

Native Offerings Farm named Cattaraugus County farmer of the year

By ANDREW MOWRER, Olean Times Herald, Apr 11, 2019



Native Offerings Farm owners Deb and Stew Ritchie (from right) accept the Cattaraugus County farmer of the year award Wednesday night at the Cattaraugus County Farmer-Neighbor Dinner.

WEST VALLEY — A full house of 360 farmers and their neighbors met at the West Valley Fire Hall Wednesday night to honor Cattaraugus County farmers at the eighth annual Farmer-Neighbor Dinner.

The event brought area farmers and their non-farming neighbors — both local and from surrounding areas — together to reflect on the previous year's achievements and look forward to the future of the local agricultural industry.

Although event speaker Chris Baker, Director of Cattaraugus County Department of Emergency Services, was unable to attend the event due to unforeseen travel issues, event organizer Crystal Abers spoke.

There are many challenges but there are also opportunities for Cattaraugus County," Abers said, the reason being "Ag is alive and growing."

Dinner, which was prepared by the West Valley Fire Department kitchen crew, included items exclusively grown in local venues including beef and pork from Ford Brothers Wholesale Meats in Ashford Hollow, mashed potatoes from WiLean Farm in East Otto and many vegetables like carrot disks and Brussels sprouts from Native Offerings Farm in Little Valley.

The Farmer of the Year award was presented to Stew and Deb Ritchie of Native Offerings. As a history student at Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario, Stew Ritchie became aware of his eating habits and developed an interest in organic food production. Because there were no course offerings in organic farming at the time, he worked for a few years after college on organic farms to learn the trade.

Deb Ritchie used her Environmental Science degree from SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry to pursue a career in environmental education, which led her to Grindstone Farm in Pulaski, where her future husband happened to work.

The two married and gradually developed their organic vegetable farm, eventually becoming Native Offerings Farm. The farm was certified Naturally Grown from 2005 to 2015, and in 2015 became certified organic. Native Offerings also raises rotational grazed beef and, in 2018, began production of industrial hemp with a recently obtained licence to grow in New York.

Other candidates honored include Chuck and Phyllis Couture, who received the Friend of Agriculture award for their contributions to agricultural activities in Cattaraugus County since moving to the area in 1968.

Chuck Couture has made contributions as an agriculture teacher and Future Farmers of America (FFA) advisor. Phyllis Couture taught Home Economics and Horticulture at Springville, then opened Fox Valley Flowers with locations in Ellicottville and Salamanca.