

Alternative Markets for Accessing Healthy Foods Panel

Food Security Summit 2008: Cultivating an Agenda for Change

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Jeff Themm (moderator), Nashville Farmers' Market
-Will Uhlhorn, Executive Chef, F. Scott's
-Tallahassee May, Turnbull Creek Farm
-Paul Bela, Hill and Hollow Farm

If eating healthily and in season is important, how can we improve and make prevalent healthy local options? Hear from two farmers and one chef on various outlets for local food in Nashville and Middle Tennessee, including farmers' markets, CSAs, subscription services, and other direct marketing outlets. Hear how chef's have connected with each other and with farmers to forge mutually beneficial relationships where their customer gets the best and the freshest!

Paul Bela

Paul, a small farmer from Southern Kentucky, introduces the concept of Community Supported Agriculture, or CSA, a model they use to get food from their farm directly into the kitchens of community members. The consumers forge a relationship with a farm, agreeing to buy direct, and giving financial up-front support to the growers who produce their food. The growers agree to provide a sufficient quantity and quality of food to meet the needs and expectations of the consumer in the form of a weekly basket of produce. There is no specific formula for this relationship beyond the members making a financial commitment to the farm to share in the bounty (and potential risks) throughout the growing season. The CSA model began in Japan and was brought to the US in the mid 1970s. About 20 farms across the Middle Tennessee Region use a CSA model to distribute food directly to customers. Customers wishing to eat fresh, locally, and seasonally benefit from healthy sustainably grown food. The CSA model also allows the farmer to get 100% of the income from the sale. There are some highly efficient small farms in the region, such as their 5 acre farm, that may feed 75 families; others are as large as 400 families.

Paul shared his views on farming in the region and land challenges involving how to create a more sustainable food system. Land is a big commodity these days and it has become nearly impossible to buy land and pay for it by farming. There is an incredible amount of time and investment needed to run a farm, with taking on too much debt as an additional risk. In Paul's view, with a small amount of land and direct marketing to consumers (such as through the CSA model), beginning farmers can be successful in today's market. As a comparison, wheat growers selling a commodity could make \$100-200 per acre profit and would need thousands of acres to make money. With direct sales of a diversified crop and a small farm system, \$5000-\$7000 per acre is achievable. This type of small diversified system also takes a lot more hands on management and

oversight. Hill and Hollow Farm sets up every Saturday at the Nashville Farmer's Market for their customer pickup.

Trends in farm ownership and operators show the changing nature of farms, and how many small farms have been lost over the past century as systems become larger, equipment becomes more efficient for large acreage, and less opportunities for people to do land stewardship, animal husbandry, or hand-work. In 1910, farmers were 31% of the workforce; in 1990 farmers were 3% of workforce. At the Hill and Hollow farm, they participate in the CRAFT program, Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training. This farmer training program helps them get their work done. But more importantly, KY CRAFT fosters farm intern/apprentice networking, collaboration and education for those interested in sustainable agriculture Kentucky. Their farm participates through the program in organized monthly KY CRAFT workshops along with a community calendar inviting member farmers and their interns/apprentices to join in on field days and other events hosted at KY CRAFT farms. The Kentucky CRAFT program is modeled after successful CRAFT programs in the Upper Midwest and Hudson Valley, no such program exists in Tennessee yet.

The e-coli scare on bagged spinach last year highlighted one benefit of dealing directly with the farmers. Accountability and the shorter distance to source of your food makes traceability possible, something that is much more difficult in an industrialized food system where a variety of farms are sending their food to a central production center for common packaging. Paul and many other Nashvillians who knew exactly who grew their spinach were eating it through the scare.

Will Uhlhorn

Will presented his views as a chef at F.Scott's restaurant in Nashville, where he gets to "profit from the great things coming from these farmers." He offered up some of the reasons restaurants of all types chose to incorporate local food onto their menus. Buying fresh and local gives restaurants an option besides receive food from mass mechanized, poor quality industrialized food. By cultivating relationships with friendly local growers not only is he provided with wonderful food, but he believes it makes him a better chef with a better end product. He did not see much of a difference in cost, since there is no shipping payment or transit cost, and any additional cost is justified with a better product. One important is the education of young cooks to observe and taste for themselves the differences in quality when supplying fresh locally raised foods.

In his experience, the restaurant should purchase everything that farmers can produce locally. There is an additional issue of responsibility as chefs and consumers in preparing whatever farmers can provide. Developing a relationship in advance is also beneficial so that farmers can grow what is appropriate for the restaurant use. Will buys from around six different farmers for his restaurant. He likes to buy whatever the farmers have. His restaurant changes their menu four times a year, letting the farmers dictate what they put on the menu. Seasonality is a very important part of their food and he would be

embarrassed to put anything that wasn't in season on the menu. Will treats purchasing food as reverently as he can, appreciating their hard work and beautiful product.

Tallahassee May

Tallahassee May has been farming for Five Years on 3-Acre Farm. She operates Fresh Harvest Co-Operative with a neighboring farmer to bring more product to direct market with her smaller acreage. She spoke about the challenge of farming sustainably and how it relates to her farm. While she uses organic practices only, she is Certified Naturally Grown rather than certified organic, a system that fits more to her scale and still maintains the integrity of her product. Self-reliance is a household goal as well as a farm goal, both are a process to get to and not necessarily at their end point. When thinking of environmental sustainability, there are many aspects to include beyond just the chemical vs. organic inputs. For example, what farm equipment is necessary and will that be powered using petroleum or propane? How will farms in Middle Tennessee cope with changes in weather patterns and be influenced by less or erratic rainfall? Water conservation is one of the most important issues on the farm and a great challenge. How will bee populations be protected as pollinator populations go into massive decline across the country? At her farm they have begun a pollinator protection program and use “farm-scaping” techniques rather than traditional landscaping to keep more land in its natural state. As more farm and forest land is developed and farms are increasingly industrialized, it is critical for her farm and others to have a safe ecosystem for bees. Tally mentioned the need for adequate organic farm inputs to be available locally, instead of having to ship them in from out of state. Not only this but a general investigation about what a local food system means in our region and what is needed to get us to a more sustainable system.

There is a need to pass on the information and the skills of farming. Farmers need interns to teach next generation of farmers and that infrastructure could be better developed in our region. While Tally likes to work by herself, she realizes the importance of working with others and passing on the tradition of knowing how to grow. There are many benefits of farming and it is good to appreciate them once in a while.

Financial solvency is a major component of sustainability. To continue farming, you must be able to make a living doing it; many early farmers have part time jobs as they launch and many spouses and farmers have off-the-farm jobs. Having a direct relationship with her consumers is the major component of her business model.

Beginning a co-op with her neighboring farmer allowed them to work together and rather than competing. Each can specialize and expand their shared market, while the system provides “insurance” if one farmer's crop fails. Alternative models such as these can help small farms become more sustainable and increase business. Rather than the CSA model, Fresh Harvest is a subscription service where the email listserve describes produce available, customers' place their orders and it is package and delivered weekly. Everything is picked and packed to-order. The co-ops 6 acres combined serve a 150

family CSA. In a complex and industrialized food system, the best you can do is know where your food comes from.