

April 2006

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Cather, Amanda. "Valley Free Radio Program Takes Things 'Farm to Fork'" NOFA Mass News (2006).

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Valley Free Radio Program Takes Things 'Farm to Fork'

Amanda Cather
Waltham Fields Community Farm



The Jan. 3 episode of Farm to Fork. From left, Ryan Voiland, Kelly Coleman and Madeleine Charney at the studios of Valley Free Radio.

The radio program "Farm to Fork," heard every other Tuesday evening from 6-7 p.m. on Valley Free Radio, 103.3 FM WXOJ-LP Northampton, could be called the Slow Food of radio. This isn't a program of 30-second sound 'snacks' or the audio equivalent of pizza to go. It's a show that requires you to pull up a chair, settle in, and prepare to savor it in its entirety.

'Farm to Fork' was the brainchild of Madeleine Charney, the librarian at the New England Small Farm Institute in Belchertown, who responded to a VFR flyer requesting new programming with a proposal for a show about local food and its connections with local agriculture. "Basically, a year later they called me up and said 'Are you ready to do that show?'" says Charney.

Charney was. She put together a distinguished team of co-hosts, including Ryan Voiland, farmer at Red Fire Farm in Granby, and Kelly Coleman, Program Coordinator at Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture in South Deerfield. Only Coleman had direct experience producing a radio show prior to 'Farm to Fork'. "I knew nothing about radio," says Charney, but with a little technical training from Valley Free Radio, the program went on the air.

The three envisioned a format organized around a central seasonal theme—tomatoes in early September, apples in October, or goats and cheesemaking in January, for example. Two in-depth interviews with local experts on the theme are supplemented by nutritional information as appropriate; local, regional and national food and agriculture news; a calendar of local and regional events; and music. Occasionally a topical interview is enhanced by an "off-topic" guest. In a holiday program on grass-fed beef, for example, a vegan baker described the mouth-watering treats she creates for several Pioneer Valley outlets.

There is a natural division of labor among the three co-hosts, according to Charney. In general, Voiland interviews guests, Coleman puts together the news, and Charney handles the music, nutritional information, and calendar portions of the show. Charney emphasizes, however, that the show is a collaborative venture. "It is an amazing team—reliable, respectful, and with great follow-through," she points out, also praising the "really amazing tech support" that the program receives from Valley Free Radio tech volunteers.

Charney, Voiland and Coleman use their connections in the food and farming community to choose guests to interview on the program. According to Charney, "the interviews depend on who you know, and you keep getting the lesson of who's in your community doing this work." Farm to Fork's interviews are lengthy enough to explore some of the real issues connected with their topics, and the interviewers don't shy away from asking difficult questions about the organic standards, regulations surrounding meat processing or the ultra-pasteurization of milk. Just as often, however, the interviews celebrate the guest's—and the hosts'—sheer love of their craft, whether it's artisanal cheesemaking, or teaching apprentices to farm.

Charney says that while at first the team would meet for an hour after the show to sketch the outline for the upcoming show, they recently got together for their first long-term planning meeting. Topics for upcoming shows include winter greens production, permaculture, community supported agriculture, asparagus, milk, strawberries and energy, and the group has already begun to brainstorm and research for these programs.

According to Charney, the team has received great feedback on Farm to Fork. They are open to more, and suggestions about the show, and recommend that listeners contact them at farmtofork@valleyfreeradio.org, or at 413 467-SOIL (Voiland's telephone number). The program is also searching for new theme music, and Charney invited any musicians who have a 1-2 minute idea for a theme for the show to get in touch with its hosts.

Finally, Charney put in a plug for Valley Free Radio itself, an all-volunteer, collectively managed alternative to mainstream commercial radio for the Pioneer Valley, urging folks who enjoy 'Farm to Fork' to join the station. "One man told me he listens to us instead of NPR," she said. "You can't do better than that."

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