

# Inside Farm Fresh Rhode Island's Game-Changing Growth

The nonprofit, with a massive new facility in Providence, has changed the way Rhode Islanders eat forever.

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Farm Fresh RI's Market Mobile staff members collect produce delivered by local farms, then pack it up for delivery to restaurants, schools and institutions, as well as home delivery customers. The individual orders are loaded into color-coded bins, then delivered by box trucks along various mapped routes. Photography by Ryan T. Conaty.

It's noon on a sunny mid-May Wednesday, and farmers are beginning to line up outside the open loading dock doors at Farm Fresh Rhode Island's new 60,000-square-foot local food hub. The center is located on 3.2 acres on the corner of Kinsley and Sims avenues in the Valley section of Providence. Sun-weathered faces glance at their own pointed fingers while counting produce

and plants, traces of dirt still visible in their nail beds and stained on the knees of their denim from harvesting the fresh-picked produce that morning or the previous day. Our Kids Farm unloads greens, kale and seedlings onto a cart, which will be divided up into individual orders, loaded into plastic bins and delivered the next day by box trucks through Farm Fresh RI's Market Mobile to restaurants, institutions and residential customers.

Farm Fresh RI's Market Mobile receiving manager Cayne Cabral collects orders from farms while cross-checking his printed list of pre-orders from the website, secured to his clipboard. Today, 102 farmers and food producers will supply goods grown and produced all over the region, he says.



Photography by Ryan T. Conaty.

The beginnings of what later became known as Farm Fresh RI started in 2004 as Brown University undergraduate student Louella Hill's thesis project that sent out students to help local farmers and get more local foods served by Brown Dining Services. She teamed up with fellow Brown student Noah Fulmer, who created an online database of local farms, farmers markets, restaurants, grocers and other businesses sourcing and serving locally grown foods. It officially became a nonprofit in 2005 based out of the Urban Environmental Lab at Brown University. Once Hill realized her goal, she moved

on to co-found Narragansett Creamery. After she left, the Wintertime Farmers Market launched out of AS220. It was such a huge success, the next year, the market moved on to a bigger home at the Hope Artiste Village in Pawtucket, where it remained for twelve years until the new hub was built.

Market Mobile was established in 2009 after Farm Fresh RI moved into the Hope Artiste Village. The program is a local food distribution system that connects farmers and food producers in the Northeast region with wholesale buyers through an e-commerce ordering and delivery platform that allows customers to buy local food directly from the source. Before March 2020, the service was only accessible to restaurants, grocers and large-scale institutions like schools, hospitals and universities, but the pandemic created a market and a necessity for Farm Fresh RI to expand online ordering and delivery to the public. The move nearly doubled their sales and farmers' sales from the previous year, and helped farmers recoup losses from restaurants and institutions that were forced to shut down or divert to takeout only, while also helping people gain access to healthy, local foods without having to rely on trips to grocery stores.

Jesse Rye is a co-executive director for Farm Fresh RI alongside Sheri Griffin, who has been with the nonprofit since 2005 and originally helped Hill establish Farm Fresh RI as a full-fledged organization. They share the role with different responsibilities. Rye, who has worked at Farm Fresh RI since 2012, handles financial management and day-to-day operations, including Market Mobile, while Griffin oversees communications and development, including all the farmers markets. The two co-executive directors sit outside of the Farm Fresh RI hub, still six feet apart and masked up, on hulking white marble slabs that were pulled from the ground beneath the hub and repurposed into benches.



Photography by Ryan T. Conaty.

The excavated marble was unearthed during site testing for environmental remediation. It was later discovered that the pearly metamorphic rock was left over from the marble that was cut there in the 1890s and used to build the Rhode Island State House. Many of the marble slabs became benches, dotting the grounds, and generous donors' names — like the Granoff family, which previously owned the warehouse that was on this site that was set to become a brewery before it was damaged in a fire — have been carved into several of the seating areas. There are also plans to sell leftover marble pieces in a public sale to raise money for Farm Fresh RI, and several more pieces were donated to the Avenue Concept public arts organization to be used for possible future sculptures or seating.

“The idea to use them as benches was a way of honoring the work that had been done here before and turn it into something that’s a good conversation piece,” Rye says. “There are views from different parts of the building where you can see the state house as well.”

