

## **SUSTAINABLE LIVING GUIDE: 67. TEN INGREDIENTS FOR A HEALTHY LOCAL FOOD ECONOMY<sup>1</sup>**

**Colleen Kimmett<sup>©</sup>**

Meeru Dhalwala calls it the "Rock and Revolution blue jean mentality." On a guerilla market research mission to a big name grocery store, she noticed that women wearing the expensive denim brand were choosing the cheapest options when it came to their food choices. She shared this anecdote at a Food and Beers series event Thursday night to illustrate what pollsters, retailers and farmers already know: that, no matter the income bracket, the majority of people make price -- not place of origin -- the deciding factor when it comes to buying food. And here in North America, we're used to getting it cheap.

Dhalwala, cookbook author and co-owner of Vij's restaurant, was one of four local food experts who took part in the panel discussion at the Museum of Vancouver. The question put to them: How do we cook up a recipe for local, sustainable food success? She was joined by Ian Walker, founder and president of Left Coast Naturals, Lori Stahlbrand, founder and president of Local Food Plus, and Amy Robertson, chair of the Vancouver Farmers' Market Society. They agreed that the low value placed on food is just one challenge of building a local, sustainable food economy. Because, even for the segment of society that is willing to shell out more to support local farmers, it often isn't easy to do. And what about the growing number of people in society who can't afford food?

There was also consensus that there needs to be an infusion of coordination, communication and education at each level of the local food chain in order to make it robust and to make local sustainable choices more readily available, and more equitable. Moderator David Beers asked each panelist to bring their own specific ingredients for local food success, and afterwards, invited audience members to throw their morsels in the pot. Here's the recipe they came up with.

### **1. Create a task force to coordinate the local food market**

Such a task force would coordinate all of the dots in the local food economy, suggests Dhalwala. "If I want to buy local, I would like to have... coordination so that it all makes sense to me as a businessperson," she says. Forging relationships with individual farmers is a lot of work. If there was one place, a website, for instance, where farmers could list products and prices, it would make shopping easier for busy restauranteurs who need to order food in a quick and efficient manner. "Some kind of one-stop shopping," Dhalwala said.

She says that price point is a huge issue for her. "You can get organic (beef) from Australia for 10 dollars cheaper than you can get organic local. A bigger farm is going to be more efficient and less expensive than a smaller farm. Could farmers ban together to come up with their own form of efficiency?" This point resonated with Scott Burgess, an audience members who used to manage a restaurant in Toronto, where he was responsible for buying local food. Burgess said it was easier there than in Vancouver, because the city had more distributors. "It was an easy way

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to get a fairly real market comparison as opposed to having to talk to a bunch of individual farmers," he said. "There's a demand that's not being met. I think a task force could really help articulate what the concerns are and how to address them."

## **2. Pool resources to achieve economies of scale**

This is an important ingredient to help both small-scale farmers and processors break out of the cottage industry and reach a wider market. Amy Robertson, who along with husband Gregor farmed with Langley Organic Growers, described the panic they felt when an acre of strawberries all ripened at once. "We were able to call our neighbour, who had a connection to a large labour force. Sharing those things is really important if you're going to produce a lot of food in general."

But, as Abbotsford pork farmer Jerry Gelderman pointed out after the discussion, cooperation amongst farmers is easier said than done. "One of the things you have to realize in agriculture, whether you're small or large, if you have a day of sunshine and a crop needs to come off, everybody's needs to come off. You can't buy one piece of equipment and say we'll do ours today and yours tomorrow." Gelderman said this is especially true in our changing climate -- erratic weather patterns make harvesting when the sun shines even more imperative, if you don't know what tomorrow will bring. "The other thing you have to realize is, for a person to be a farmer, they're an independent person," Gelderman added. In other words, perhaps farmer co-operatives are possible, but not easy, and not always successful.

Just as many family farms have disappeared from our landscape, so too has regional food processing infrastructure. Efficiency through economies of scale, plus cheap labour south of the border, has driven much of the processing out of British Columbia and Canada -- leaving a huge hole in which huge economic potential drains away. Ian Walker wonders if an economy of scale could be achieved through cooperation and coordination of processors. His company, Left Coast Naturals, manufactures organic snack foods. "To sell sustainable food, if it's local, especially, it's a fairly high price, so you have a limited market that you can sell to," he said. "When you have that cap, that means you can only sell so much. But to build the infrastructure and the equipment, you need to have sales of this much. It's a bit of a chicken and egg issue." Walker suggested that companies could share the capital and operational costs of processing equipment, making it more economical to produce smaller volumes.

## **3. Build food hubs throughout the region, and connect them by rail**

Another way to offer farmers more infrastructural support is through food hubs. Robertson is part of a group of farmers and food activists in Vancouver working on building New City Market, a place within the city that would offer warehouse, cooler and freezer space for local produce, as well as an indoor/outdoor farmers' market and a certified kitchen. "Ideally, it would be on a transit route, preferably on the train system," said Robertson. In fact, farmers in the Fraser Valley used to ship eggs, milk, meat and produce to Vancouver regularly on the Interurban line. It opened in 1910 in anticipation of the thousands who would eventually settle in the Fraser Valley to farm. And a recent feasibility study shows bringing back this line would be affordable and sustainable. "We'd like to go full circle and re-create that," said Robertson.

## **4. Engage and educate the public**

Without an informed consumer, it's harder to command the price that farmers need to grow food and remain viable. Robertson suggests such a food hub -- and why not have one in every city in the region? -- could also serve as an educational centre, where people could learn how to preserve the harvest, use local products, and learn from farmers the ins and outs of growing food. "If we did have this food hub it would be an opportunity to teach them about growing, seeds, health issues, everything that food involves," said Robertson. She mentioned the UBC farm summer camp and children's gardens as good models to replicate.

