

Local Food Odyssey

By Gary L. Valen
Director of Operations, Glynwood Center

"Twelve years ago, as the Dean of Students at a small liberal arts college in Arkansas, I spent a lonely afternoon in a room at a National Student Personnel Association conference where I was promoting the use of locally produced food in school cafeterias. Not one administrator showed even a remote interest. So I was delighted this September when more than 300 people attended the first ever 'Farm to Cafeteria' conference."

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I want to share with you the story of my odyssey through local food systems, starting more than a decade ago with the lukewarm reception that greeted my advocating local food in school cafeterias, to the enthusiasm generated recently when Glynwood Center and the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture convened a diverse national group of farm and non-farm organizations to consider how communities can support mid-size farmers and the environmental, economic, aesthetic and clean food benefits they generate.

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This publication is adapted from a speech Gary presented on October 4, 2002 at the *First Ever National Conference Farm to Cafeteria: Healthy Farms, Healthy Students*. The session was part of the Sixth Annual Conference of the Community Food Security Coalition, *Eating Locally, Thinking Globally*.

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There are many ways to link farmers and consumers in a community. Consumers increasingly seek out food markets, restaurants and community-supported-agriculture (CSA) projects that meet their desire for fresh products and keeping their food buying dollars in the community. Many also believe our young people deserve fresh, healthful food, and it is fitting that the institutions serving it are supported by tax dollars paid in part by the producers themselves.

Citizens and institutions are beginning to understand how they can support the farmers in their communities and satisfy a growing appetite for locally produced food. What began as a good idea little more than a decade ago is now a defined movement – the local food movement – carried forward across the nation and around the world by dedicated people and their institutions.

In 1990, I was baffled by my colleagues' lack of interest in our local food project at Hendrix College. What had begun as a means to improve food service and student diets had blossomed into an important part of the local economy and students' lives.

Contrary to the myth that young people crave only fast food, our students loved the fresh food, especially when they spotted the symbol that noted items from Arkansas farmers. Our students learned the value of the local food system for its tasty, healthful products and the ties it fostered with the community.

This wasn't an overnight success story nor was it an easy thing to

Sustainable Agriculture, which he helped found.

do. The Hendrix Local Food Project began in 1986 at a gathering of agricultural and environmental leaders at Meadowcreek, an environmental and sustainable living retreat center located in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas. Someone suggested that as a dean of students, I should advocate the purchase of food products from local suppliers. I loved the idea; I wanted to improve the quality of the meals served to students. I returned to my campus, marched into the food service director's office, and told him we needed to immediately start serving products from local, or at least regional, farmers.

After a hearty laugh, he explained the "realities" of a modern food service operation: "cooking" meant heating up on Wednesday the prepared food ordered on Monday; locally produced fresh foods would be too expensive; students would rebel; and besides, no farmer in our area produced foods that could be served in our cafeteria. These are the same arguments given today.

Undeterred, and with the help of student researchers, we discovered that only six percent of our food came from Arkansas, despite its agricultural stature. The students' written and videotaped findings galvanized support: scenes with livestock crowded in desolate feedlots and vegetable fields sprayed with pesticides by migrant workers dressed in protective clothing and face masks. Delivery systems wasted fuel resources; trucking added to pollution – on average, a food product consumed in the U.S. travels 1300 miles from farm to plate.

One videotape showed a California strawberry grower. *Holding a large, perfectly shaped strawberry, he declared it "mostly fiber, guaranteed to survive" the trip to Arkansas. "Now this," he said, presenting a much smaller, somewhat lumpy variety, "is the strawberry I will feed to my family."* It was an important lesson for our students (and faculty and administration) about fresh food.

The tide truly turned when the college President learned that the rice served on campus came from Mississippi, though Arkansas is the leading producer in the nation. Foundation funding combined with support on and off campus, enabled us to develop a local food system.

Within three years, 30% of the food in our cafeteria was locally grown. We had helped start and support several new farms and were annually returning \$200,000 to the local economy. This percentage marked a major victory for our farm to cafeteria experiment given the limits imposed by the length of our growing season and the necessary items local farmers could not supply.

We supported farmers concerned about the health of their animals, land and the environment. We discovered they could deliver products at prices comparable to large agricultural operations in California and Mexico; with the college as a steady customer, farmers avoided marketing expenses and passed along the savings.

It is a challenge to retool a food service operation to incorporate local food products into daily menus. We had to create a delivery system that brought all the local products (egg, meat, dairy and produce) to the campus at one time each week. We solved that by hiring a farmer to do all the pick up and delivery. Since most of our menu items had, until this point, been delivered pre-prepared, we had to teach cafeteria personnel to make meals from scratch. "Oh, I get it", said a veteran employee, "you want us to do it like we used to." Eventually, the use of fresh local products became an element of pride; our cooks often stood on the serving line telling students about the meal's ingredients.