While Rye and Griffin speak, pings resound in the background as stone carver and 2010 MacArthur Fellow Nicholas Benson, owner of the renowned John Stevens Shop, carves symbols into a marble sculpture that sits outside the

market area. The inscription can be translated by code into the words “History. Community. Sustainability,” says Benson. “If you were intent on decoding it, that’s what you’d get,” he says with a smirk.

It’s a pertinent theme. The past year was marked with historical moments and community triumphs as Farm Fresh RI moved into its new state-of-the-art space in late October 2020, and quickly pivoted its well-known winter market into a year-round farmers market there that November.

“During the pandemic, we were able to keep all of our markets open and running. We worked closely with the state DEM to make sure that we were compliant with regulations and keeping our staff safe,” Griffin says. “The doors open up, there are fans and a high-end ventilation system. We had all of this designed prior to COVID because we all wanted a bright, airy space that is permeable to the indoors and outdoors.”

The weekly event is still the largest indoor winter farmers market in our region, and they safely ran it under the strict COVID-19 health restrictions that were necessary at the time while also scaling up home delivery operations and continuing wholesale deliveries through Market Mobile. They spread the word that Market Mobile was open for residential delivery through social media outlets and contacting local media to help gain customers.

“Up until last year, Market Mobile was primarily wholesale accounts, including restaurants and fine dining, grocers, buying clubs, hospitals, schools, colleges and universities. We had grown that program to a point in 2019 when we were recording over \$2.2 million in sales on behalf of the network of farms that we work with,” Rye says. “In 2020, with COVID, we opened the system up to home delivery and continued to work with wholesale customers and we saw the sales on behalf of the farms and food producers we were working with scale up dramatically. We ended up with \$4 million in sales last year [earned on behalf of the farmers/producers].”



Photography by Ryan T. Conaty.

With a surge in local business, home delivery is here to stay. Customers log onto the website where they can pre-order from more than 100 farms and food producers from all over the region, and have food delivered directly to their homes (within certain areas) or packed for pickup at the Sims Avenue packhouse. It's like shopping from a farmers market, except online.

The whole process — from ordering to delivery — seems seamless this morning as farmers drop off fresh produce and food products. The goods are then organized in the food hub's four storage areas, each in different temperature zones, including room temperature, a 55-degree cooler, a 36-degree cooler and a freezer. Allergens like nuts and seeds, seafood and dairy are kept in separate areas to avoid cross-contamination. Over the next day, nearly 200 individual orders will be packed for customers into bins that are arranged by addresses — mapped and routed using Google maps by Market Mobile's operations manager Jay Alston — and loaded onto box trucks for delivery to Boston, Providence, Pawtucket, the East Bay, Newport and South County (wholesale only).

Farm Fresh RI has come a long way since early March 2020, when the pandemic forced them to do all of this planning on the fly in its former smaller

location at the Hope Artiste Village. “When COVID-19 first arrived here, right away, we were starting to hear from our college and university customers canceling their standing orders that they had with us. We knew right at that moment that we were going to need to pivot,” says Farm Fresh RI’s Market Mobile operations director Rachel Van Scyoc.

Farm Fresh RI’s Market Mobile sales director Nikki Ayres had suggested home delivery, and the team got it up and running within a matter of days to find homes for the produce that was left in limbo. “It certainly required some learning and growing pains to be able to adapt to the different needs of those customers compared to our wholesale accounts, both on ordering and sales perspectives as well as packaging and operational standpoints,” Van Scyoc says.

They quickly made the decision to expand to home delivery. “Within a week, we had opened the online ordering system to the general public with as much understanding as we could of what was ahead of us,” says Jesse Rye. “That move was met with a lot of enthusiasm from folks who were at home and needed access to fresh food. It was also a time when we were starting to see the global supply chain and food coming from other places was having a hard time getting here. It really emphasized how important it was to have a local food system.”

But the abundance of orders overwhelmed their previous space. “The coolers at the Hope Artiste Village were full to the brim. You couldn’t even walk around. Cayne was still out delivering on the road because we didn’t have enough drivers at that time,” says Van Scyoc, who has been with the nonprofit since 2017. They now have a team of forty-nine full- and part-time employees and a varying number (usually four to six) Americorps Direct Service and VISTA volunteers.



Photography by Ryan T. Conaty.

Due to the popularity of the service, many of the farmers exceeded their previous year's sales through Market Mobile, and Farm Fresh RI hopes to continue this trend. "In many respects, a lot of Rhode Island and New England farmers had a very good year last year," Rye says. "But one good year is something you can build off of. We need to build off the awareness to better understand the fragility of our food system and where our food comes from."

