Staying True to Its “Roots”:
How Will Growth Change Local Food Systems?

By Ethan D. Schoolman
Local Food: Growing Pains

City leaders in Grand Rapids, Michigan, are celebrating a big addition to downtown. But the new building is not a corporate headquarters. It is a non-profit food market, recently profiled in the *New York Times* article “A Michigan City Bets on Food for Its Growth.” Local food, boosters believe, can be a cornerstone of the region’s future, where a green environment, social wellbeing and a thriving economy go hand-in-hand.

Grand Rapids is not alone in staking part of its future on local food, or in viewing vibrant local food systems as linchpins of social and environmental sustainability. From the Rust Belt to the Bible Belt, the local food movement—understood as the collective efforts of public and private parties to reduce the distance and create closer ties between food producers and consumers—has experienced dramatic growth. Marketing of local foods through direct-to-consumer outlets like farmers markets and intermediate channels like grocery stores grossed $4.8 billion in 2008, the most recent year for which comprehensive statistics are available—and momentum has continued to build. In fact, the National Restaurant Association, based on a survey of over 1,300 chefs, recently predicted that locally-sourced food will be a top menu item, not just in 2014, but all the way to 2024. If this happens, the local food movement may be one of the most significant food-related developments of the early 21st century.

For local food advocates and entrepreneurs, such encouraging signs are all to the good. At the same time, a fundamental question is emerging—one driven by the very success of local food. Can the local food movement keep growing while maintaining a focus on small farms, face-to-face contact, and environmentally responsible production methods? Local food, in its short history as a social movement, has been about more than just fresh vegetables and healthy people. It has also been about a healthy environment: moving away from the use of chemicals and genetic modification to increase yields and control pests. It has been about healthy relationships: consumers knowing something about the farmers behind their food. And it has been about supporting networks of small farms and innovative farmers who prioritize sustainability and direct contact with food buyers. If the supply of “local” food keeps growing, but loses much of what makes it unique, then the very success of the local food movement may be its undoing.

As demand for locally-sourced food continues to grow, the biggest challenge will be increasing supply while staying true to the movement’s original values. This report lays out the current state of local food and highlights innovative initiatives around the country that show how this challenge can be met.

Why Local Food?

The term “local food movement” describes a wide range of public and private efforts to respond to the industrialization of American agriculture by linking consumers and institutional buyers with relatively proximate farmers and food businesses. Since chemical pesticides began to be widely used after World War II, dramatic changes in how food is grown and processed have motivated a growing set of concerns:

- **Worsening food quality.** Food systems today are global in scope: ingredients grown on one continent can be used on another, and the finished product eaten thousands of miles from where it originated. Global supply chains are dominated by a handful of corporations: in 2004, the ten biggest multinational food processors controlled over 60 percent of the food and beverages sold in the U.S. The ability of food to travel long distances and last for months, if not years, depends on preservative ingredients, sophisticated processing and storage, and genetic modifications. All of these changes, critics of conventional food systems contend, have resulted in food that tastes worse and contributes to public health problems like heart disease, diabetes, and obesity.

- **Costs to the environment.** Agriculture in the U.S. has changed radically over the past decades. Over 370,000 farms have disappeared since 1982 and average farm size has nearly tripled since 1940. These changes are closely related to increases in agricultural chemical use and crop specialization. From 1988 to 2007, the amount spent by the agricultural sector on pesticides...
doubled to over $2.5 billion; in 2007 alone, 857 million pounds of herbicides, insecticides and fungicides were used on U.S. farms.\textsuperscript{vii} Rising use of pesticides has been accompanied by widespread monocropping—very large farms that grow just one or two crops—and application of synthetic fertilizers. These modern agricultural practices have been linked to a range of environmental costs, from steep declines in birds and other kinds of wildlife to “dead zones” in the Gulf of Mexico and Great Lakes.\textsuperscript{viii}

- **Risks to public health.** Agricultural pesticides also adversely affect human health, particularly in children—whose vital systems are still developing—and people who work on or near farms.\textsuperscript{xvi} Illnesses associated with exposure to pesticides at varying levels include many types of cancer, cognitive disabilities, and neurological diseases.\textsuperscript{x}

- **Diminished connection to food.** Processing, pesticides, and the disappearance of nearly five million farms since 1930 are part of something even bigger: a change in people’s basic relationship to food. Even as agriculture has become more industrial, chain restaurants offer homogenous menus regardless of location and families spend less time eating together. The result, as Michael Pollan and others have pointed out, is a diminished sense of where food comes from and even what “real food” is.\textsuperscript{xi}

The local food movement, as a response to these concerns, has sometimes been dated to the 1971 opening of Alice Waters’ restaurant Chez Panisse in Berkeley. In search of fresh, high-quality ingredients, Waters cultivated relationships with farmers and suppliers in Northern California, and ultimately became an advocate for organic and sustainable food. Organizations and people engaged in the contemporary local food movement share Waters’ goals and also, in some cases, are seeking to improve access to healthy food within disadvantaged communities:

- **Improve the taste and nutrition of food.** Proponents argue that locally-sourced produce is fresher and more nutritious than conventional produce, and that strong local food systems encourage healthier eating habits.\textsuperscript{xii} Prepared foods that use mainly locally-sourced ingredients are minimally processed, exposing consumers to fewer preservatives. The business models of smaller producers are also more likely to emphasize quality over quantity, leading to higher prices but also, in the eyes of many, better flavor.