Stahlbrand's organization, Local Food Plus, recently launched a campaign called Buy to Vote. It asks people to shift 10 dollars a week of what they'd spend on groceries to local, sustainable food. "If ten thousand people in B.C. were to do that... you would have offset enough greenhouse gas emissions to be the equivalent of taking 400 cars off the road for good," said Stahlbrand. "You would have pumped enough new money into the local economy to create 100 new jobs."

### **5. Bring ethnic restaurants, retailers and farmers into the local food movement**

Dhalwala described one dinner where she and other Vancouver chefs espoused the virtues of using local ingredients -- over a dish of imported tiger prawns. "In this local food movement, we don't include a lot of the ethnic restaurants," she said. "I think what happened is the local food movement has placed a bigger burden on being local and being ethical on the restaurants that are, for lack of a better word, Caucasian-owned." She points to the food task force as one way to make it easy for non-Caucasian restauranteurs, retailers and consumers to find local products.

### **6. Bridge the gap between organic and non-organic**

There's organic, and then there's "handshake organic." Dhalwala credits this phrase to Mark Bomford, manager at the UBC farm, but knows it well in her line of business. For her, the difference between certified organic produce and produce that isn't sprayed with pesticides is about \$2.99 a pound.

There are many reasons why a farmer doesn't want to, or can't become certified organic. While the organic farming movement was borne out of a desire to move away from industrialized methods of farming, now it's come full circle to the point where many organic farms are operating at an industrial scale. As Stahlbrand put it, "organic isn't always sustainable, and sustainable isn't always organic."

Her organization, Local Food Plus, has developed what it calls "local sustainable" certification. It is a set of standards that uses integrated pest management systems, permitting the use of some pesticides that are ranked according to Cornell University's environmental impact quotient. It also factors in things like animal welfare, working conditions, biodiversity and native habitat protection, and on-farm energy consumption. "I think there are a lot of consumers out there who want to support farmers and want to support their local economy and their local culture. There are a lot of pluses to it," said Stahlbrand. "But it's very hard to know how to identify it. So we said, let's create a way to identify it. And the certified local sustainable label is a way to do that."

### **7. Leverage the power of public sector procurement**

Along with developing the local sustainable label with farmers, Local Food Plus is also connecting these farmers with public sector institutions. Five years ago, it partnered with the University of Toronto on a local food procurement strategy. Now, one residence on campus spends 22 per cent of its food budget on local food. "These institutions are spending millions of dollars on food every year," said Stahlbrand. "We write the language that goes into the requests for proposals for food service contracts. It helps to scale up the whole system, it helps to educate the public through these institutions, it's a part of how these institutions can meet their climate change requirements." Stahlbrand's ingredient prompted a question from an audience member, a woman who works for CUPE, who was curious about how international trade agreements might block such procurement policies. "It's not an issue," Stahlbrand insisted. "The food in most institutions is provided by food services companies. The food service companies themselves are not covered by trade agreements. We've come up against this so many times, and for every argument that you get, there's an answer to it."

## **8. Protect farmland**

Robertson pointed out that British Columbia has some of the best farmland in the world. While B.C. might be ahead of the game to Toronto, for instance, in terms of reducing urban sprawl onto farmland, its Agricultural Land Reserve has still been chipped away at over the past four decades. "The main, main thing that people in Vancouver should really concentrate on is how to preserve farmland," said Nati King, a farmer in Surrey.

Adriane Carr, Vancouver Centre candidate for the federal Green party, offered this suggestion for protecting food-producing land in cities: "My idea is, why doesn't the city of Vancouver take forward a resolution to the UBCM (Union of BC Municipalities) and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, asking the federal government, which has by far the biggest tax power, to rebate municipalities to set aside community gardens and farmers' markets. That way they won't feel the pressure to rezone land for higher density to get the taxes back."

## **9. Rebuild the social safety net**

Gord McGee, a food security facilitator at Kitsilano neighbourhood house, pointed out that, even in high-income areas of Vancouver, there are people who can't afford to eat. This summer, he ran a pocket market for seniors in the neighbourhood. "They're on a fixed income, and they're paying really high rent," he said. "So they don't actually have money to buy food. And that's in the west end. I don't even know what it's like in the Downtown Eastside." "We need a good social safety net," responded Stahlbrand. "We need a fair minimum wage, we need a proper old age pension, so that people can afford to buy food at the price that it is worth, not on the backs of farmers." Robertson pointed out that the B.C. Association of Farmers' Markets ran a highly successful coupon program, in which low-income families received vouchers to use at local farmers' markets, in addition to cooking classes about how to use that produce. It was cancelled this year due to lack of funding.

## **10. Build pride in our local food system -- and hold politicians accountable to it**

Many of the government decisions that affect food and farming fly under the radar, said Herb Barbolet, a food policy analyst and one of the founders of Farm Folk/City Folk. He pointed to Canada and the European Union's proposed trade agreement being negotiated this week in Ottawa, as one example. Is it possible to mobilize politically around food? Dhalwala offered this lesson from India, where, two years ago, Monsanto tried to introduce a genetically-modified

eggplant that would resist pests. "The Indian government thought it was a great idea... it was actually supposed to be a no-brainer," Dhalwala said. "The Indians managed to stop Monsanto from coming in, and the government backed down on it, and the reason why? Pride in their eggplant. They weren't trying to be moral... it was a national pride that they gathered. We're going to stick up for our eggplant."