Last year, Farm Fresh RI also participated in the federal government's response to finding solutions to food insecurity. The nonprofit applied to be a vendor for the Farmers to Family food box program and packed 13,000 boxes filled with food from local and regional farms that were distributed through the Rhode Island Community Food Bank. Providing local, fresh food to those in need is something they plan to continue. "It was a great way to strengthen that connection between local growers and producers and food-insecure families," Rye says. "We built a strong relationship with the food bank and have continued to work with them to connect local farmers into different pantry and hunger relief settings over the last year."

The following day at 6 a.m., Farm Fresh RI team members have already been busy in the packhouse since 5 a.m. filling up plastic bins with orders for



residential customers (red) and wholesale (grey and blue). A volunteer in the 36-degree cooler is organizing greens, asparagus and rhubarb by individual customer order on carts, and when the carts fill up, they are wheeled into the 55-degree cooler, the bins are loaded with the produce, dairy products, dry and baked goods and lifted onto the rolling belt that leads directly to pallets that will be heaved onto a box truck. The first box truck already left at 4:45 a.m. to make the 7 a.m. Sun Island ferry from Hyannis on Cape Cod, and the second one will soon be on its way to Boston, then the East Bay and South County. It takes a lot of communication and organization to keep track of orders on each truck.

“Cayne is the controller of the packline for today. After the orders have been packed, he is making sure everything is there and it’s all correct with food from the right farms, the right variety and the right quantity,” says Van Scyoc. “Shonan is the caller today. While Cayne has the invoice, Shonan’s calling out everything in the bin by farm, the food, the variety and the quantity so Cayne can focus on the invoice.”



Photography by Ryan T. Conaty.

Plastic bins begin to form a line on the rollers. Large restaurant orders are assembled into gray crates, including sixty dozen eggs from Little Rhody,

fifteen pounds of asparagus from Four Town Farm and fresh herbs for Bayberry Beer Hall, then a whole bunch of fresh herbs, Cato Corner cheeses, greens and daikon radishes for Oberlin. Newport Restaurant Group also takes up a large bulk of these orders. A playlist of tunes blasts in the background while workers pack boxes and vibe out to the music. It's a community playlist made from songs contributed by members of the packline staff. The songs range from '90s girl group TLC's "Scrubs," Whitney Houston's "I'm Every Woman," and '80s hits like Chaka Khan's "Ain't Nobody (Love Me Better)."

Now that they have ample space in the new hub, there's more opportunity for growth. "Once we get bigger shelves and can use the height of the space better and smarter, how much can we hold?" Van Scyoc says. "Last year we had to shut off the order form because we wouldn't be able to accommodate food that was being demanded by customers because we didn't have enough space."

Van Scyoc walks through each area, pointing out how food items are stored by temperature, then she strolls past the walk-in refrigerator posted with a printed-out sign reading "Christopher Walk-in" and explains how the pallets are loaded before being wheeled into the box trucks. She points to a row of plant starters from area farms. "Everyone was doing a lot of home gardening so the amount of plant starts we sell typically skyrocketed last year and remains pretty strong," she says.

Van Scyoc points out rows of applesauce, pickles and more created by Farm Fresh RI's Harvest Kitchen culinary job training program. The program trains youth ages sixteen to nineteen who are involved with the RI Department of Children, Youth, and Families to create a line of value-added preserved products using excess produce sourced from local farms, and they also gain retail experience selling their goods at farmers markets.

Farm Fresh RI also sponsors Hope's Harvest, a Rhode Island gleaning project founded by Eva Agudelo. The organization partners with farms while recruiting and mobilizing volunteers to harvest food from fields that would otherwise go to waste, a process known as "gleaning." The harvested produce is stored at Farm Fresh RI and staff then delivers it to the food insecure through relationships with food pantries and hunger assistance organizations across Rhode Island.

These programs continued throughout the pandemic and, at the same time, Farm Fresh RI also distributed a record-breaking amount of Bonus Bucks last year. The nutrition incentives provide a 100 percent match to low-income families shopping with SNAP/EBT at farmers markets across the state and make local food accessible and delivery possible for many food insecure

families through Market Mobile. “We learned that during COVID, it was very challenging for families to get groceries delivered and charged to their SNAP card,” says Sheri Griffin. “The government’s licensing of SNAP benefits was so restricted that at first we were the only ones in Rhode Island who could do it. We can still do it. A lot more people were getting SNAP benefits because schools were closed, and people who were receiving SNAP had their benefits increased during the crisis.”



