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Posted March 17, 2007

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Network promotes local food

By **Jason G. Zencka**
Journal staff

Since December, a bunch of local food enthusiasts has been meeting weekly to eat, drink and create a network for food producers to drum up interest in their products.

The group, called Farmshed, held a "speed-dating" event Wednesday, where local farmers made connections with local chefs, grocers and food buffs while discussing ways to expand the group's reach.

"I'd have to say this is the best first date I've been on," joked John Sheffy, one of the group's charter members.

Sheffy, who works with the Global Environmental Management Education Center at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, said he wants Farmshed to serve as an umbrella group, organizing food-related community activism across Central Wisconsin.

"There are so many different reasons to support local food," Sheffy said, "from environmental aspects, to health aspects, to community development aspects, to economic aspects -- to keep money local."

Despite its regional emphasis, Farmshed's appeal isn't limited to the area. Co-founder Jeremy Solin said that mounting concerns regarding issues such as climate change and "peak oil" contribute to public interest in finding alternatives to a global food market.

"Food that's traveling 15,000, 1,500, or even 500 miles won't be as fresh as what you get locally," he said.

Many food producers expressed the need for a group to raise community awareness of local food availability.

"Organic farming never pays the bills," said Kristine Klish, "it's just a passion."

For Klish, who owns Stonecrop Organic Dairy, 4472A County Road J, with her husband, keeping her stock local and organic is more than just a practical matter.

"I will never have a SYSCO truck stop at my restaurant," Klish said. "That's how I define myself."

Farmshed members and visitors discussed the possibilities of revitalizing the Stevens Point Farmers' Market, as well as coordinating the efforts of regional Community Supported Agriculture programs, where investors share in the yield of farmers' yearly harvests.

The group, however, still is gaining momentum. Wednesday's "speed dating" was one of the first events sponsored by Farmshed, which began as a weekly breakfast club. Now, several members are discussing the possibility of registering with the IRS as a charitable organization.

More information on Farmshed can be found at www.farmshed.org.



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Kenneth Castleberry and Jane Maya-Shippy share their interests in locally grown foods Wednesday evening during a Farmshed meeting.
DOUG WOJCIK/Stevens Point Journal

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