

Farm Fresh RI: So Much More Than a Bumper Sticker

If you've ever seen an "I TOMATO My Farmer" bumper sticker, then you are familiar with Farm Fresh RI.

Farm Fresh RI is a nonprofit whose main mission is to make fresh, local and healthy food more accessible to Rhode Islanders while helping farmers and food makers across New England thrive. RI prides itself on its food, from its unique culinary items like clam cakes, pizza strips and coffee cabinets, to its world-renowned restaurants and seafood. It may not immediately come to mind, but we are also home to a host of bountiful farms and orchards. Farm Fresh seeks to bring it all together to reduce food insecurity. I recently spoke with **Thea Upham**, Farm Fresh's director of programs and operations, to discuss what they've been doing and what's to come.

According to its tagline, Farm Fresh has been "a hub for local food since 2004." Everything they do across a number of programs promotes their mission in some way, from community education to food delivery. According to Upham, the program that provides the most access to healthy food is their "Bonus Bucks" program.

In 2009, Farm Fresh created the infrastructure that allows SNAP (formerly known as food stamps) recipients to utilize their benefits at participating farmers' markets and receive more support as an incentive. In 2018, Farm Fresh received a federal grant that enabled them to increase this bonus to a dollar-for-dollar match, meaning that each SNAP recipient could spend double at the Farmers' Market compared to what they could at a traditional grocery store., with the bonus supporting the purchase of fresh fruits and vegetables. These are the "Bonus Bucks." Upham notes that this has had an enormous impact on the RI food economy, as farmers reach customers who wouldn't otherwise shop at farmers' markets while consumers get fresh, local food - a win-win for sure.

While Farm Fresh's mission has been consistent since its inception, that mission became more vital in the wake of COVID-19. Last year, they partnered with the RI Community Food Bank to bring fresh food from local farms to food pantries across RI. The food bank has always faced challenges storing perishable food: Farm Fresh provided a solution with what Upham describes as the "right size fit." Farm Fresh is able to make their deliveries to the food banks at just the right time and in just the right quantity. They have even curated the contents to meet the cultural needs of the various communities. Federal funding for this program expired, but it has been such a success that the RI Community Food Bank uses their own funds to continue the program.

Aside from continuing its current successful programs, this year Farm Fresh will partner with the Department of Environmental Management (DEM) to distribute food boxes to seniors. Seniors can face both financial and mobility challenges in attempting to access fresh fruit and vegetables; Farm Fresh and the DEM will use Farm Fresh's "Market Mobile" to deliver boxes of seasonal produce directly to senior centers.

Making all this magic happen requires space. Farm Fresh outgrew their former locale in Pawtucket and in 2021 moved to their current home on Sims Ave in PVD. Aside from a need to expand, the move "came out of a desire to create a space to celebrate RI food, both its agriculture and production," explains

Upham. FFRI has done just that with a hub that covers all elements of the food chain. The space is unique. This is no food court for sure, but rather a perfect blend of local RI food producers, farmers and consumers, all coming together to celebrate the unique and remarkable culinary offerings of our humble state.

Each Saturday, Farm Fresh hosts a farmers' market, year-round. Over the fall and holiday season, the building also hosted the Providence Flea, and holds other special events throughout the year. Upham tells me the building will open fully this year, with exciting tenants such as Anchor Toffee, Robin Hollow Flowers, Rhed's Hot Sauces, Tallulah's Taqueria, Providence Brewing Company and Wright's Creamery, the state's only cow-to-cone ice cream producer. New Harvest Coffee & Spirits also moved to the Farm Fresh Food Hub last year, meaning you can get a quality cup of Joe or a cocktail while you support RI farmers and food-producers. What a perfect way to spend a Saturday.

Fun Note, carved in stone: When you go to Farm Fresh RI, be sure to check out the marble carvings. According to historical records, the stonecutters who built our current statehouse leased the land where FFRI now resides, leaving behind unused marble. While remediating the land surrounding the building, pieces of marble, from large slabs to small pieces, were unearthed. FFRI has honored this history by creating unique pieces of art out of that marble. Read here for more information on this exciting piece of RI history: Public Invited to Watch Renowned Stone Carver Create Unique Art at Farm Fresh (farmfreshri.org)

To learn more about all the amazing programs at Farm Fresh RI, check out their website at Farm Fresh Rhode Island - A hub for local food since 2004 (farmfreshri.org).