



FOOD AND COMMUNITY

"The biggest question to ask yourself about food is: Where did this come from? And that begins the telling of the story."

– Michael Pollan, author and journalist



Sustainable
EATING

From Field to Table



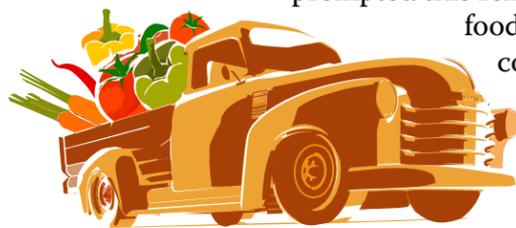
Eating is a local act. In a world where many things are now virtual, eating remains necessarily something that must be done in person. The process of getting food to the right place and ready to eat is the work of many human hands. It uses natural resources such as sun, soil, air, and water. This publication describes trends in the U.S. food system that strengthen the social, economic, and environmental vitality of communities and the health of the people who live there.

The Importance of Food

Food consumers are interested in learning more about how their food choices affect other people, the economy, and the environment. They want to know the foods they choose to eat and drink are safe and healthy. Today's food consumer also expects great taste, convenience, and good value. These values inform the decisions people make every day about food.

The emergence of these consumer food values has enabled a new generation of farmers to learn how to make a living in both rural and urban environments. Chefs and food personalities inspire us through television, magazines, newspapers, and social media. Interest in sustainable agriculture has come to the forefront. These new ideas about food, agriculture, and the environment are reshaping our food system.

Our food system—once simple, direct, and community-based—has become increasingly complex and globally influenced. Many of us do not understand the process by which food reaches our dinner plates. The process of preparing and delivering safe, delicious food to your home, grocery store, or restaurant has a great impact on many lives and on the earth.



Community Food Systems

In the early 1900s, about 40 percent of Americans lived on farms. Few foods were processed or traveled more than one day to market. What was eaten was dictated by what was in season. Following World War II, the U.S. food system became global, aided by lower transportation costs and refrigerated trucking. Regional specialties developed for crops such as fruits and nuts. Declines in cotton and tobacco production presented other opportunities in poultry, fish, and vegetable agriculture. By the year 2000, only 1% of Americans lived on farms. This food system has provided U.S. citizens with a safe and abundant food supply.

A community food system is distinguished from a globalized food system by considering food security, location, self-reliance, and sustainability. Concerns about community hunger, questions about where and how food is produced, an awareness of growing and producing food, and a desire to lessen our human impact on the earth are the underlying reasons for strengthening community food systems.

The food system includes all processes involved in keeping us fed and is central to discussions about nutrition, food, health, community economic development, and agriculture. The food system operates within, and is influenced by, social, political, economic, and natural environments. Each step in the food system is dependent on human resources. A community food system integrates food production, processing, distribution, consumption, and recycling in order to enhance the environmental, economic, social, and nutritional health of a particular place.

Food System Trends

Over the last two decades, food consumers have developed an interest in supporting local farmers and achieving a better understanding of the origin of their food. Several factors have prompted this renewed interest in community food systems. Environmental concerns cause many consumers to consider the geographic distribution of food, food packaging, and food production processes.

Hunger advocates work to help communities achieve an equitable distribution of healthy foods. The Slow Food movement encourages traditional ways of growing, producing, and preparing foods. Although USDA considers local foods to be the hottest trend of the decade, little research has been done in this area. Researchers at University of Tennessee collected data from restaurateurs and consumers regarding local foods. The primary reasons cited by both groups for purchasing local were:

- To help build a more sustainable economy
- To increase demand for local foods
- To have a positive effect on society
- Belief that local is good for the environment
- Concern about decline of local farms
- Belief that local is healthier to eat

About one-third of those surveyed considered “locally produced” to mean within a 50-mile radius. The definition below describes someone who tried to eat mostly foods from a 100-mile radius. Regardless of how we define “local,” communities across the United States are embracing the trend and reinventing community food systems.

LOCAVORE: a local resident who tries to eat primarily food grown or produced within a 100-mile radius, 2007 Word of the Year, New Oxford American Dictionary

Examples of Food and Community Action in Kentucky

In 2013, Louisville, Kentucky identified some community food principles to support creation of a locally based food system that promotes healthy eating, improved food access, and environmental responsibility. The Louisville Community Food Principles, shown below, are designed to leverage a strong regional food economy, raise the community's “nutritional IQ,” enrich the lives of citizens, and support the reversal of negative health trends through promotion of healthy food consumption.

