

SECRETS TO SUPPORTING LOCAL FOOD¹

Colleen Kimmett[©]

One doesn't have to look very far to find people dedicated to creating a different kind of food system. A system that supports local farmers, respects the environment and is based on equity, fairness and common sense -- not to mention good taste. This fall, we reporters -- Colleen Kimmett, Justin Langille and Jeff Nield -- traveled to two of the most productive agricultural regions in the entire country: Ontario's Greenbelt and British Columbia's Fraser Valley. Our goal was to examine the challenges, opportunities and barriers to creating this kind of food system. What we found was that local food systems are flourishing at a community level. Farmers' markets are growing at a national rate of 30 per cent a year, pumping \$3.1 billion dollars into local economies. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) projects, like Urban Grain or Home Grow-In in Vancouver, have no trouble finding members, doubling or tripling their numbers in the first few years.

We learned that some farmers will go to great lengths to supply customers with what they can't find on the supermarket shelves. Like Jim Grieshaber-Otto in Agassiz, who found and refurbished a 90-year-old grain cleaner to supply local flour to a bunch of city folks, or Karl Hann in Abbotsford, who drives to Vancouver from Abbotsford three times a week to deliver fresh organic eggs right to his customers' doors. In Elmira, we met a group of Mennonite farmers who invested cooperatively in an auction warehouse, a kind of one-stop shopping where local retailers who don't have time to deal with individual farmers. Deb Reynolds at Home Grow-In convinced Fraser Valley farmers to invest in a distribution centre and retail store for local products on a busy street just blocks from Vancouver's City Hall.

We learned that, despite the troubling statistics about agriculture, young people are getting into farming and finding success with small-scale production geared specifically for farmers' markets. In Brampton, Ontario, we spoke to Eric Rosenkrantz at the McVean Incubator farm, who, along with his business partner, pulls in \$25,000 off each of his three-acre plots each season. "If I'm getting by, and this is working, then I'm happy," he told The Tyee. "The business, I realize, can grow if my production methods improve and I get a bit more land."

We visited the Kwantlen University's farm school, one of a handful of venues in B.C. where eager students can learn the ins and outs of, what program director Kent Mullinix refers to as, human-scale food systems. UBC's 8-month long Sowing Seeds sustainable agriculture practicum is entering its fourth year. Much like the Kwantlen program, it's a mixture of practical classroom learning and hands-on experience.

Scaling Up is Key

So if we have people willing to grow food locally, and people willing to buy it, what's the problem? Essentially, it's a matter of scaling up. Our predominant food and farming system is designed to serve distant markets, not local ones. The reason why primarily comes down to cost. When Ontario's minimum wage increased to \$10.25, farmers like the Pfenning family found it even harder to compete with growers in California who pay their workers half that. "People have to understand that \$10.25 an hour minimum wage means that their potatoes have to cost more, they have to," says Pfenning. "The true cost of production has to be paid."

¹ The Tyee, December 17, 2010

The wage differential is compounded when you get into processing. In 2008, the closure of a CanGro canning facility in Niagara forced at least 150 farmers to rip up fields and peach and pear trees because they suddenly had no market. The pending closure of a Bick's pickles plant in nearby Delhi, Ontario, will impact some 200 cucumber growers nearby. "This decision will provide greater manufacturing and sourcing flexibility, enabling us to be more cost-competitive," a Bick's spokesperson told the local paper.

At a Museum of Vancouver event, Tyee editor David Beers asked experts to create a recipe for strengthening the local sustainable food economy in B.C.'s Lower Mainland. Watch the results. While it's hard to imagine life without lemons, or coffee or sugar, it simply doesn't make sense to export or import products we can grow here. And the gap in the post-harvest processing sector is one in which jobs and money drain away. How many jobs? Local Food Plus, a Toronto-based non-profit focused on local sustainable food production did some calculations. Executive director Lori Stahlbrand says they found that, in Ontario, if 10,000 families spent 10 per cent of their food budget specifically on local food, it would pump enough money into the local economy to create a hundred new jobs. LFP's mandate is to link large institutional and commercial buyers (like universities and restaurants) with local, sustainable certified farmers. "These institutions are spending millions of dollars on food every year," says 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."

Building a Soft Infrastructure

This kind of soft infrastructure -- relationships and business networks -- are just as important as barns, warehouses and processing plants. In Vancouver, New City Market is a vision of a food hub that would serve as space to store, sell and buy local food, but also a place for public education around food. Food hubs like this one are viewed as essential to creating a local food system. But they have to be designed to serve the specific needs of a specific community.

Like The Stop Community Food Centre. When it first opened its doors in Toronto's Davenport West neighbourhood in the early '70s, it was one of the first food banks in the entire city. Now it offers the emergency food bank service -- a three-day supply of food, twice a month -- plus members can drop in for a meal four days a week, grow their own vegetables in a community garden, buy discounted produce at a weekly farmers' market, or take cooking classes. The Stop works on the premise that without food infrastructure, viable farms, civic engagement and personal empowerment, food banks are simply a stop-gap measure in the fight to eradicate hunger. Even in Canada there is significant class disparity when it comes to access to food; never mind local sustainable food. Food bank use spiked sharply in 2008/09 during the recession and continues to climb. In a typical month this year, 80,000 people in Canada used a food bank for the first time.

The Stop's program director Kathryn Scharf says that food is a way to make poverty and social justice relevant to everyone -- because everyone eats. Everyone enjoys a good meal. And for the first time in her career, Scharf feels that this is a moment, that food is a galvanizing force with the potential to incite real change. This was a common sentiment amongst many people we talked to, including farmers and food activists who are close to retirement. Now, is the time for political leadership and comprehensive planning. "We are going to need something much more comprehensive than farmers markets," says Scharf. "The scale of the solution has to match the scale of the problem."