

# Local Food Report:

## An Update on Washtenaw County's Local Food Movement

Article and Photos by Jen Eberbach



Especially in the last few years, the idea of developing local food systems that sustain themselves has entered into a wide variety of discussions. Proponents of eating local argue how local food systems spur economic development and increase people's access to fresh, healthy food in the 21st Century. Research institutions, food market experts, and national media in the U.S. have been reporting that demand for locally sourced produce, dairy products, and meats is on the rise.

On a cold and blustery day this March, stakeholders in Washtenaw County's local food system convened at the 3rd annual **HomeGrown Local Food Summit**. Farmers, food business owners, chefs, non-profits, community organizers, educators, and public policy experts met at the day-long conference to reflect on the local food community's successes and struggles over the past year and share ideas for the future.

I took the opportunity to learn more about locally sourced food from local foodies before, during, and after the summit. There are good signs that Washtenaw County has a maturing local food movement. In many ways, the county is riding the cusp of contemporary food initiatives with zeal. The county also faces all sorts of stumbling blocks to progress – sometimes quite monumental ones.

Many of the people I spoke with made a point to let me know that local food and demand for it have “always been here” in Washtenaw County. But they agree that the local food movement has really accelerated in the last decade, even more so in the last few years.

### Defining 'Local Food'

You have to decide for yourself how far away 'local' food can grow before you no longer consider it to be 'local.' There is no standard definition, although Congress's 2008 Food, Conservation and Energy Act (also known as the Farm Bill) says anything less than 400 miles away or within the state constitutes 'locally or regionally produced agricultural food products.' People in Washtenaw County accept different definitions, frequently preferring much shorter distances than that.

This article mostly focuses on farms, businesses, and initiatives happening within the boundaries of Washtenaw County. However, the county's extended 'local food' network only multiplies as you move outward to surrounding communities. With that, the diversity of food products to choose from multiplies. You can already find a lot of what you like to eat grown and raised right here in the county. However, a greater network of growers, processors, distributors, retailers, and consumers exists around us, as well.

### The local food system in Washtenaw County

Washtenaw County residents can eat food sourced from within the county in a number of different ways, whether you buy directly from farmers, choose local products at the grocery store, or dine at restaurants that support local farms. There are now 17 farmers' markets spread throughout the county where farmers sell directly to customers. There are also easily a dozen Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) projects in the county that sell shares of their yield directly to members. (For more information on many of the individual CSAs, read our cover story on CSAs in the May thru August 2009 issue of the *Crazy Wisdom Community Journal* on our website archive at: <http://www.crazywisdom.net/PDF/CSA.pdf>) Locally sourced products are also sold on the shelves of some of the grocery stores in town and a number of local chefs use locally sourced ingredients in their menus.

A food system includes more than producers and consumers. It also encompasses things like food processing businesses and distribution companies. A thriving local food system creates room for new niche market businesses to grow. The good news is that more food related businesses have been popping up in town over the last few years. There is also a push to get more locally sourced food into institutions like schools, hospitals, and restaurants, as well as to encourage municipalities to adopt 'buy local' practices.

The bad news – which might astound you – is that only a tiny fraction of the food that Washtenaw County residents eat is sourced from within the county. County residents only spend about 1% of the \$1 billion we spend on food each year on food produced in the county. The rest of our money leaves the local economy. The same goes for food produced here – the vast majority of both our food and money leaves the county.

**Jeff McCabe** hosts **SELMA Cafe** with his wife **Lisa Gottlieb** each week, and he is deeply involved with new farmer development in Washtenaw County and hoop house builds.

McCabe proposes we try spending 10% of our food budget on food from the county. “At last year's summit, we introduced this idea of ‘Ten Percent Washtenaw’ looking specifically at what can happen within our own community here if we build a local food system. Just getting to where we source 10% of the \$1 billion a year we eat in this county would be creating a \$100 million food system. It would mean thousands of new jobs. You can look at it from almost any perspective that's important to you, whether it's food access, food security, jobs, economics, health outcomes, energy – all of those things are benefited when we build this local food system,” he says.



