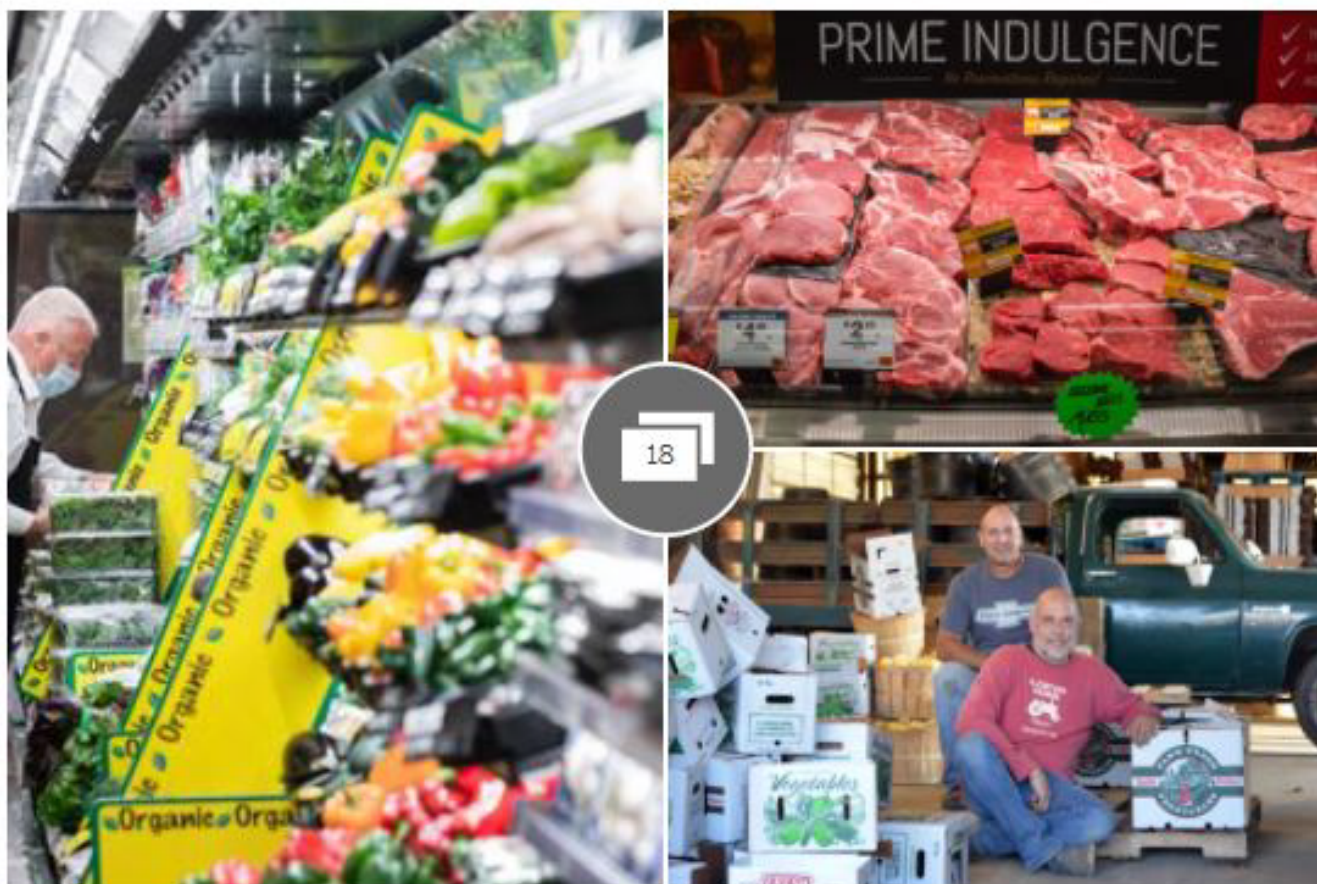


Local

# ‘Fresh & Local’ Big Y names Springfield distribution center to emphasize relationship with local farmers

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Big Y World Class Market in Southwick



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Derrick Turnbull, owner of Autumn Mist Farm in Agawam, had a problem this spring when coronavirus restrictions shut down businesses.

