

WORTH THE TRIP

A DIFFERENT KIND OF EAT-LOCAL CHALLENGE

Provisions Market finds it's not easy being green.

BY ANN MONROE

FORT GREENE—When Jason Richelson and Amy Bennett moved to Fort Greene seven years ago, they shared their neighbors' frustration that they couldn't buy good fresh food without getting on the subway or into a car. But, say the partners, who now own two Greene Grape wine stores, there's a reason it's taken Fort Greene so long to get fresh fish and cut-to-order meat and cheese. Fresh food is hard.

They should know. In January, after two years of planning, they opened Provisions, a gourmet grocery store with fish, meat and cheese counters, fresh organic vegetables, artisanal beer and an assortment of prepared food, just down the block from their Fort Greene wine store (the other is in Lower Manhattan). Despite some to-be-expected building and permit delays, the store's first few months have been happy ones, with enthusiastic customers and solid sales. But it hasn't been—and still isn't—easy. Stocking a food store is complicated. When it's a food store with a conscience, like Provisions, it's very, very complicated.

The goal, says Matt Roberts, the store's general manager, is to stock food that's as local and as natural as possible. "I'd rather go to the producer," says Matt, meaning the farmer, say, or pickler, rather than a middleman. "He's the one that needs the money." But many of the producers whose food Provisions would like to carry can't provide as much as the store needs, as regularly as it needs it. As anyone who shops New York's Greenmarkets knows, bad weather can force farmers to skip the trip to town. A missed delivery—and it has had some already—leaves Provisions scrambling. And heresy though it may be to a locavore, they've found local and high quality aren't always synonymous. One local honey producer couldn't pack bottles without breaking them, and at least one local ice cream turned out to taste just awful.

So far, says Amy, the couple's main concern has been simply filling those shelves, a painfully slow process that they turned into a marketing gimmick by sending out regular e-mails to customers as new sections of the store filled up. "It's the same thing

we did at the wine store," she explains. "We start with what we can get from wholesalers. Then once the store is stocked, we can begin to go to farmers." She hopes to work with farmers who sell at the Fort Greene Greenmarket (plans are already afoot to get deliveries from Ronnybrook Farm as well as meat from a Ronnybrook neighbor). But Ronnybrook's an established outfit that's already got wholesale distribution experience; many farmers aren't ready to move into that supply chain—or to trade the retail prices they get at Greenmarkets for the lower wholesale prices they'd get from grocers.

There are more subtle ethical dilemmas, too. Grassfed beef, or organic? And just how free-ranging are those free-range chickens? "If we offer wild salmon we're part of the problem," Amy says, "and if we offer organic farmed salmon we're part of the problem. But people want salmon. It's tricky."

But that, she says, is what makes it fun. 🍋

www.greengrape.com; 718.233.2700; 753 Fulton at South Portland.



Photograph: Stephen Munshin