- **Protect the environment and public health.** Local food systems have a smaller ecological footprint than conventional food systems, because they consume less energy through transportation, processing and storage.\textsuperscript{xiii} In addition, small farms that produce most locally-sourced food have often been associated with production practices that make minimal use of pesticides and artificial fertilizers. To the extent that locally-sourced food overlaps with organic or semi-organic farming, consumers are also exposed to fewer pesticides and other agricultural chemicals.

- **Help people to connect with their food.** Robust local food systems have the potential to nurture a deeper, more meaningful relationship between people and food—a relationship that benefits both individuals and communities.\textsuperscript{xiv} Farmers markets and community supported agriculture (CSA), unlike supermarket aisles, are not just places to buy food. They are ways to understand where food comes from, connect to the community that provides it, and find greater pleasure in a basic part of life: getting stuff to eat.

- **Revitalize rural economies and small farm agriculture.** Government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs,) as well as individual consumers, view strengthened local food systems as an economic lifeline for small farms and rural areas.\textsuperscript{xv}

- **Get healthy food to people who need it most.** The fact that locally-produced food can be more expensive than conventional food, coupled with the tendency of “alternative” grocery stores to cluster in high-income areas, has led some scholars to observe that local food systems can perpetuate existing social inequalities.\textsuperscript{xvi} At the same time, many advocates of local food are motivated by the goal of increasing access to fresh, healthy foods among low-income communities, through urban farmers markets, urban agriculture, community gardens, and food assistance programs.

These goals come together in the local food movement, whose most fundamental aim is to shrink the distance that food travels from farm to consumer, with possible stops for minimal processing.
How are the local food systems doing?

By almost any measure, the local food movement has gone mainstream. Along the way, local food systems—networks of farmers, processors, consumers, and mediating organizations focused on the production and consumption of locally-sourced food—have grown in complexity and reach.

- Interest in local food has taken root in many different parts of the country, and, unlike interest in “green” products, is not tied to conventional markers of socioeconomic status, such as income and education level, as well as political affiliation. Indeed, some of the most visible public local food initiatives involve low-income communities and urban areas, like community garden programs in Rust Belt cities. While interest in local food is high in many low-income communities, however, actual opportunities to regularly buy local food are greater for relatively high-income, well-educated individuals.

- Farmers markets and CSAs, among other outlets specializing in local food, have never been more popular. From 1994 to 2013, the number of farmers markets in the U.S. rocketed from 1,755 to 8,144. In California’s Central Valley alone, CSA cooperatives—farms that provide fresh produce and meats directly to subscribers—surged from 673 members in 1990 to 32,938 in 2010. ix

- Restaurants have been central participants in the local food movement from the beginning. More recently, non-specialty grocery stores and even big-box retail chains have begun to experiment with participation in local food systems. Walmart recently announced that “buying local” will be part of its sustainable agriculture initiatives, and competitors are following suit. Longtime proponents of local food question whether corporations like Walmart, with their emphasis on scale, low prices and uniformity, are fundamentally incompatible with the goals of the local food movement. But the very fact that this debate is happening is a signal that interest in local food continues to expand.

- Public policy regarding food security and public health in low income areas has begun to see local food systems as a potentially valuable component of the social safety net. Nutrition assistance vouchers—“food stamps”—are increasingly accepted at farmers markets nationwide, and programs in many states, with the participation of NGOs, offer to double the value of public food assistance spent at farmers markets and other outlets for local food.

If there is one statistic above all that indicates the upward trajectory of local food, it is this: while the total number of U.S. farms declined by .5 percent from 1997 to 2007, the number of farms selling directly to consumers actually increased by 24 percent. During the same period, direct sales to consumers, through farmers markets, CSAs, and roadside stands, increased by 105 percent, compared to a 48 percent increase in all agricultural sales.