### The new Tilian Farm Development Center

Farms sourcing the county

Several area farms were identified as local food “mentors” during a summit presentation by **Kim Bayer**, the president of **Slow Food Huron Valley**, and **Dan Bair**, the manager of the **Farm at St. Joe's** hospital. **Community Farm of Ann Arbor**, located in Chelsea, is one of the oldest CSAs in the country, founded in 1988. Chelsea's **Tantré Farm**, owned by **Deb Lentz** and **Richard Andres**, is the biggest CSA with about 400 members. The **King family** at **Frog Holler Organic Farm**, located in nearby Brooklyn, MI, has been growing organic food for nearly 40 years.

Michigan is one of the most diverse farming landscapes in the county. However some foods are harder to find than others and the growing season is limited by our cold winters. For example, it is harder to find fresh local produce when it is not in season. A number of farms in Washtenaw County are using hoop houses to extend the growing season. Hoop houses are inexpensive greenhouses made by wrapping a plastic roof over flexible piping. Funds from McCabe and Gottlieb's community breakfasts have already helped build hoop houses on area farms, like **Tomm and Trilby Becker's** relatively new CSA **Sunseed Farm**, and others. The couple started a “Farmer Fund” to fund more hoop house projects. The plan is to build 20 hoop houses in 20 days this summer.

Numerous people at the summit said they would like to see more meat and dairy producers in the area; however, there are already some of note in our county. **Back Forty Acres** farm, in Chelsea, for example, raises a variety of pasture-raised poultry and grass-fed livestock, including chicken, turkey, lamb, goat, rabbit, pork, duck, geese, and free-range brown chicken eggs, according to the farm's product list.

### Incubating young chickens: The new Tilian Farm Development Center

Farmland in Ann Arbor Township, off Pontiac Trail, will be the site of a farm incubator. The idea behind the **Tilian Farm Development Center** is to provide new farmers with land, equipment, and support for two years. The project is possible because of the formation of the **4-Seasons Farmer Development Program** funded by a U.S.D.A. grant. Members of the steering committee discussed the program at an afternoon “breakout” session at the summit. **Jeff McCabe** is involved in the project, along with **MSU Student Organic Farm's Jeremy Moghtader**, **Food System Economic Partnership (FSEP)** director **Jennifer Fike**, and 4-Season Farm Development Program manager, **Andrea Ridgard**.



Jennifer Fike

In many ways, the county is riding the cusp of contemporary food initiatives with zeal. The county also faces all sorts of stumbling blocks to progress – sometimes quite monumental ones.

“The goal from our perspective is that these folks are successful and that in two years they can move their business within our community to somewhere that is long term and sustainable for them,” Ridgard announced. While the farmers are on the land, they hope to supply them with all of the equipment, mentorship, and knowledge they need to succeed after its time to let the next set of farmers get their start on the land.

**Niche businesses in processing, distribution, and marketing**

In the last few years, a number of new, independently owned niche businesses have sprung up around local food. A few years ago, local food distribution company **Eat Local Eat Natural** started gathering meat, dairy and eggs from nearby farms in their refrigerated trucks to distribute to local restaurants and other food retailers.

**Dawn Thompson** and **Jane Pacheco** started a new online business, **Lunasa**, which sells local goods and food for pick-up twice a month. **Ed Weymouth** is biking local food to people and businesses in Ann Arbor through his unique new delivery business, **Arbor Cycle**. And **Karl and Cara Rosaen** have launched their nationwide website, **Real Time Farms**, which gives visitors up to date information about what local farms are growing, what restaurants are serving on their menus, and ways to find local food artisans and farmers’ markets in your area.



**David Klingenberger**

**Filling a niche by fermenting: The Brinery**

**The Brinery**, a new fermented foods processing business, was “birthed out of a surplus of cabbage from Tantré Farm last year,” says owner and Ann Arbor-raised briner **David Klingenberger**. He sells sauerkraut, pickles, and kimchi through the Ann Arbor Farmers’ Market and local independent grocers, and a number of downtown Ann Arbor restaurants serve his products.

“I cut my teeth at Tantré Farm,” Klingenberger recalls. He helped them start their CSA and farmers’ market business back in 2001, working and living at the farm on and off over the years. “I first fermented sauerkraut there about ten years ago and just sold it to people through the farm. Then, last year, I came back to Michigan after being out West. They had a surplus of cabbage and I was ready to start my own foods entrepreneurial business,” he explains.