Local flavor. Glynwood Center expanded its garden to provide organic, heritage vegetables for its guests, caterers and a local restaurant.

Our students and cafeteria personnel celebrated our links with local farms, including a luncheon in which farmers and students shared a meal featuring the farmers' products, and we enjoyed the economic and social connections created when several students took part-time jobs on the farms that supplied our cafeteria.



Taste Matters

My experience with the Hendrix College local food project encouraged me to look for more ways to advance a national movement linking farmers and consumers in the same community or region. In 1999, I accepted an opportunity to demonstrate a local food system at the Airlie Center in Warrenton, Virginia. Airlie is a conference and education center located on three former estates near Washington D.C. frequented by policymakers and leaders from government, business and the nonprofit sector.

The Local Food Project at Airlie, sponsored by The Airlie Foundation and the Humane Society of the United States, introduces the value of local food systems to key leaders. A simple idea – incorporating produce from the vegetable garden on the Airlie grounds into meals served in the conference center's dining facilities – yields impressive outcomes.

The author. Institutions support farmers and the community by buying directly from local and regional farmers.

While every individual can make a difference by purchasing locally produced food whenever possible, the leader of a government agency, business or non-profit organization can purchase huge quantities of food from local farmers.

Many guests learn for the first time (via their palate, informational brochures, walks in the garden or conversations about the collaboration between the chef and gardener) the advantages of local food systems, lessons they are urged to take back to their organizations and home communities. As Airlie demonstrates, any institution or organization that serves meals as part of its activities can support a local food system.

Fostering Community Support for Local Agriculture

Glynwood Center is located an hour north of New York City in the Hudson River Valley. Glynwood's mission is to help communities address change in order to conserve local cultural and natural resources, heritage and agriculture, and pursue economic opportunity consistent with these values. Glynwood operates a conference and training facility on a 250-acre site that includes a working farm.

As Director of Operations, I have the opportunity to meld my interest in sustainable agriculture with direct involvement in producing, serving and marketing food. Since its inception, Glynwood has stressed the importance of serving fresh, healthful food.

More recently, we have explored using our purchasing power to encourage the emergence of a local food system in the Hudson River Valley. Glynwood staff identified small producers in the Valley and provided this information to the caterers with which we work.

There are challenges – one meal may require obtaining food from several producers, many who are located some distance from each other and the caterer. Unless our order is large enough, or the caterer is preparing another meal that can use food from the same producers, buying locally is sometimes not economic. Yet, we continue to encourage these connections, sometimes using our

own staff to make the pickups and deliveries. Gradually the caterers have found that other customers are choosing "regional" menus.

We begin every dinner by explaining our commitment to buying as much regional produce as we can and describing which producers contributed to the meal. We encourage diners to take this idea back to their organizations.²

Just as serving food helps us understand and work to overcome the challenges involved in buying locally produced food, operating a farm allows us to understand and address the challenges of selling specialty products from a small farm. Our expanded vegetable garden provides food for our own guests and a challenge to find efficient ways to sell the rest and reap the premium that organic, heritage vegetables merit. We sell back to the caterers who work with us and to a local restaurant that features regional food.

We plan to expand our operation to produce pasture-raised beef, eggs from free-range chickens and wool products from our sheep. Our beehives just yielded their first harvest.

We are also deepening our programmatic focus on supporting small and mid-size farmers. We partnered with the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture in September to convene leaders from alternative agricultural organizations, and environmental, land conservation, historic preservation, culinary and other organizations whose missions are impacted by agricultural activity. They responded enthusiastically to our proposal for new and different methods of gaining wider public support for responsible farmers, including the promotion of local food systems.

Glynwood has developed a program through which communities assess the public benefits—aesthetic, economic, environmental, clean food—generated by local agriculture, broaden support for it and create a plan for local action.

We can't wait the decade or so it took for the local food movement to catch on. Currently only 9% of American food production comes from midsize farmers. If current rates continue, virtually all our midsize farms will be lost within the next decade and with them, access to high quality food and the other public benefits generated by agriculture. **We must act quickly, bringing to bear the thoughtful use of our food buying dollars as we participate in and advocate for local food systems.**

*Glynwood Center helps communities address change in order to conserve local cultural and natural resources, heritage and agriculture, and pursue economic opportunity consistent with these values. **You can advance this mission and support responsible small and midsize farmers and the many public benefits they provide - economic, environmental, aesthetic and fresh food.***

- Use your food dollars to buy local and regional food
- [Email](#) us your stories about supporting local food systems
- [Make a gift](#) to Glynwood Center using the enclosed envelope

You can make a difference. Thank you.