

Life to the fullest: healthy, nutritious and tasty food provided by a local food system

Rich Heffern | Feb. 21, 2011 Eco Catholic

The Gospel account of the miracle of the loaves and fishes clearly shows Jesus's awareness of the central place of food in our lives. Listening to him preach created an appetite in his followers, which he satisfied almost as an afterthought. Jesus knew that food is one of our central concerns.

In this country over the last several generations we have seen an amazing



transformation in the way food is produced and consumed. I can

remember as a kid all the mothers on my block in the summertime would buy lettuce, cucumbers, carrots and cabbage not at a supermarket but from an elderly Italian who parked his pickup truck at the top of the street on Monday afternoons. There were no supermarkets. My mom's best friend lived with her husband on a small family farm outside of town. We would often spend weekends with these farmers and get up early on Saturday mornings to help feed their chickens and hogs or to ride on the tractor when it was cutting hay in the spring.

The food system everywhere was local, but no more. Now we see a dazzling array of vegetables and fruits in supermarkets. More is available to the average U. S. shopper today than was accessible to Roman emperors. Yet there are serious concerns about the environmental and health damage that is effected by the modern food system with its reliance on petrochemicals, industrial sprays and long-distance travel. Plus, the system is built on a network of cheap labor ? workers that have few benefits and many injuries from the dangerous work they must do and the exposure to harmful chemicals.

The small family farm, once the mainstay of U.S. agriculture, is now an endangered species. Between 1961 and 2001 the number of U.S. farms dropped from 3.82 million to 2.17 million, a loss on average of 41,333 farms per year. The average age of farmers is more than 55 now. Squeezed between expensive input and decreasing prices for their products, small-scale and mid-size family farms cannot cover the costs of production. Debt, bankruptcy, foreclosure and forced evictions threaten family farms.

Public policy over several decades has promoted the industrialization of U.S. agriculture, large-scale farms and the corporate control of our food system. A few corporations control energy, fertilizers, seeds, livestock and the distribution and marketing of food products. Domestic farm policy sets prices according to the interests of

multinational agribusiness corporations, not family farmers. International trade agreements like NAFTA create unfair and unstable markets for small and independent producers. Factory farms and an industrial system of agriculture force farmers out of business and off the land. Meanwhile, our water, soil and air are polluted by industrial and chemical farming, and by huge confined animal feeding operations that generate gigantic amounts of toxic waste, not easily disposed of.

A quiet revolution is happening, however, in favor of sustainable family farms and healthful local and regional food. There has been an emphasis lately on returning to a local food system as much as possible.

Why buy locally? Because food grown close to home is fresher and tastes better, uses fewer pesticides and antibiotics. Buying locally grown and produced food supports local communities as well. The money stays within the community, ensuring that family farms will continue to thrive.

Building a local food system in a particular area creates unique opportunities and challenges. A pioneer in this arena is the Kansas City Food Circle. Since 1994, the Food Circle has united consumers with producers in the Kansas City area and provided a forum of exchange for local food products, information, friendships and community. Interviews with local farmers in the area show the Food Circle plays an important role in creating a local food system by educating people, advocating for farmers and building markets for local food.

The Food Circle links diverse elements of the local food system, including small organic vegetable producers, farmers' markets, restaurants, grocery stores, and value-added small businesses. The idea is to directly link farmers and eaters in as many ways as possible. The vision is to create a self-reliant food system made up of farmers, consumers, chefs, retailers, processors and all the other important people in the food system. The Food Circle is staffed primarily by consumer activists with some farmer members. The goal is to aid local farmers by increasing demand for local foods and educating the public.

Perhaps most appreciated by area farmers is the Food Circle's annual Farmers' Expositions, held in very early spring. These events draw 30 to 50 local producers and thousands of consumers. It gives those in vegetable production an early market for spring greens. The indoor festivals draw from both the inner-city and suburbs and provides an opportunity for folks to get to know local farmers, enjoy music and good food, experience the first "farmers' market" of the season and mingle with others. Chefs from restaurants that feature local food prepare dishes for audiences.

Scott Jung, a local farmer, said: "Customers are the small family farmer's allies. They realize you are totally bucking the system in many ways. Their support is important."

Jesus said that he came to give us life, and life to the fullest. Part of a full life is surely healthy, nutritious and tasty food. A local food system goes a long way toward providing it.

For more information on local food, go to [Local Harvest](http://www.localharvest.org/) [1] or the Kansas City [Food Circle](http://www.kcfoodcircle.org/) [2]. or [GrowLocalColorado](http://www.growlocalcolorado.org/) [3] -- for examples of local food movements.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.localharvest.org/>

[2] <http://www.kcfoodcircle.org/>

[3] <http://www.growlocalcolorado.org/>