The new entrepreneur is “impressed by the number of new food related niches that have been created around local food in the last few years.” However, “I noticed that there wasn’t a fermented foods business in the community I had gotten to know through working at Tantré Farms and [by] making other connections over the years. I thought, this is a niche that’s not being exploited and I wanted to fill it as soon as possible,” he explains.

Klingenberger buys surplus vegetables from local area and Michigan farms to produce his products. However, he would love to establish bigger contracts with farms instead of only buying their surplus. “A lot of small farmers want to grow for a

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**St. Joe's first hoop house**

This year Americans will spend 49% of their food budget dining in at restaurants, ordering delivery, driving through fast food establishments, and eating meals prepared by other types of food vendors.



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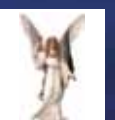
Green Fair- [Bart@LiveGreenFair.com](mailto:Bart@LiveGreenFair.com)

Holistic Fair- [rrvendors@yahoo.com](mailto:rrvendors@yahoo.com)

Green Art Show- [Mary@IntegrityShows.com](mailto:Mary@IntegrityShows.com)

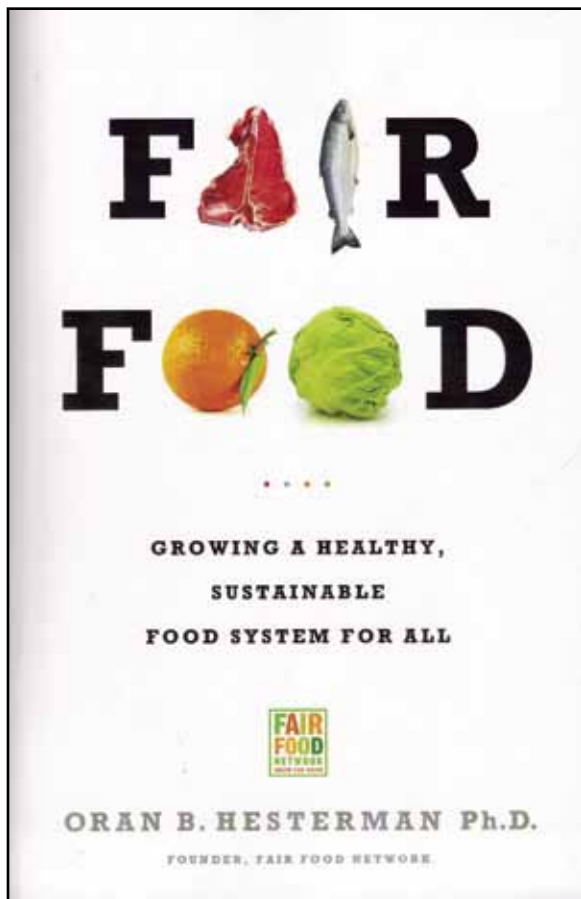


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# Local Food Report

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In late May, Perseus Books is publishing Oran Hesterman's *Fair Food: Growing a Healthy, Sustainable Food System for All*. Hesterman lives and work in Ann Arbor, and is the president and CEO of the Fair Food Network.

Institution" programs, which executive director **Jennifer Fike** says aim at helping schools, restaurants, and hospitals with sourcing food from area farms. "We've been successful in that we have 'Farm to School' programs in three of the five counties that we serve and we are looking to expand that further," she announced at the summit.

Fike says the demand for locally sourced food is already there. "When we work with these institutional buyers we find that the supply is not keeping up with the demand. These institutions want to buy local food year-round, but there isn't enough of it out there yet to be able to serve them," she says.

For information about the Ecology Center's effort to bring local, healthy food to hospitals, see our interview with Hillary Bisnett in our last issue, at: <http://cwonline.squarespace.com/storage/journal-issue-47/ecology%20center%20web%2047.pdf>

## The case of restaurants

This year, Americans will spend 49% of their food budget dining in at restaurants, ordering delivery, driving through fast food establishments, and eating meals prepared by other types of food vendors, according to the National Restaurant Association. This is potentially good news for local farmers and independent food businesses across the country, especially since chefs purchasing locally sourced meat and produce are the top two 'hottest trends' in the restaurant industry right now (according to their nationwide survey of chefs who contributed to their *2011 Restaurant Industry Forecast*).



