

Ex-Manhattanite finds much to love in Saratoga food scene

By Pam Abrams, *The Times Union*

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After 40 years as an executive in publishing in New York City, where she reveled in the culinary scene of one of the best food cities in the world, Pam Abrams moved full-time to Saratoga Springs and has discovered a different but very satisfying food scene. She's seen here at Four Seasons Natural Foods. (Will Waldron/Times Union)

After four decades in the publishing business in New York City, I was trepidatious about leaving the city for full-time living upstate. As an enthusiastic home cook, avid entertainer, adventurous restaurant diner and regular boozier, I thought I was leaving culinary heaven behind when my husband and I moved to Saratoga Springs in 2019: a cheese and charcuterie

shop on my Manhattan corner, arguably the world's best spice store (Kalyustan's) a few subway stops away, bars and restaurants galore (pre-pandemic, obviously). Food life was good. But then I moved up here, and food life got great. Here's why.

Three times a week there's a farmers market: Wednesdays at High Rock Park, Saturdays at Wilton Mall and Sundays at the Lincoln Baths at Saratoga Spa State Park. If I don't make it to one of those I can pick up local produce, eggs, meat and dairy from many of those same farmers and small-batch producers at Four Seasons Natural Foods Store on Henry Street. I love that this market buys direct from farms in the area, giving customers the convenience of anytime shopping for the freshest food.

The produce section of Four Seasons isn't large, but it moves its products efficiently and it is always stocked. The dairy case has a satisfying combo of local and other organic offerings. Like a lot of things at this small, natural foods market, you often have to look carefully to find what you are after, but most times it's there. (Ask the reliably helpful staff if you're stumped.) They'll order things for you, too, as was the case for me during the pandemic winter when I was cooking my way through the book "Indian-ish." I needed asafetida powder, a flavor booster used to unite and enhance the flavors of all the other spices in many Indian dishes. Four Seasons' bulk spice collection is good, too, so I can buy a little at a time, as frequently as I need.

Its rival for me is Healthy Living Market, with which I have had a love/hate relationship. Let's start with the love. What a selection! In every aisle there's a dazzling array of food, from locally sourced to globally diverse. It's a cook's dream, that store, with good meat, fish, cheese, bread, groceries and bath and beauty products all under one roof. But my confidence in their customer service was shaken a bit in the early days of the pandemic when they were slow to require mask compliance. I also prefer to shop in town than out at the soulless mall in Wilton.

A little shop that has captured my heart without conflict is the Farm Stand at Pitney Meadows Community Farm. I belong to the farm's pick-your-own CSA, a marvel in the summer and fall. But when I don't have time to tromp out to the fields — or it's too hot, too cold, too rainy — I can shop their little produce store. (Anyone can: It's not just for members.) The Farm Stand is housed in a brightly renovated shed that's fully accessible and an easy in-out right off West Avenue.

The self-service shop has refrigerated cases filled with whatever's just harvested: leafy greens, peas, tomatoes, herbs, etc. They also carry products from neighboring farms like frozen, pasture-raised meat, local honey and, occasionally, eggs. Also flowers! Though you never know exactly what you'll find there, the selection is as fresh and local as it gets. Pitney Meadows is a nonprofit that donates 40 percent of what it grows to food pantries and food security programs. This year they're piloting a pay-what-you-can Pop-up Produce Pantry that will travel to underserved rural communities. When I buy from Pitney Farms, I like that I'm also contributing to their larger mission.

The new-location Moby Rick's Seafood in the Purdy's/CVS/Embassy Suites Plaza on Congress Street is a sight to behold. Fresh fish and seafood on icy display line the cases in the roomy new space. If I'm giving a party I order in advance (they'll clean, filet, shuck), and on an ordinary weeknight I take advantage of the promotional specials texted to my phone. The people who work at Moby's are friendly, and helpful with cooking tips. It may not look like a shack anymore, but the Saratoga store — and the one in Clifton Park, too — are among the area's culinary treasures and have made it easy for me to cook and eat more fish.

And the bonus for Moby Rick's new location: Purdy's Discount Wine & Liquor is right there. A wine and spirits shop with aisles and shopping carts — now there's a change from city

shopping that certainly makes laying in the booze a whole a lot easier. I love Purdy's for its vast wine selection at every price point; it's not as highly curated as the wine room at Putnam Market, which I also like, but it sure is convenient to have hard liquor and wine under one roof, with easy park-and-load. Purdy's recent expansion, after taking over the bank next door, has resulted in even more wine choices and, for home cocktail enthusiasts, more artisanal tequilas, bourbons, aperitifs and the like.

Dining Out

When we were house shopping, our real estate agent told us we would be pleasantly surprised by the restaurant choices in Saratoga Springs, and it turns out that wasn't just a line. My favorites overall are Hamlet & Ghost, Osteria Danny and Hattie's, but there are others for specific reasons: the outdoor terrace at Prime at Saratoga National for its gorgeous setting, 9 Miles East for excellent pizza, Saratoga Awesome Dogs cart (which puts NYC corner dogs to shame) and Mouzon House for live music with terrific food.

Hamlet & Ghost ticks all my boxes: consistently delicious farm-to-table food, buzzing bistro atmosphere, detailed service and an innovative cocktail list. The menu changes with the seasons, though you can always get the burger, which I think is the best in town. And as a dessert person, I make a point of saving room for it here: Lemon posset! Chocolate Eton Mess! Go for whatever Executive Chef Michelle Hunter has on the menu at any given time: She's a pastry genius.

The food at Osteria Danny is just aces, which is why I tolerate the difficulty of getting a table or bar seat. No online reservation system, frequently booked, etc. But once there, the place never disappoints: There's a happy, party atmosphere and fresh takes on Italian standards that the owners aptly describe as "old, new and simple." Billie's meatballs are perfectly textured and

tasty. Veal Patti is a sublime change from the regular Veal Danny, but it's not on the menu often enough. A dinner here never fails to put me in a good mood.

Hattie's is not only my favorite place to take out-of-towners for its history, ambience and perfect fried chicken; it's also my favorite dining spot before or after a show at Caffè Lena. It's a testament to owner/chef Jasper Alexander that Hattie's has maintained its Southern charm. It opened in 1938; Alexander and his wife, Beth, are only the third owners. The jambalaya, pulled pork and gumbo are all excellent, but it's the fried chicken that keeps most of us hooked. Got to love a food town that knows not to mess with a good thing.

Pam Abrams writes about food for the website of The Savory Pantry store in Saratoga Springs and helps produce the CulinaryArts@SPAC series. She lives in Saratoga Springs.



Pam Abrams shops for groceries at Four Seasons Natural Foods in Saratoga Springs. (Will Waldron/Times Union)



Pam Abrams reaches for a jar of bulk spices while shopping for groceries at Four Seasons Natural Foods in Saratoga Springs. (Will Waldron/Times Union)