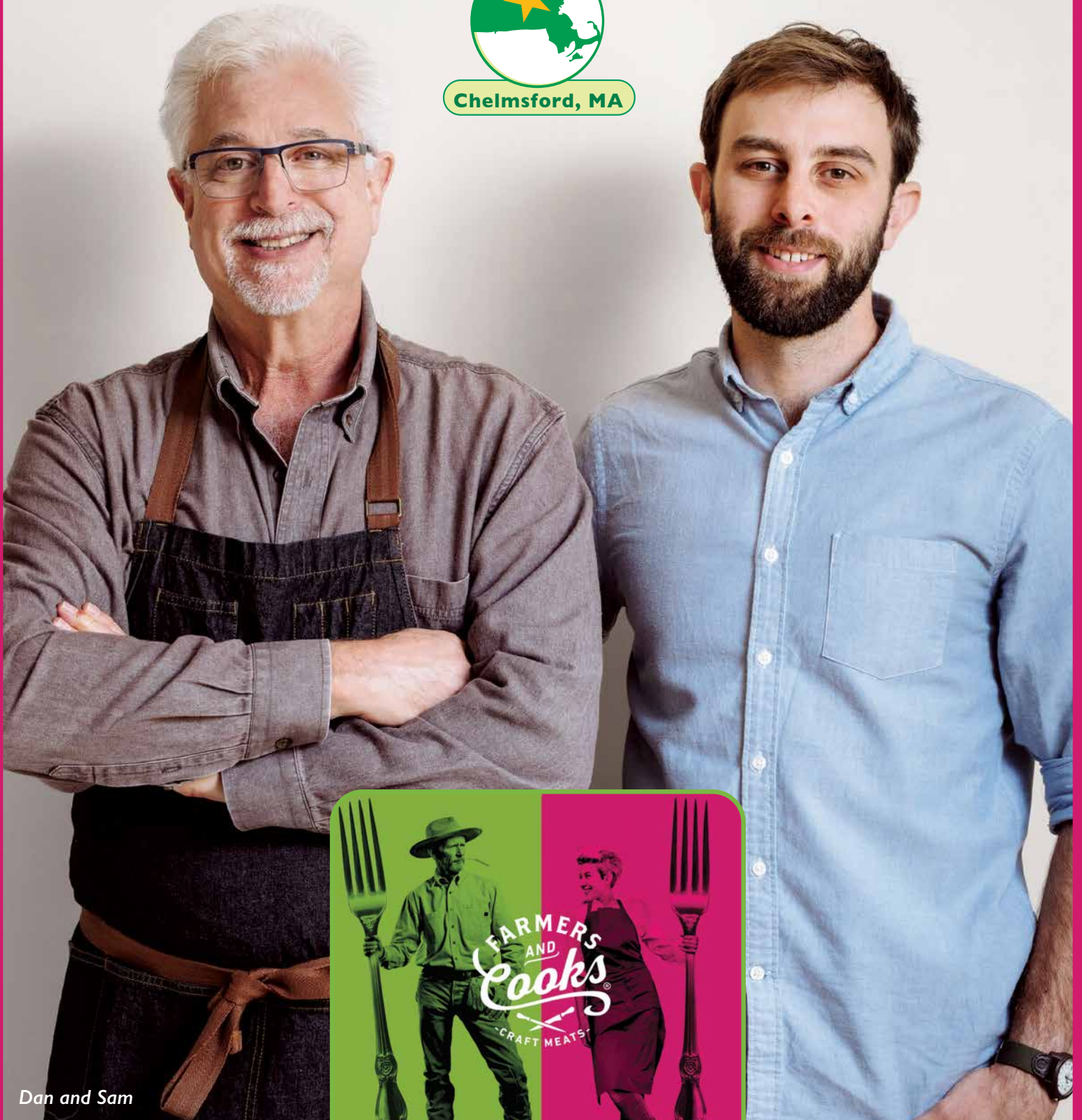


Producer ^{OF THE} *Month*

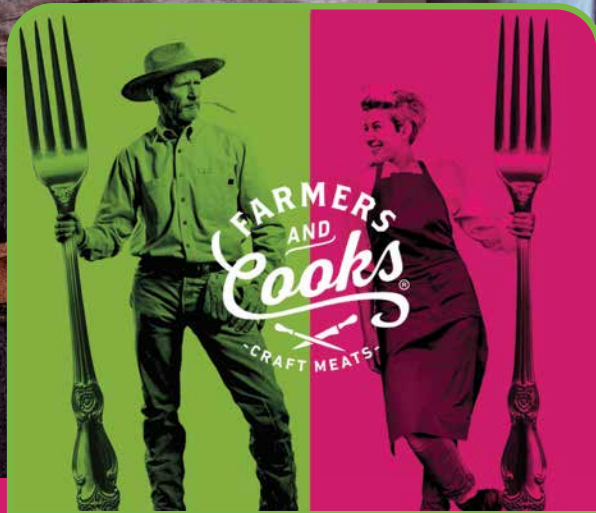
MAY 2023



Chelmsford, MA



Dan and Sam



BRATTLEBORO FOOD CO-OP

Producer OF THE *Month*

By Ruth Garbus



For Sam Estridge of Farmers and Cooks, real conversation means talking about real food: quality, flavor, and tradition. Because what they do is so unlike the industry standard, Farmers and Cooks needs the stores that carry their products to be partners in educating and inspiring their customers. At our Co-op, that hurdle isn't quite so high, but it's still kinda weird to think about buying something from the deli case that's so good you'd be comfortable serving it to guests on a dinner plate. That's where the real conversations come in.

At the BFC and other food co-ops, we've seen "all natural" packaged sandwich meat for many years, and those brands did a lot of work to carve a path for higher quality. But Farmers and Cooks is doing something very different—because they were founded by a flavor-obsessed foodie, not a health-conscious hippie. More and more, the Venn diagram between those two constituencies

is overlapping, but that hasn't always been the case. On the one hand, it only makes sense: good flavor comes from high-quality ingredients that are fresh and minimally processed, which often means they're healthier, too. But the earlier options for natural deli meats didn't have "foodie appeal." Grilled rye bread layered high with luscious, fat-marbled Jewish-style pastrami, melted Swiss cheese, Thousand Island dressing and kraut isn't usually the preferred lunch of your average flower child.

It started as a labor of love. An appreciation for great pastrami, like the kind found at the legendary Katz's Deli on New York's Lower East Side, has been passed from father to son for three generations in the Estridge family. Sam's dad, Dan, took him on a pilgrimage to Katz's as a kid, and he recalls having an almost religious experience with that first towering sandwich. Back then, nothing came remotely close to it in the Boston area where Sam,