"What I really like about this program is that it's not about spending more money, it's about shifting who you are spending it with."

– Ingrid Ault, Director of Think Local First of Washtenaw

CSA or for a farmers' market, but I'd like to encourage the more mid-grade production of more of these crops for food processors such as myself," he says.

## Institutions

Washtenaw County's food movement has been a strong advocate for getting more locally sourced food into institutions like schools and hospitals that serve a lot of food to people. For example, community gardening non-profit **Growing Hope** is getting grade schoolers involved in food growing through school day, after school, and summer programs, under the direction of **Amanda Edmonds**. St. Joseph Mercy Hospital has a new farm on the property that grows food year-round, the **Farm at St. Joe's**, which is managed by **Dan Bair**.

Economic development non-profit the **Food System Economic Partnership (FSEP)** has been developing "Farm to

school" programs, which executive director **Jennifer Fike** says aim at helping schools, restaurants, and hospitals with sourcing food from area farms. "We've been successful in that we have 'Farm to School' programs in three of the five counties that we serve and we are looking to expand that further," she announced at the summit.

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The **Jolly Pumpkin's** food philosophy has been locally-minded from the start (it was founded in 2009), according to the restaurant's head chef **Maggie Long**. Long has been in town for 26 years

and says local food is much more than a 'trend' in Washtenaw County. "We live in a community that has always been extremely supportive. The Farmers' Market has always been here and the farms have always been here, even though some come and some go," she says. However, "it certainly seems like people are becoming more aware of what is going into their food these days. People ask about our menu on a daily basis," she notices.

During the growing season, the percentage of locally sourced food on their menu is upwards of 90%, Long reports. The chef prefers to buy directly from farms rather than using a distributor – although she doesn't mind having independently owned local food businesses, like distributor Eat Local Eat Natural, and online local food market, Lunasa, around when she needs help getting the ingredients she wants. "Personally, I like face time. I go directly to the farmers, talk to them and convey their back stories to my staff," she explains.

**The good news is that more food related businesses have been popping up in town over the last few years. There is also a push to get more locally sourced food into institutions like schools, hospitals, and restaurants, as well as to encourage municipalities to adopt 'buy local' practices.**

A slightly more expensive meal is worth it to the Jolly Pumpkin's customers, according to Long. "I have to charge a little more for it, but it's a far better product. People walking in the door get it. They know that what they are putting into their bodies is a good thing," she says. In Long's experience, "Dealing with farms nearby really cuts down on costs. You don't have the shipping costs because it's not coming from across the country. A lot of the financial benefit is in the back end, which you don't always see," she says.

**Ann Arbor Brewing Company** first hired chef **Nicole Young** a few years ago to spearhead an effort to buy more locally sourced food. About a year ago, the WCC culinary arts graduate became head chef of their downtown Ann Arbor restaurant. "Instead of buying everything from big distributors, we are now buying the majority of our products from a network of local growers – especially in season," she says.

Although planning a more local-friendly menu "takes some adjusting," Young thinks it is well worth it. "It's an adjustment to not be able to always get the product you are looking for in the quantity you want on a moment's notice. For example, you can order a case of 12 oz. sirloin steaks from a big distributor really easily. But you can also buy larger cuts of local meat and break them down or even buy a whole cow," she explains. "I'd love to see more local cheese producers in the area, and fresh local produce can be hard to find during the winter (although we are hoping to make connection with some hoop houses)," she says.

"To some extent, these things influence what we put on our menu, but once you make that adjustment, it's better. The quality of the ingredients you get is worth it," Young concludes.

## Think Washtenaw First

**Think Local First of Washtenaw** director **Ingrid Ault** sees "natural connections between buy local movements and local food movements," she says. About 30 of its members are food related businesses. There is also a natural connection between the HomeGrown Local Food Summit's call for a "Ten Percent Washtenaw" campaign and projects that Think Local First is currently working on.

Ault says one of their big pushes in the next couple of years will be to encourage a "ten percent shift" in municipal spending in Washtenaw County. Think Local First's final goal is to support the passage of a purchasing resolution stating that 10% of Washtenaw County's municipal purchases be spent in the local economy. "I hope that Think Local First can be a champion for this government spending initiative," she says. "What I really like about this program is that it's not about spending more money, it's about shifting who you are spending it with," she says. "I think it's a myth that buying local has to cost more," she explains. Part of the push will include encouraging the municipality to source 10% of its own food budget on local food.



