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**Satur Farms' focus on flavor is key to its success**

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By

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**Cutchogue, NY** — Here on the North Fork of Long Island, a region best known for its ubiquitous vineyards and wineries, Satur Farms has carved out a niche as one of the top producers of gourmet lettuces, herbs and baby vegetables, which it supplies to leading retailers and foodservice establishments in New York and beyond.

In many ways, Satur Farms was destined to be a success, owing to the backgrounds of the couple that own and operate the company. But that success has not come without tremendous hard work and an occasional leap of faith.

Paulette Satur grew up on a dairy farm in central Pennsylvania and earned a bachelor's degree in plant physiology from Penn State University. From there, she traveled west and completed her graduate work in the same discipline at the University of Arizona before moving on to work in the wine industry selling high-end wines to top restaurants.

Satur's husband, Eberhard Muller, a native of Germany, is a classically trained chef who helmed the kitchens at such venerable establishments as L'Archestrate in Paris, and Le Bernardin and Lutece in New York City.

The couple met when she was trying to sell him wine for his restaurant. After living in New York City and working in their parallel careers, they decided to leave the urban jungle behind and head east to the bucolic North Fork.

"I love the city, but I am drawn to farms," Satur told *The Produce News* in early June. "I just love food production, and I was looking [for farmland] before Eberhard and I even met."

Her husband did not need a lot of convincing, she said, and has adapted well to life as a farmer. "He was trained in Europe and was well accustomed to the farm-to-table concept. He translates his focus and precision from cooking into his farming practices."

Satur said their start in farming was modest, with the goal of growing some vegetables for Muller's restaurant.

"Our first plot was a 100-by-50-foot garden with drip tape irrigation," she said. "We raised too many crops, from asparagus to zucchini, and I had 60 different heirloom tomato varieties. We also started doing our own deliveries to high-end restaurants in New York City, since that is where we had the most contacts."

In 2000, three years after starting Satur Farms, the couple began working with Fresh Direct to supply

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retail packs, marking a shift in strategy for the company.

“This was our first foray into retail, and we wanted to offer local New York products,” said Satur. “Fresh Direct was the perfect partner for that.”

Satur said its retail line was slow to develop in the beginning, but it was a valuable endeavor because it enabled the company to connect with consumers as a local supplier.

Satur Farms eventually pared back its offerings and began focusing on what Satur refers to as her Holy Trinity — mesclun, baby spinach and wild arugula (though she is quick to include baby kale, which they added a few years ago, as a main item). However, Satur Farms lists nearly 30 produce items among its offerings, as well as a line of organic salad dressings.

### **Unmatched flavor**

Asked what sets Satur Farms apart from its competition, Satur puts flavor at the top of the list. She said the fertile growing region and microclimate of the North Fork are key factors behind their ability to grow vegetables with unmatched flavor.

“Here on the North Fork we are surrounded by water, with the Long Island Sound to the north and the Peconic Bay to the south,” she said, adding that the mild climate and ocean breezes that are prevalent result in ideal growing conditions for the crops. What’s more, the region has an incredible fresh water source, as it sits atop an aquifer.

“We are intrigued by the flavors and textures that nature can produce with some help of good farming practices,” she said. “We favor field-grown crops.”

### **Pandemic accelerates retail**

At the start of 2020, Satur Farms’ business was split roughly 50-50 between retail and foodservice, according to Satur. When the government-mandated shutdown was implemented in March of last year, she said they quickly had to change course.

“When the shutdown was put in effect in mid-March, my jaw just dropped,” said Satur. “After the initial shock we quickly realized that we had to focus on our retail program, which subsequently soared. Our size allowed us to change course rapidly and efficiently. Business increased dramatically with our existing retail customers such as Fresh Direct, while new customers were open to sourcing from a local and regional grower.”

She said Satur Farms now derives nearly three-quarters of its business from the retail side, and Muller does not see that changing in the near term.

“I believe high-end foodservice will be slow in coming back to where it was prior to the pandemic,” he said. “Baby boomers moved out of the city and that gave rise to more casual restaurant formats. Also, the number of restaurant patrons has decreased. In a very short period of time, most major distributors turned to retail and delivery, and I don’t think that will go away any time soon.”

### **Local advantage**

Regarding the current growing season, Satur said things got off to a great start with a nice early

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spring, enabling them to begin harvesting around two to three weeks earlier than normal.

That bodes well for their customers, according to Muller, who said there are a number of advantages offered by locally grown New York produce.

“First and foremost are the flavor and freshness. It is hard to match that with product coming from the West Coast,” he said, noting that Satur Farms’ product can be on a retail shelf within a day of harvest.

He also noted that there is a huge freight advantage for New York-grown product, which allows him to keep his prices within the range of inflation despite the rising cost of production. “All of our costs are going up — inputs, boxes, labor, plastic, basically everything.”

Also, as a well-established local supplier, Satur said they have the advantage of high name recognition in their densely populated region.

“The consumer recognizes the brand’s reputation for excellent standards,” Satur said. “We want to translate and transport our freshness to our customers and ultimately the consumer. That is our reason for being here,” she concluded.

*Photo: Eberhard Muller and Paulette Satur, who own and operate Satur Farms, with fresh-picked lettuce at their farm in Cutchogue, NY, on the North Fork of Long Island. Photo by John Groh.*

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