

## Why Local Foods?

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*Local* has replaced *organic* as the most popular label or descriptor of food. Organic foods had been the fastest growing segment of the U.S. food markets, growing at 20%-plus per year and doubling every three to four years from the early 1990s until the economic recession of 2008. Growth rates have since stabilized at around 10% per year, reaching \$36 billion in sales in 2014. Organic sales account for only about 5% of total food sales in the U.S., but organic fruits and vegetables and organic dairy products claim more than 10% of their respective markets.<sup>i</sup>

The organic movement began as a rejection of industrial agriculture. As organic foods moved into mainstream supermarkets, many consumers began looking to local farmers to ensure the quality and overall integrity of their food. According to industry estimates, local food sales have doubled in recent years, jumping from \$5 billion in 2008 to \$11.7 billion in 2014.<sup>ii</sup> USDA statistics indicate that farmers markets in the U.S. increased from 1,755 to 8,144 between 1994 and 2013 - a four-fold increase.<sup>iii</sup> Estimates by *Local Harvest*<sup>iv</sup> place the number of CSAs in the U.S. at 2,700 CSAs in the U.S. in 2009, compared with less than 100 in 1990.<sup>v</sup>

A more recent development in local foods has been the formation of multiple-farm networks of local farmers. The networks may be called alliances, cooperative, collaboratives, or food hubs - as with the Southeast Iowa Food Hub, *Grown Locally*,<sup>vi</sup> *Idaho's Bounty*,<sup>vii</sup> *Viroqua Food Coop*,<sup>viii</sup> *Good Natured Family Farms*<sup>ix</sup>, and the *Oklahoma Food Cooperative*<sup>x</sup> are examples of successful food networks. The *National Good Food Network* lists more than 300 "food hubs."<sup>xi</sup> The local food movement is so diverse and dispersed that it is virtually impossible to accurately estimate its size or importance. Virtually everywhere I go, I discover new local foods initiatives.

I believe the primary reason for the growing popularity of local foods, as well as organics, is that Americans are losing trust and confidence in the industrial food system. A recent *Fortune Magazine* article: "The war on big food," begins, "Major packaged-food companies lost \$4 billion in market share alone last year, as shoppers swerved to fresh and organic alternatives."<sup>xii</sup> The article identifies artificial colors and flavors, pesticides, preservatives, growth hormones, antibiotics, and genetically modified organisms among consumer concerns. All of these concerns are linked directly or indirectly to industrial food production, including industrial agriculture.

In an attempt to stem the tide of growing public concern, the "industrial agricultural establishment," has mounted a multimillion-dollar public relations campaign designed to "increase confidence and trust in today's agriculture."<sup>xiii</sup> Funders and board members of the new *U.S. Farmers and Ranchers Alliance*, include the American Farm Bureau Federation, John Deere, and several major commodity organizations. Corporate board members Monsanto and DuPont have each pledged to contribute \$500,000 per year to a \$7 million annual budget. A recent study by Friends of the Earth documents that more than a dozen similar "front groups" have been spending more than \$25 million per year to defend industrial agriculture.<sup>xiv</sup>

I believe local foods are an even greater challenge to "business as usual" in the food business than are organic foods - and industrial food producers know it. Organic obviously is a

more meaningful label or descriptor than local because all industrial foods are local to someone somewhere. However, industrial farmers or commodity producers know they can't sell all, or even a significant part, of their total production locally. The most frequently mentioned motives for buying locally grown foods include freshness, flavor, and nutrition. People have learned that shipped-in foods generally are not as fresh and flavorful, and probably not as nutritious, as fresh-picked, locally-grown foods at farmers markets or CSAs. Many people also consider local foods to be safer because they are more likely to be produced organically, or at least without pesticides or GMOs, or in the case of meat, milk, or eggs, without hormones or antibiotic.

People who prefer and buy local foods often mention their desire to support local farmers and to help build stronger local economies and communities. Foods grown for local markets contribute about four-times as much to local economies as commodities grown for industrial food production. People tend to trust "their local farmers" to not only produce "good food" but also to be good neighbors, good community members, and good stewards of the land. Some experts may question the importance of social, ecological, and *unselfish* economic motives for buying local. However, the fact that local foods emerged in response to the perceived industrialization of organics suggests otherwise. Local foods are a rejection of "food business as usual." Farmers motivated primarily by economics are unlikely to be successful in local markets. Americans are trying to restore trust and confidence in "their food system" by "buying local."