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– Maggie Long, Jolly Pumpkin

**Conclusion**

There is much more that goes into the local food movement than can fit into this article, including public assistance programs like “**Double Up Food Bucks**” at farmers’ markets. People eligible for a SNAP Bridge Card (Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program) can use their Bridge Card at farmers’ markets. For each dollar they spend, they receive one “Double Up Food Buck” token that they can use to purchase more Michigan-grown fruits and vegetables at farmers’ markets. There are also public policy initiatives happening that impact the local food movement. The **Michigan Good Food Charter** is a good place to continue learning about issues related to local food systems on your own.

It’s also worth noting the upcoming publication of Ann Arborite Oran Hesterman’s new book, **Fair Food ~ Growing a Healthy, Sustainable Food System for All**. The book will be available at Crazy Wisdom at the end of May. Hesterman is the founder of the **Fair Food Network**, and has been a leading force in the sustainable food revolution over the last quarter century. See our interview with Hesterman in the Fall 2010 issue of the CW Journal at: <http://cwonline.squarespace.com/storage/journal-issue-46/hesterman.pdf>.

Events like the HomeGrown Local Food Summit and the festival they throw in the fall are excellent opportunities to immerse yourself in the world of local food and to meet Washtenaw County’s food community. Summit time won’t roll back around again until March 2012, but save the date for the next **HomeGrown Festival, which will be held September 10, 2011**, in Ann Arbor.

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**Weblinks for Resources Mentioned in the Local Food Report**

- HomeGrown Local Food Summit**  
<http://localfoodsummit.org/>  
<http://localfoodsummit2009.blogspot.com/>
- Selma Café** – Jeff McCabe and Lisa Gottlieb  
<http://www.repastspresentandfuture.org/>
- Slow Food Huron Valley** – Kim Bayer, president  
<http://www.slowfoodhuronvalley.com/>
- Farm at St. Joe’s** - Dan Bair, farm manager  
<http://www.sjmercyhealth.org/the-farm-at-st-joes>
- Community Farm of Ann Arbor** – CSA farm in Chelsea  
<http://www.communityfarmofaa.org/>
- Tantré Farm** - Deb Lentz and Richard Andres  
<http://tantrefarm.com/>
- Frog Holler Organic Farm** – the King family  
<http://www.froghollerorganic.com/>
- Back Forty Acres Farm** – Larry and Kevin Doll  
<http://www.backfortyacres.com/>
- Sunseed Farm** – Tomm and Tribly Becker  
<http://www.farmsunseed.com/>
- Tilian Farm Development Center** – Jeff McCabe, Jeremy Moghtader, Jennifer Fike, Andrea Ridgard  
<http://www.realtimfarm.com/farm/4757056/tilian-farm-development-center>
- Eat Local Eat Natural** – Bill Taylor, Tim Redmond, Scott Aikens  
<http://www.eatlocaleatnatural.com/>
- Lunasa** – Dawn Thompson and Jane Pacheco  
<http://www.lunasa.us/>
- Arborcycle** – Ed Weymouth  
<http://www.arborcycle.com/>
- Real Time Farms** – Karl and Cara Rosaen  
<http://www.realtimfarm.com/>
- The Brinery** – David Klingenberg  
<http://thebrinery.com/>
- Growing Hope** – Amanda Edmonds  
<http://www.growinghope.net/>
- Food System Economic Partnership (FSEP)** – Jennifer Fike  
<http://www.fsep-michigan.org/>
- Jolly Pumpkin** – Maggie Long  
<http://www.jollypumpkin.com/annarbor/>
- Ann Arbor Brewing Company** – Nicole Young, executive chef  
<http://www.arborbrewing.com/>
- Think Local First Washtenaw** – Ingrid Ault  
<http://www.thinklocalfirst.net/>
- Double Up Food Bucks** – Rachel Chadderdon  
<http://www.doubleupfoodbucks.org/>
- Michigan Good Food Charter**  
<http://www.michiganfood.org/>
- Fair Food Network** – Oran Hesterman  
<http://www.fairfoodnetwork.org>
- HomeGrown Festival**, September 10, 2011  
<http://www.homegrownfestival.org/>