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Winter farmers markets supports local products in the off-season

by Sharon Abercrombie

Eco Catholic

Some of the tastiest whole grain bread I've ever eaten comes from the Worthington (Ohio) Winter Farmers Market. Every Saturday morning from November through April, the main hall at Griswold Senior Citizen Center turns into a bustling bazaar crammed with nutritious breads, cookies, pies, free-range chicken, lettuce, tomatoes, apples, asparagus, potatoes, spinach, handmade soaps, herbs, maple syrup, honey and freshly ground almond butter. Shopping there has become a weekly ritual.

It feels so blessedly satisfying to support hardworking local farmers and to return home with healthy, unprocessed, whole food.

Just out of curiosity, I went online to find out how many winter farmers markets there are in the United States. A December 2011 press release from the USDA reports that they've increased 38 percent since 2010, going from 886 to 1,225. Winter farmers markets represent almost 17 percent of the nation's 7,222 operating farmers markets.

They flourish in New York, California, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Ohio, Maryland, Florida Oregon, Washington, Massachusetts, Vermont, Wisconsin and Illinois.

Low-tech hoop houses are making it possible by allowing farmers to extend their growing seasons.

Churches are a visible presence in this local foods movement. The website for Catholic Charities' Rural Life Office in Madison, Wis., refers its readers to a Jan. 26 newspaper story. Currently, eight churches are hosting Markets and Meals for Hope, a winter series that promotes indoor farmers markets and serves low-cost community meals in the Madison area. It is organized by the Churches Center for Land and People, a

nonprofit that connects farmers with faith communities in Midwestern states, giving people the opportunity to buy and sell locally made foods. An educational component includes film clips from "Fresh" or "Food, Inc."

Participating host churches include four Catholic parishes as well as Evangelical Lutheran, United Methodist, Unitarian and United Church of Christ congregations.

Jamie Stoiber, the organization's coordinator, said the project serves as a venue for supporting local farmers and presenting shoppers with the opportunity to take part in discussions to learn "what's really going on with the food system."

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