Dan, and the rest of the family lived. Eventually, Dan decided to make his own. He perfected a recipe for great pastrami that became a family tradition to be enjoyed on special occasions.

Dan was in his early forties when he had a "tasty midlife crisis," as Sam describes it, and decided to quit software engineering to try making a living from his passion for pastrami. The first customers were upscale restaurants in the Boston area, but eventually, they grew their market to all of New England and beyond, and expanded their repertoire to include roast beef, turkey, and ham. This process involved much trial and error as Dan shepherded recipes from his home kitchen to professional smokehouses. Different ingredients behave differently at scale, so getting it right took time, attention, and diligence. But ultimately, he succeeded.

Sam says it was wild to watch his father embark on this new adventure. At the time, Sam was at college



studying sustainable business. When he graduated, he joined the family enterprise and hasn't looked back since; he's now vice president of sales. They make a great pair: Dan loves creating in the kitchen, and Sam loves being out in the field. His mom, Kathy, also works for the business, handling administrative tasks from home base, and they have three additional staff members who manage their growing number of accounts.

The origin of the deli meat category can be epitomized by the day-after-Thanksgiving turkey sandwich, or the way a family might make a big roast on Sunday and eat cold sliced leftovers the rest of the week. It's been part of the economy of a typical home kitchen for eons. Over the last seventy years, it has become a convenience category, i.e. the cheaper the better. Before the industrial food system existed as we know it today, frugality didn't mean chemicals, fillers, and preservatives, but today, more often than

not, cheap food is highly processed, morally dubious, and bad for your health. And it usually doesn't taste great, either.

