

Panel to focus on local effect of federal agriculture policy

By Lisa Chamoff
Staff Writer

Published July 22 2007

WESTPORT - Local chef Michel Nischan always knew that once he had his own restaurant, he would buy his ingredients directly from farmers.

But when he opened Miche Mache restaurant in South Norwalk in 1990, Nischan was surprised to learn that buying directly from producers did not necessarily save him money.

He found he could either buy a whole pig from a farmer for \$3.50 a pound and cut it up himself, or buy boneless pork loin from a big supplier for the same price.

Nischan said this price disparity can be attributed to the federal farm bill, which gives subsidies to large agribusiness ventures that produce commodities such as corn, grain and cotton, while giving little funding to smaller farms that grow fruits and vegetables. It also is why potato chips are often cheaper than fresh produce, he said.

Nischan opened the Dressing Room restaurant at the Westport Country Playhouse last year. He advocates for locally grown produce and sustainable agriculture. He will be part of a panel discussion tomorrow on a new version of the farm bill, which recently was approved by the House Agriculture Committee and likely will be debated by the U.S. House of Representatives this week.

The multibillion-dollar legislation sets the nation's farm and food policies for the next five years. The bill provides farm subsidies, supports nutrition programs, including food stamps, and sets land conservation policy.

Democrats in Congress are pushing to reform the subsidies program, and Nischan said tomorrow's event will educate participants on how the bill affects the price of food and what is available to consumers, as well as encourage them to contact their representatives.

"They have a great opportunity right now to actually have some input in getting the bill changed," said Nischan, whose company, Wholesome Wave, along with the Dressing Room, is sponsoring the event. The American Farmland Trust and the Northeast Midwest Institute also are sponsors.



Others on the panel, held from 1:30 to 3:30 p.m. at the playhouse, include Gus Schumacher, the undersecretary of farm and foreign agricultural services during the Clinton administration; Annie Farrell, an advocate for sustainable and organic farming and the manager of Millstone Farm in Wilton; and Daniel Imhoff, the author of several books on food and environmental issues, including "Food Fight: A Citizen's Guide to the Farm Bill."

U.S. Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-New Haven, will give an introduction.

DeLauro, who is in her ninth term, serves as chairwoman of the House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee. Earlier this year, she introduced legislation focusing on policies that would help the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states, which she said are underrepresented in the farm bill.

DeLauro's bill called for expanding programs to increase access to healthy foods, promoting specialty crops and conserving farmland.

"We've got a number of things we cared a lot about into the bill," DeLauro said. "I think the panel will offer people the opportunity to learn more about the farm bill because it's critical to our communities."

Copyright © 2007, Southern Connecticut Newspapers, Inc.

