

Meet the Farmers: Phil Williamson

Melody Blues, Williamson Farms

Phoenix & Fulton, N.Y.

Farmers Markets are part of Phil Williamson's DNA. He has been helping out at the Downtown Farmers Market since he was four years old. Now 46, Phil manages the Melody Blues blueberry stand (named after one of his sisters) at the Downtown Farmers Market with his siblings.

"My family – my parents, grandparents, great-grandparents – we have always been farmers," he says.

Though their produce content has changed through the years – at one point, Williamson Farms grew Dill sold in Wegmans, Price Chopper and PNC! – right now, the fruit of the family's labors are blueberries. What started as seven bushes 24 years ago has grown to 20 acres sprawled across rural farmland in Phoenix and Fulton.

All of the blueberries are handpicked which allows them to ripen seven to ten days longer than if they were picked by a machine. Phil says handpicking yields natural benefits. The berries build natural sugar and are more flavorful.

"Just like apples, there are multiple varieties of blueberries," Phil explains. "We grow nine different kinds. They each have a little bit of a different taste, a little bit of a different texture."

Phil says blueberries can be round or flat, and flavors range from mild to intense. He points to the "Duke" or "Toro" as examples of flat berries, both sold at the Melody Blues stand.

"Dukes are a traditional berry. They have a very typical blueberry taste," Phil says. "Toros are really big, but they have a thinner skin, and are much juicier." He says some customers say the Toro blueberry tastes similar to a pear, while others liken the flavor to a kiwi.

More than halfway through the season now, quarts and pails continue to move fast. Phil credits faithful customers for Melody Blues' popularity. He says *they* are the ones with the interesting stories.

"I call them my 'Bucket People,' because they buy a couple of pails at a time," he laughs. "It's quite the following! I don't have a Facebook page for the blueberries, but I have people that send updates and tweets out about where I've been, and where I'm going. They take pictures and explain it to others."

Many are eager to share creative recipes. Phil recalls one customer excitedly revealed the key to making what they called the "best" blueberry pie. It turns out, they added a bit of vodka to their crust to get a nice, fluffy texture.

"There are so many different things you can do with blueberries, it's not just about blueberry muffins and jam anymore," he says. "People put them in their yogurt, they make Lemon Blueberry Bars, they put them in their salads."

The Melody Blues blueberry stand sits under a blue tent, next to a blue truck, in the center of the activity at the Downtown Farmers Market (most likely, the Williamson crew will also be wearing blue!), but not for much longer.

"Blueberries are really just a six to seven week selling season," Phil explains. The crew started coming to the Downtown Farmers Market right after the Fourth of July, and stays through mid-August.

Phil, who is a Middle School Art Teacher for ten months out of the year, can't imagine spending the summer any other way.

"I've been coming to The Market since I was 4-years-old. If I didn't come to the market one summer, that would feel really strange to me. My kids help out at the farm and at The Market... It's just part of what we do in the summer - It's in our blood."



Left to Right: Lawton (Phil's brother) Hayden (Phil's daughter) and Phil Williamson sporting blue.

Fun Fact: Lawton works in Syracuse, but spends his lunch break helping at the The Market every Tuesday



Phil Williamson and his family will be at the Downtown Farmers Market for at least two more weeks. Make sure to say hello!