I can foresee a time in the future when every community has its own local, community-based food system. Farmers will connect with their local customers through regular personally-connected transactions facilitated by a local digital food network. Face-to-face contacts at farmers markets, on-farm sales, regular farm visits, or local food festivals will serve to punctuate the less personal electronic transactions in order to maintain relationships of trust and integrity. The objective of community-based food systems would not be "self-sufficiency," but instead local assurance of quality, integrity, and "food security" through shared social and ethical values.

I believe these local community-based food networks will bypass the industrial food system entirely by making regular home deliveries. Products ordered through Amazon.com show up on your doorstep. Local foods could be delivered just as conveniently and efficiently. I believe local foods will show up on your doorstep, perhaps in a well-insulated box with a food drop-chute for your local "food carrier." This service could start using existing services such as Fed-Ex or UPS, but quality local service may require local, community-based delivery services as well.

Finally, people often ask me if I am optimistic about the future of local foods. I am hopeful, if not optimistic, because I believe people are beginning to understand the inherent value and importance of the personal relationships that are essential in creating local food systems that have ecological, social, and economic integrity. People are rediscovering that we are not only material beings but also social and moral beings. We need the personal relationships we find in caring communities for reasons that have nothing to do with any economic value we may receive in return. We need to care and be cared for. We also need a sense of purpose and meaning in life, a sense that what we do matters. We need to care for the earth as well as each other - because it matters. Why are local foods growing in popularity? Because, local foods are not just about growing better food to fuel the human body, it's also about creating caring communities to feed the human spirit. In this kind of social and spiritual awakening, there is always hope.

End Notes:

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- i Jeff Gelski U.S. organic food sales rise 11% in 2014, Food Business News, 4/15/2015, [http://www.foodbusinessnews.net/articles/news\\_home/Consumer\\_Trends/2015/04/US\\_organic\\_food\\_sales\\_rise\\_11.aspx?ID=%7B0C1920D3-1822-4467-9FF0-F1EE00E53F54%7D&cck=1](http://www.foodbusinessnews.net/articles/news_home/Consumer_Trends/2015/04/US_organic_food_sales_rise_11.aspx?ID=%7B0C1920D3-1822-4467-9FF0-F1EE00E53F54%7D&cck=1)
- ii Tom Vilsack, USDA Blog; “Tapping into the potential for economic potential for local foods through local foods and local places,” July 1, 2015. <http://blogs.usda.gov/2015/07/01/tapping-into-the-economic-potential-of-local-food-through-local-foods-local-places/#sthash.ZBUCi7BE.dpuf>
- iii USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, “Farmers Markets and Local Food Marketing,” <http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/ams.fetchTemplateData.do?template=TemplateS&leftNav=WholesaleandFarmersMarkets&page=WFMFarmersMarketGrowth&description=Farmers%20Market%20Growth> .
- iv Local Harvest, <http://www.localharvest.org/>
- v Debra Tropp, “Current USDA Research on Local Foods,” USDA, Agricultural Marketing Service, May, 2009, <http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/getfile?dDocName=STELPRDC5077145> .
- vi Visit the *Grown Locally* website at <http://www.grownlocally.com> .
- vii Visit the *Idaho's Bounty* website at <http://www.idahosbounty.org/> .
- viii Visit Viroqua Food Coop website at <http://viroquafood.coop/> .
- ix Visit Good Natured Family Farms website at <http://www.goodnaturedfamilyfarms.com/>
- x Visit the *Oklahoma Food Cooperative* website at <http://www.oklahomafood.coop/> , list of other cooperatives: <http://www.oklahomafood.coop/Display.aspx?cn=otherstates> .
- xi National Good Food Network, “US Food Hubs, Full List,” <http://www.ngfn.org/resources/food-hubs> .
- xii Beth Kowitt, “Special Report: The war on big food,” Fortune, May 21, 2015. Para 1, <http://fortune.com/2015/05/21/the-war-on-big-food/>
- xiii Food Dialogues, “About USFRA,” <http://www.fooddialogues.com> .
- xiv Kari Hamerschlag and Anna Lappe, “Spinning Food,” Friends of the Earth, <http://www.foe.org/projects/food-and-technology/good-food-healthy-planet/spinning-food#sthash.8Xhj3lqt.dpuf> .