

OPINION

Coronavirus pandemic should shift our focus to a more locally sourced food supply

A positive side effect of the pandemic: Demand for local food is through the roof.

By **Kathleen Finlay** , Updated March 29, 2020, 5:00 a.m.



Spring garlic just ready for harvest at Siena Farms, where CSA orders have been doubling each week. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

I wish it didn't take a pandemic for people to realize that a homogeneous, centralized food system is a weak one.

What I'm hearing from the farmers and the food professionals that we support here at [Glynwood](#), a nonprofit I run in the Hudson Valley, and our peers across the country, is that the demand for local food is through the roof. People are swarming (at a safe distance) the local grain stand at New York City's Greenmarket, and farmers are experiencing a huge uptick in sales of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) shares, like Chris Kurth at Siena Farms in Sudbury. His orders have been doubling every week, resulting in the most shares he has ever packed in the entire history of the farm. Meat sales at the farm that our organization operates here near Cold Spring, N.Y., have never been better.

No one likes to think about the damage that this virus is going to have globally, but one is comforted by thinking about the possibility of what my friend Molly Kile, an epidemiologist at Oregon State University, refers to as punctuated equilibrium. It's a term she is borrowing from evolutionary biology, and it argues against the idea that species undergo steady, uniform, and gradual adaptations. Rather, it posits that living things mostly enjoy a static state interrupted by spikes of large-scale change. This pandemic may very well be one of those spikes for us humans.

This is a moment when we need to learn lessons, and learn them fast, about how we cover the basic needs of our global population. I hope that one of the things we realize as a society is how we are too reliant on a handful of food producers that are mostly turning out products that harm us rather than heal us.

What does a decentralized, healthy regional food system look like? It looks a lot like what we are building here in the Hudson Valley. It looks like small to mid-size farms, maybe one acre, maybe 10, maybe a few hundred. They are run by people who care deeply about their community, about the health of the natural world, and about their peer producers.

On one call that we organized the other day, 70 local farmers participated. They wanted to connect with each other and share best resources: “What’s the protocol around safety? How are you getting your food to your people? What are you doing with all your food meant to go to restaurants?” And most importantly, “How can we work together?”

That “how can we work together” is something that farmers have been practicing for centuries, but it has heartbreakingly become all but lost in our race toward profit. But I am hearing that “how can we work together” ethos loud and clear in emails and phone calls. A communal network — the exact opposite of the conventional food system controlled by very few — provides a type of economic immunity to those farmers. They will feel this crisis deeply, of course, and need federal and state assistance to continue to operate, but this is the kind of system that has a better chance of withstanding harsh shocks.

I helped distribute our meat shares this past week, driving around my community and leaving bags of gorgeous pasture-raised meat on my neighbors’ doorsteps and porches. People came out of their homes and picked up the food and smiled and thanked me. It felt so great — so sane and joyful to connect once again through food during this unprecedented time of distance. The power of good, local food to bring us together has never been more important, and we need to support our regional farmers and local food system now more than ever.

Here’s how:

- Give to a [food assistance fund](#), like Glynwood’s, that will get local food to people in need.
- Gift, buy, or donate a [CSA share](#) now from your local farm
- Support [restaurants that use regional farms](#) by buying gift certificates now or supporting their staff relief funds
- Tell your policy makers that regional farms and restaurants need support.

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