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- [FARM NEWS](#)
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Farm News

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Buy-local campaign targets grocers, consumers

By Jim Massey
Editor

VERONA - Grocery store owner Carl Miller said it's been an eye-opener to learn how many food items are produced in his area.

Miller, owner of Miller and Sons Supermarkets in Verona and Mount Horeb, hosted a Grocers Buy Local event Sept. 19 at his Verona store. Ten local food producers offered samples of items sold in Miller and Sons stores.

Miller and Sons is the first supermarket to partner with the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, the Wisconsin Grocers Association, the Thrive economic development program and UW-Extension to highlight local foods available through the state's Something Special from Wisconsin program.

The Grocers Buy Local project aims to increase the visibility of local foods by revitalizing the Something Special from Wisconsin program.

"I think what the state is doing is really good," Miller said. "When we got involved in this, it was kind of an eye-opener for me, how much food is really locally produced. There are some real entrepreneurs out there."

Lois Federman, a DATCP agriculture marketing consultant, said the Grocers Buy Local campaign is designed to expose grocery store owners to Something Special from Wisconsin products and encourage them to carry more of those products in their stores.

"We also want to call attention to the consumer that, 'Hey, this is a Wisconsin product,'" Federman said. "The (Something Special from Wisconsin) branded logo is the catalyst."

Federman said the program is stronger than ever and gaining members.

"We've been working very, very hard," Federman said. "One of the reasons this program is effective is because Wisconsin alone is such a recognizable brand."

"Grocery consumers need a fast and easy way to identify local foods. Grocery managers need a simple, cost-effective way to promote local foods. It brings the whole picture together - consumers, producers, distributors and grocery stores."

Kara Kasten-Olson, sales and marketing manager at the farmstead Sassy Cow Creamery near Columbus, said low milk prices have dipped into the company's bottled milk profits, but ice cream sales have helped pick up the slack.

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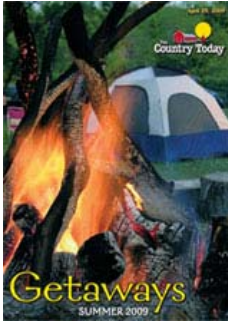
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"We only do five flavors at retail stores, but we sell 15 at the creamery," Kasten-Olson said.

The ice cream is distributed to retail outlets in the Madison and Milwaukee areas.

Miller and Sons customers sampled five flavors during the Sept. 19 event.

Kasten-Olson said the cow trading cards attached to the company's milk bottles also have been a big hit.

"We have a picture of a cow with a name and a description," she said. "So far we've done 70 or 80 of them. We get a lot of e-mails and calls from people who have like 25 of them. The kids really love them. They hang them up in the kitchen or on the fridge."

Kasten-Olson said Sassy Cow co-owner James Baerwolf came up with the trading card idea.

"He wanted people to know where their milk comes from," she said.

The company will add butter to its product inventory later this year.

Mary Olson, co-owner of Renaissance Farm in Spring Green, said the farm's 25-year-old pesto business has expanded into five product lines. The farm sells seven flavors of pesto; three flavors of pesto vinaigrette dressings; three flavors of herb-infused olive oils; four flavors of herb-infused sea salts; and a new line of gourmet frozen entries.

"(Florida-based) Tree of Life, a national food distributor, picked us up and has taken us to the East Coast," Olson said. "Things have been going pretty well."

Olson said she and her husband, Mark, have been doing more store demonstrations such as the one at Miller and Sons.

"It really helps people link the product with the producer," she said.

Greg Lawless, director of agricultural initiatives for the eight-county Thrive economic development initiative, said more local food purchases means more money circulating in local economies.

Thrive covers Dane, Sauk, Columbia, Dodge, Iowa, Green, Rock and Jefferson counties.

Federman said the cooperating groups are planning more food demonstrations at grocery stores.

"We're focusing on the Thrive region right now, and we want to try to do it in one store per county in the next six months," she said. "We'll be evaluating how things went today."

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