Farmers and Cooks made the clever decision to not own their manufacturing facility in order to incentivize themselves to continue making higher-quality products. In a more typical scenario, the brand would own the smokehouse*, which not only hampers a young business with debt, but also leads to a desire to streamline and cut costs at the expense of the end result. For example, the same brines are used for every roast, fillers are injected to increase yield, parts are combined and steamed in a plastic bag instead of cooked in an oven, and then they're colored with dyes to make it look as though they've

** All USDA-inspected facilities that have the ability to smoke meats are called smokehouses, even if not all of the meats cooked there are smoked.*

been browned in the oven. Instead of going down that path, Farmers and Cooks partners with independent smokehouses in several locations. As customers rather than owners of those facilities, getting the most value for their dollar is all about getting the highest quality products, not the least expensive.

Case in point: our deli staff wondered about the unusual size and shape of Farmers and Cooks turkey breast (sort of a rounded square, about 2.5 inches thick). Sam's explanation was unexpected. He said that the typical approach in deli is to macerate and form the meat into a standard, rounded shape so the product performs more efficiently on a slicer. (This is also a convenient opportunity for processors to add water and fillers.) But while Farmers and Cooks wanted their turkey breast to slice well for the stores and restaurants they supply, their obsession with home-cooked quality led them to a simpler, more natural



solution. They worked extensively with the family-owned Mennonite smokehouse where it's roasted to get the most evenly cooked, easy-to-handle result. After much experimentation, they determined how to fold the seasoned breasts just so, with the ideal spacing between the roasts on each tray. Getting down to that level of detail pays off for everyone. Not only are their products consistently more delicious, but they're also better for our deli staff to work with—easier to slice, cleaner inside and out, and generally a higher quality experience on both sides of the counter.

Clearly, Farmers and Cooks has put a lot of time and effort into translating not only ingredients to a larger scale but also cooking methods. The environment might look different—all Farmers and Cooks products are made in USDA-inspected smokehouses, as required by law—but essentially, they're replicating the process of home cooking. All their offerings are made with single cuts, meaning they don't mix different pieces of meat into one loaf with the aid of binders. They're all

hand-rubbed with herbs and spices, open roasted, and brined for flavor in a unique blend of seasonings. Smoked varieties spend hours in the smoker. These are all fancy ways of saying they're made just like you would cook a roast for your family.

Home headquarters is in Westford, MA, near Lowell—that's where Dan does a lot of recipe testing, and Kathy administrates. However, they've found it necessary to look farther afield for a consistent supply of animals raised to their standards (no antibiotics, added hormones, artificial ingredients, nitrates or nitrites, and must be vegetarian-fed). Their partner farms and smokehouses are in Pennsylvania, the mid-Atlantic region, and the Midwest. Their market, though, is almost exclusively in New England and New York State, and they aren't focused on growth farther afield; there's still plenty of opportunity to expand within this region (if you're a regular reader of these features, this will be unsurprising!). One dream is to have a completely Northeast-raised roast; it might not be consistently

available, but moving their business to incorporate more and more local ingredients and facilities is definitely on their radar. Other than that, Farmers and Cooks will keep doing what they do best: bringing extraordinary food to ordinary deli counters all over our little corner of the world.



A note from the author:

In last month's feature article, I pointed out the characteristics of co-ops that distinguish us from conventional grocers from the perspective of our local vendors. In that piece, I made the case that cooperatively-owned supermarkets are always a cut above conventionally owned, especially regarding how we value small, locally-owned businesses. So it was interesting to hear Sam of Farmers and Cooks make an equally strong distinction, but not between co-ops and conventionals: between independents and multinationals. For Farmers and Cooks, that's the line separating good businesses that care about their customers and communities from those solely focused on maximizing profit.

**Farmers
and Cooks
TASTING
at the BFC!**

Saturday, May 13

**11:30 am
until 2:30 pm.**