At this moment of remarkable success, however, local food systems are not far from an existential crisis. As demand for local food continues to grow, the possibility exists that this demand will be met by food producers—farmers and processors—who do not share the original commitments of the local food movement to environmental sustainability, public health, and changing the culture around food and eating. If local food is to remain “local” not only in the narrow sense of geography but also in the larger sense of its social mission, three challenges must be addressed:
• **First Challenge: Working with Large Buyers.** It can be difficult for small farms both to connect with large buyers—like hospital dining services, company cafeterias, and high-traffic grocery stores—and to provide on a consistent basis the amount of product that large buyers expect. Establishing and managing relationships with large buyers demands staff and resources that small farms often lack. In addition, while traditional outlets for local food, like farmers markets and CSAs, take advantage of consumer willingness to buy and use what is available at a particular time, large buyers depend on having a great deal of certain foods at definite times.

• **Second Challenge: Not Enough Small Farms.** After decades of consolidation in the agricultural sector, the surprising upswell of interest in locally-sourced food may simply be outstripping the ability of small farms to meet the demand. In other words, even if individual small farms or groups of farms are able to devise ways to make their output more predictable and reliable, there still may not be *enough* output to continue to grow the local food movement beyond a certain point.

• **Third Challenge: Seasonality.** Local food systems have historically been inherently seasonal, in terms of being limited by climate and geography to producing particular foods at particular times. The seasonality of local food systems is part of their charm, and fits with the “back to the earth” mentality of dedicated eco-consumers. But most consumers are accustomed to the year-round availability of a wide variety of once-seasonal foods, in particular fresh fruits and vegetables. Whether local food systems will be able to meet this expectation of non-seasonality will also strongly impact their growth.

If these challenges are not met, one of two things will happen. The first possibility is that the growth of the local food movement will be insurmountably limited, and local food systems will remain a niche resource—beloved by a small, dedicated minority, but prohibitively costly or inconvenient for most people, most of the time.

The second possibility, however, is even more worrisome. If existing small farms cannot meet the expectation of constant supply, if the number of small, environmentally conscientious farms does not grow, and if seasonality remains a hard-and-fast roadblock, then institutional buyers, grocery stores, and large suppliers may choose to meet the demand for local food by diluting their requirements for what local food should be. The local food movement could follow the path of the now ubiquitous Red Delicious apple, whose breeding for mass consumption led to the loss of its original sweetness and flavor.

**How can local food systems meet these challenges?**

Consumers are demanding more local food, and corporate actors are already mobilizing to take local food mainstream. The question is: how can local food systems continue to grow without compromising essential values? The task is not an easy one, but examples from around the country show ways that it can be done.

The *first challenge* is whether small farms can connect with large buyers, and then create the kind of constant and predictable supply that large buyers require. Meeting this challenge will require small farms to form cooperative arrangements such as *food hubs*—centrally located facilities that facilitate “the aggregation, storage, processing, distribution or marketing of locally or regionally produced food products.” Through food hubs, the work of making connections with large buyers is shared, and variability in the outputs of individual farms averages out when seen from the perspective of the group.

• Idaho’s Bounty, a Boise-based food hub serving southern Idaho, caters to both retail and wholesale customers. Individual consumers can shop in person or online and have their food delivered to several pick-up sites. Large buyers submit their needs to regional sales representatives, who work with networks of small farms to fill complex orders. Importantly, institutions that buy through the food hub are not limited to grocery store staples, but gain access to artisanal, region-specific, and seasonal foods, produced in environmentally-sensitive ways at competitive prices. Food sold through Idaho’s Bounty is not conventional food, localized—it is true “local food,” in its original sense, scaled up.

• The Allen Street Marketplace, a food hub in Lansing, Michigan, recently started an online exchange for buyers and sellers of local food. The exchange works like a dating service for large buyers and small farmers: food hub staff analyze what area restaurants, grocery stores, hospitals and schools are looking for at a particular time, and find local farms that can fill the orders. Orders can be filled by more than one farm, so a large buyer does not need to turn to a conventional supplier shipping huge amounts of food from distant states. The exchange also promises that participating farmers abide by pre-determined environmental, ethical, and purity standards, thus lowering an additional barrier to local food systems.
Coordinated groups of small farms can accomplish what individual farms are unable to do on their own. Food hubs, backed by state, federal and private funding sources, have a proven track record of success not just in Iowa and Michigan, but also in New York, Vermont, and many other states. Food hubs and similar organizations are a crucial piece of the puzzle for growing local food systems in a socially responsible way.

The second challenge is to increase the number of small farms by encouraging people to farm who are likely to build their business around a commitment to local food systems, community and the environment. With this goal in mind, public and private organizations should look beyond existing residents of rural communities for new farmers and farms. Following the historical examples of Grange halls and Future Farmers and America chapters, imaginative programs can provide training, land, and equipment to populations with strong interest and potential but few socioeconomic resources. Immigrants with farming backgrounds and residents of low-income urban areas comprise two of the most promising such populations.

