

Power of Pie: Purple sweet potatoes planting seeds of economic development in Stokes

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A plate of cooked Saura Pride sweet potatoes is shown with samples in the raw state.
(Journal Photo by David Rolfe)

Grandma's sweet-potato pie at Thanksgiving dinner this year could be purple.

Purple sweet potatoes and family recipes for jams, jellies, pies and pickles are part of a push to get a new economic-development initiative for farmers in Northwest N.C. off the ground.

Farmers in Stokes County are working with cooks in Ashe County to market a purple sweet potato. And Stokes officials hope that the purple potato is the first of several crops that will help preserve agriculture and the rural nature of the county.

The idea has attracted attention of the N.C. Tobacco Trust Fund Commission, which gave the shared-use community kitchen in Ashe County a \$26,000 grant to support growth and production of purple sweet-potato products.

"A big part of what we're doing is a concerted effort to preserve the farming environment, to preserve the opportunity for family farms to remain in Stokes County and preserve the land at the same time," said Bill Cobb, the owner of Saura Pride Sweet Potatoes.

Saura Pride Sweet Potatoes, which is based in Walnut Cove, has contracts with eight farmers to grow the potatoes, and sells the potatoes and a puree online through www.saurapride.com. The company works with Creative Food Ventures Kitchen to make a purple sweet-potato mash which can be used in casseroles, pies and other recipes.

The purple sweet potatoes are one of several other projects at Creative Food Ventures Kitchen, a shared-use commercial community kitchen in Jefferson.

Shared-use community kitchens are licensed, commercial kitchens that farmers, food entrepreneurs, and cooks can use to make their own food products that they can sell.

The trust-fund commission awarded the grant to Creative Food Ventures Kitchen from a fund that was created with tobacco-settlement money to help rural and agricultural economies across the state.

Stokes Center of Regional Economics, or CORE, a non-profit community organization with a mission to develop and support a new economic vision for Stokes County, is working with Creative Food Ventures Kitchen on the new economic-development initiative.

Tony McGee, the executive director of Stokes CORE, said he hopes that the purple sweet potatoes will get other farmers interested in selling their crops and products made at community kitchens.

"It's a really great opportunity for us to really get this anchored and demonstrate to smaller businesses what opportunities are out there," McGee said. "The community kitchen project is really so that more people can be involved in local food production."

Forsyth Technical Community College and Stokes CORE are also working to bring a community kitchen to Stokes County. They hope to have a renovated space in Stokes County that will serve as a community kitchen by the fall of 2008, McGee said.

Forsyth Tech officials and Stokes CORE officials presented plans for the community kitchen in the Meadows community of Stokes County to county commissioners during their meeting last week.

Larry Weston, the development director for Stokes CORE, said that combining efforts with education programs at Forsyth Tech is important.

"We think that a retraining of many people in the local area would help to stimulate the economy," Weston said. "We can certainly help to grow a food production industry here."

Carol Coulter, the director of Creative Food Ventures Kitchen, said that the kitchens provide commercial kitchen space and business assistance.

"What we're focused on with these farmers is helping them develop value-added products from what they're growing on their farms," Coulter said. "If their interest is not being in the kitchen, our staff can contract with them and we'll cook or make the product."

The community kitchen in Ashe County is in its first year of operation and can serve farmers in the region until one in Stokes is built, she said.

"We've grown together," Cobb said. "We've worked with them and the equipment we had to determine what we wanted to process."

The purple sweet potatoes are just the beginning, he said.

"It's a natural product," Cobb said. "We add nothing but water in the purple sweet-potato mash."

"Adults have a little problem with the purple, kids love purple," he said. "It's similar but not the same as an orange sweet potato."