.

On Thursday, Kowalski's Markets added a line of locally grown food to its produce aisles. The supplier is Big River Foods of Marine on St. Croix, which has been selling food to supermarkets and restaurants, including Chipotle, since Aug. 1. The group teaches immigrants about farming, then helps them harvest about 22 acres, mostly heirloom tomatoes and peppers.

"People want to feel they are connected to their food," said Teresa Cuperus, Big River Foods coordinator. "They want to support small family farms, and the product tastes so much better.

YOUTHFUL AMBITIONS

It's not just the lunchroom, but also the classroom, where the surging interest in agriculture can be seen.

The Academy for Sciences & Agriculture in Vadnais Heights has 225 students, more than five times the number it started with in 2001.

Director Becky Meyer knows most students will never own farms. Instead, she steers them into agriculture-related careers.

"It's not my grandpa's agriculture," Meyer said. "For them, this is a rediscovery."

About 23,000 students study agriculture in Minnesota high schools.

"We are busting at the seams," said Julie Tesch, director of the Minnesota Agricultural Education Leadership Council.

Culture mavens study the attitudes of young people as bellwethers - and have noticed that farming as a hobby is expanding.

At the Dakota County Fair in Farmington on Aug. 7, 18-year-old Nick Zweber showed off his 1,450-pound dairy steer named Brian.

"My friends think it's kind of cool," he said.

He lives in Elko but has driven to his grandfather's farm all summer to raise the steer in an unused shed.

Nonfarm kids leasing their animals account for about 20 percent of county fair entries in livestock competitions. And they are winning.

State Fair records show that 20 years ago, there were only three people with metro addresses in livestock competition. Last year, there were 31.

"It's kind of a phenomenon. We have more entries than we can handle in some divisions," Pooch said.

One of those entries is the calf shown by Durow.

She could have spent her summer watching TV or playing video games, but that just seems so ... boring. Instead, she commuted to a farm four times a week to raise her calf.

At the State Fair dairy barn, Durow coolly assessed the calf. "She has good depth, good belly and a good rib cage," she said, looking up and down as a livestock judge might do. "She could be taller, though, and longer."

The tricky part, she said, would be getting the calf to follow her obediently around a show arena.

"They are grading you and the animal," she said.

Her dad couldn't be more proud.

"It's a nice thing for kids to do," Bryan Durow said. "They learn a little bit of responsibility and a lot of respect for farmers."

DIG IN

Want to eat locally grown food? Or try farming or raising farm animals?

Look for locally grown food at Byerly's, Lunds and Kowalski's Markets. Food carrying the Big River Foods name is farmed at Marine on St. Croix, but most distributors include food from local farmers in season.

Dine at metro area restaurants featuring locally grown food. A partial list includes Muffuletta, The Birchwood Cafe, Restaurant Alma, Corner Table and Lucia's.

Buy from local farmers or farmers' markets. Search or download the Minnesota Grown directory at www.mda.state.mn.us/food/minnesotagrown/directory.htm.

Sign up for a Community Supported Agriculture program, where you pay a seasonal fee for a share of a farm's produce. Weekly home delivery is available through the May Farm CSA (651-433-3676 or www.mnfoodassociation.org). The price is as much as \$585 for food delivered through the 18-week summer season, depending on the location of the home. For \$400, customers may pick up a box of produce weekly at the farm. Further discounts are available for those willing to work at the farm. Find other local CSA programs at landstewardshipproject.org.

Raise a farm animal. Leases with local farmers usually involve little or no money, but the informal agreements usually require tending the animal and performing some chores. Local 4-H clubs sometimes help members find willing farmers. For information about 4-H, call the state office at 612-624-2116 or a county 4-H club, or go to www.fourh.umn.edu.