Photography by Ryan T. Conaty.

Bonus Bucks are a win for the food insecure and farmers because they double the spending power for SNAP recipients, which doubles the earning potential for local farmers. “The model of Bonus Bucks reinforces such a strong local connection,” Rye adds. “It’s a federal benefit that supports food insecurity but it’s also in the way Sheri has built Bonus Bucks out as a program that has allowed for it to benefit local farms and the agriculture economy as well.”

On a Saturday morning in July, the Farm Fresh RI farmers market is bustling with activity. Families are wandering the vast open area that has all eight garage doors gaping wide to let in the fresh air. Farmers and vendors are mingling with shoppers, who glance over vegetables in every color of the

rainbow. The scents of freshly brewed coffee and sweet confections from Buns Bakery are in the air. The Rocket food truck is parked out front and people are sitting on the marble slab benches munching on fried egg sandwiches with bacon while sipping coffee and chatting.

Around the corner, in the same Farm Fresh RI building, New Harvest Coffee and Spirits is open for business, serving its own beans roasted on site (that's the aroma that permeates the air). It doubles as a cocktail bar in the afternoon, having moved out of the Providence Arcade into this new space. Across the street from Farm Fresh RI's hub on Sims Avenue are two more local drink options: Industrious Spirit Company and Revival Brewery. Farmers market shoppers can wander from the food hub down to the distillery and brewery for an afternoon of socializing over cocktails and beer and visits from more food trucks and vendors. In addition to the Saturday farmers market, Farm Fresh also hosts the Providence Flea weekly Sunday markets from October through May, as well as the Holiday Markets and monthly Friday Night Fleas, showcasing wares from local artisans with food and drink for purchase.

Back in the food hub, Tallulah's Taqueria is preparing to open this fall, says Farm Fresh RI's real estate and community developer Lucie Searle. The windows are papered up to block out the interior activity, but painting and construction are well underway. "They are building a commissary, which will allow them to do prep for their existing restaurants as well as the one at Farm Fresh," Searle says. "They will have dine-in and takeout, and they are working out the details within the next year or so to make their own tortillas, hopefully from locally grown corn."

The nonprofit Red Tomato has already moved in and is facilitating connections to get more locally grown foods into mainstream grocery stores like Whole Foods. Robin Hollow Farm's Providence headquarters is here, too, and they are using this facility to distribute more of their fresh flowers in the city. Future tenants include Wright's Farm, which makes ice cream from the milk sourced from its own herd of dairy cows, says Searle. Providence Brewing Company, Rhed's Hot Sauce and Anchor Toffee are also gearing up to open production and retail locations in the food hub.

"Rhed's uses about 4,000 pounds of locally grown peppers annually to make their award-winning hot sauces," Searle says. "They will be doing everything at Farm Fresh, including processing, bottling, retail and wholesale distribution."



Photography by Ryan T. Conaty.

All of this business activity at Farm Fresh RI contributes to one major goal. “We want to help achieve something that is called fifty by sixty,” Searle says. “It’s a goal for New England to produce 50 percent of what we consume by 2060. And in everything that Farm Fresh does with our programs, we try to help achieve that goal.” All of these businesses are making local food products, and they are all using local ingredients to do it. “It strengthens the market for locally grown,” Searle says. “There is nothing that will sustain farms better than that.”

To achieve that goal by 2060, Farm Fresh RI also invests in the youngest generation. They work with local schools to get more fresh farm ingredients like asparagus and apples into cafeterias. At farmers markets, they organize kids’ crafts and activities with prize incentives that inspire them to eat more produce. Back in the farmers market courtyard, Festival Ballet gives dancing lessons to a group of waddling toddlers and jubilant preschoolers dressed in bright clothing, their smiling caregivers close by.

Kids wander the hall alongside parents, looking at local produce spread out on tables, tasting healthy items and asking questions. Wright’s Dairy Farm is on site explaining that their ice cream is cow to cone, made from the milk of its

own herd of dairy cows, proving it doesn't just come out of a carton in the freezer section of a grocery store. Inside the hall, a woman carrying a baby is followed by five children, each a few inches shorter than the next, traveling from vendor booth to vendor booth like ducklings in a row. They're taking it all in and seeing, firsthand, where their food comes from.