He'd been raising beef cattle since he was an 11-year-old 4-H member, slowly building up 130 cow and calf pairs on 100 acres, with 600 more acres under lease growing crops to feed them.

Turnbull's primary customers were restaurants and college dining facilities interested in serving fresh and local foods. Enter the pandemic, and COVID-19 shut those down while the cattle kept growing on the family-run farm and getting ready for market. He'd also been going through the processes of getting his Autumn Mist beef onto the shelves at Big Y stores. His beef hit the coolers at Big Y in June.

"That really helped," Turnbull shared during a visit to the Big Y on College Highway in Southwick. "It's a way for us to sell our product, and people really appreciate being able to eat local."

Springfield-based Big Y Foods has branded the \$46 million distribution center it opened earlier this year on Roosevelt Avenue in Springfield as the Fresh & Local Distribution Center.

"One of my earliest memories was going around with my uncle to the farms in the summer months and buying peppers and tomatoes and corn," said Charles L. D'Amour, president and CEO of Big Y. "You could just feel the camaraderie and the connection. I'm proud to say that that connection is still with us today."

The "Fresh & Local" designation comes at the same time the state of Massachusetts is working to connect consumers with local producers. In August, the state Department of Agricultural Resources launched the MassGrown Exchange online platform to offer a range of options to farmers, fishers, restaurants and anyone else linked to the agriculture businesses, aiming to bring together and support both in-state producers and shoppers. Big Y says the exchange helped it add close to a dozen more local producers to its already more than 500 "local partners" whose products are featured in the chain's 71 stores.

"We are grateful to all who helped to make the MassGrown Exchange a reality. It is a valuable tool for our buyers to enhance our local product offerings for our customers throughout the year. These new local producers will be joining our family of over 500 local partnerships. Our goal is to use all of our resources to continue to add more and more local products to our markets," said D'Amour. "We appreciate everyone's role in this important initiative, including the essential work of the Massachusetts Food Association in shepherding this entire process." Big Y's distribution center project was an expansion of an existing structure, increasing the facility from 189,000 square feet to 425,000 square feet — about the size of 10 football fields. There will be 53 receiving bays for trucks, up from 19.

The distribution center also makes it easier for farmers to sell their food into the Big Y distribution system, dropping meat or produce off there — one location — and then having Big Y move it to each store to fill demands.

Big Y brought in farm produce to the distribution center from growers across Massachusetts and Connecticut before, but this is an expanded capacity, the company says. "We've been doing it for years," said Michael Cecchi, an owner of Cecchi Farms, also in Feeding Hills, of his family's relationship with Big Y.

The Cecchi farm drops off eight to 10 pallets of produce a day to Big Y. Last week it was the last of the summer sweet corn, green beans, wax beans, summer squash and hard squash. The farm grows about 25 different vegetables and varieties for Big Y over the course of the year.

And it's a quick turnaround, with food likely getting shipped out to stores less than 24 hours after its arrival at the distribution center.

For the farmers, the partnership with Big Y makes sense, they say. "You're not driving," Cecchi said. "You are not burning fossil fuels. You are not wasting time."

Turnbull delivers cattle for processing at a Connecticut facility once a week. The facility is near a Big Y store, so when the meat is ready, a Big Y truck picks it up and takes it back to the distribution center. The meat is shipped generally 14 days after the cattle arrive at the processor, a much shorter turnaround time than beef processed through the regular supply chain.

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Individual stores get Autumn Mist Farm beef in large pieces called “primal cuts” that store butchers then carve into cuts of meat for sale.

Cecchi Farms has its own farm stand and wholesales vegetables to other retailers as well. Cecchi says Big Y is good marketing for his family’s produce, raising awareness and drawing customers to the farm stand as well.

Cecchi says the coronavirus and efforts to stop the spread actually helped drive demand for local produce this year.

At the Southwick Big Y, store director Chris Beck says its redesign included installation of signage that promotes and directs customers to local products. The Big Y now has dedicated endcaps – prime display space for grocery products – dedicated to close-to-home products like Billy C’s Honey from New England Apiaries in Southwick and Whip City Jerky from Westfield.