- The role of the immigrant in American agriculture is often that of underpaid laborer on a commodity farm. Given the opportunity to work for themselves, however, new immigrant farmers can contribute their considerable skills and worth ethic to building sustainable local food systems. The National Immigrant Farming Initiative (NIFI), established in 2003 through grants from the USDA and several non-profit organizations, is currently helping immigrants from Africa, Latin America, and Asia, who might otherwise disappear into conventional food systems, to start their own farms in every part of the country. NIFI’s programs envision local food systems as an ideal market for immigrant-owned farms, because of the emphasis that many consumers of local food, both organizations and individuals, place on social justice and developing personal relationships with farmers.

- Without minimizing the tragedy of urban decline since the 1960s, it can be observed that many hard-hit urban areas are now rich in a surprising resource: vacant and underused land. Put to productive use as community gardens and urban farms, this land can be a source of fresh, healthy food for underserved populations. Moreover, urban farming is increasingly recognized as a way to introduce young people in these communities to agriculture and food-related businesses as potential career paths. The work of Georgia Organics, an organization primarily focused on helping farmers and ranchers convert to organic production, is one example. Alongside programs for existing farmers, Georgia Organics provides scholarships for individuals from low-income communities to get paid, hand-on training at urban farms around metro Atlanta. Graduates not only learn the basics of how to grow and raise food, but also gain exposure to opportunities for new farmers through local food systems.

For immigrants with farming backgrounds and residents of low-income urban areas who face high barriers to finding good jobs, local food systems can provide unique paths for economic advancement. For local food systems, reaching out to these and other non-traditional populations offers the prospect of new farms started by people sympathetic to the original goals of the local food movement.

The third challenge is to reduce, to the extent possible, the limitations of seasonality on local food systems. Efforts underway in the Midwest, where fertile summers give way to dark and bone-chilling winters, demonstrate that seasonality can be at least partially transcended while staying true to the spirit of local food: small farms, minimal processing, and consideration of environmental impacts. Strategies employed focus on extending the growing season and preserving food in healthy and environmentally responsible ways.

- One way to make local food systems less seasonal is to find ways to extend the growing season for produce on small farms. Winter “hoop houses,” for instance, are lightweight, relatively inexpensive, passive solar greenhouses that allow vegetables to be grown during cold weather. Hoop houses can provide significant economic benefits to small farms—in some cases making the difference between a farm that succeeds and one that does not. Farmer looking to build a hoop house have recently been aided by funding from the National Resources Conservation Service and partner agencies in many states. For consumers, the benefits of hoop houses can be seen in the winter farmers markets—over 1,800 operating nationwide as of 2012—that are increasingly common in cold-weather states.

- A second solution to seasonality, both revolutionary and entirely traditional, is to make it easier for small farmers to preserve and sell food past its growing season. Two recently founded Michigan businesses demonstrate that food preservation as a vital component of local food systems is possible, profitable—and healthy. The Brinery uses produce from local, organic small farms to make fermented foods like kimchi, sauerkraut and pickles. Locavorious freezes locally-grown fruits and vegetables and sells the result both in area grocery stores and as part of a winter CSA. The success of these businesses is passed on to small farms that supply the raw materials for their fermented and frozen products.
Preserving food past harvest time has been part of agriculture for thousands of years. Fermenting and freezing are two age-old technologies with new relevance for mitigating the constraints of seasonality for growing local food systems.

These proposed ways for addressing three challenges to local food systems are mutually reinforcing. Small farms need food hubs; food hubs need new farmers; and both need ways to make money and stay viable outside of the regular growing season. Ideas like those outlined above hold out the possibility that local food systems can expand by enabling more small farms to sell to more buyers during more of the year. This is growth that would not compromise essential values.

**What does it mean to be “local”?**

A “neighbor” is someone who lives near to you. But a *neighbor* is someone who watches your garden while you are away, who asks after your health. A “neighborhood” is a dotted line on a realtor’s map. But a *neighborhood* is a community of people who share traditions, a sense of place, and a commitment to think about how the actions of individuals affect everybody else.

Similarly, “local food” might someday be just food that happens to have been grown or prepared within a specified distance from where it is bought or eaten. Today, though, *local food* is something more: food that embodies a sense of care for the community and environment; food that makes us aware that our lives our richer for being bound up with other people and living things. The most important question facing the local food movement today is not whether it will continue to grow. There can be little doubt that it will. The most important question is whether its growth will come at the expense of a complex and emotionally rich understanding of what local food can actually be.

Everybody eats, as the expression goes. And everybody who eats has an interest in preserving what is meaningful and important about local food. The recommendations outlined in this report would contribute to this effort. But growing local food systems in an environmentally and socially responsibly way will only be accomplished if all parties involved—consumers, entrepreneurs, established businesses, government agencies, and advocacy organizations—recognize what is at stake, and think creatively about where the local food movement should go from here.

**About the Author**

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Endnotes