- We believe in creating a community food system whereby all community members have equitable, affordable, and convenient access to nutritious food.

- We believe in supporting food education that addresses how food is produced, processed, labeled, distributed, marketed, prepared, consumed, and disposed.
- We believe in building greater nutrition knowledge and awareness throughout our community, acknowledging the important link between the foods we eat and our health.
- We believe our support of locally based small and mid-scale farms, as well as local food processing and distribution, will benefit our community.
- We believe our food supply should be produced and processed in sustainable ways that prevent the exploitation of farmers, workers, natural resources, and the cruel treatment of animals.
- We believe in supporting community-based initiatives that address hunger.

Bowling Green, Kentucky has also made a commitment to changing its food system through the Barren River Food Systems Alliance. A thriving farmers' market, a mobile market, and annual celebration of Food Day (October 24, 2014) help to keep food a priority in Bowling Green. Some innovative new farmers and local foods restaurants make it possible for many more citizens of southern Kentucky to enjoy locally produced foods. A food pantry at Western Kentucky University operates as “The Food Abides” for benefit of hungry students.

Begin by Reshaping Your Plate

To start your own local foods adventure, begin by making half your plate fruits and vegetables. Plant-based diets consume fewer natural resources than animal-based diets. Commit to allocating 10 percent of your food budget on locally produced honey, eggs, dairy, grains, meat, and produce. Visit your local farmers' markets and look for “locally grown” signage in your local grocery store. Learn how to put quick, tasty, seasonal foods from your community into meals by using local recipes. Cooking good food is undervalued in our society; let the cooks in your life know how much you appreciate their work.





Grow and preserve some of your own food; even a tomato plant can help us appreciate the effort that goes into food production. Try not to waste food by using or processing fresh foods at their peak and enjoying leftovers. Look for the Energy Star rating to select earth-friendly kitchen appliances. And finally, consider composting your food scraps along with yard waste to create your own rich compost for the garden. Recycling food packaging and reusing food containers will reduce your food-related waste. See the following tips on serving Local Foods for Local Gatherings to learn more about how to promote sustainable eating at meetings in your community.

If you are interested in cultivating a new food system, please consult the other two publications in this *From Field to Table: Sustainable Food Systems* series: *Eating from the Earth* and *Sustainable Community Food Systems*. To learn more about the foods you eat, contact your Cooperative Extension Service office for learning opportunities and a reading list on related topics. By joining the conversation about community food systems, you may find a new appreciation for everyday food.

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Local Foods for Local Gatherings



There seems to be no shortage of meetings to attend or family and community events. Foods and beverages are served at many of these gatherings. Here's some food for thought: what if local meetings served more locally produced foods?

Would eating local foods at local meetings have a positive effect on the local economy? Would it help families and farmers make a living? Would it help people eat a healthier diet? Would it preserve agricultural land and the character of Kentucky communities?

When food consumers have a healthy relationship with food, buying and enjoying locally produced fruits, vegetables, grains, dairy and meats, they are more likely to benefit from good nutrition. Most businesses and organizations want to serve foods that are affordable, enjoyable, and that benefit consumers and the community. Serving famous and favorite foods, like freshly baked cinnamon rolls or pit-smoked barbeque, will probably increase meeting attendance.

If your business or organization would like to begin serving more local foods, try these steps:

- Identify the meals, snacks, and beverages you currently offer. Which of these offer the best opportunity to serve local foods?
- What food products are locally produced in your region? Consider using a few of these foods on a regular basis or for a special event.
- Try to use one or two Kentucky foods at most large events.

Local Foods at Local Meetings: Practical Tips to Get Started

- Before signing a contract or making an agreement with the meeting facility or caterer, ask if they would be willing to work with you to serve some local foods at your event.
- Identify locally produced foods you would like to serve. This may require some research.
 - Visit the local Farmer's Market during summer months to establish relationships
 - Look on the Kentucky Department of Agriculture Web page for producers of Kentucky foods
 - Check with your county Cooperative Extension Service Office to ask about local food producers
- Check with the producer to see if they will be able to supply the quantity of the food you will need on a specific date. Inquire about the price.
- Negotiate with the meeting facility or caterer to use the local foods you have identified. Agree upon a purchase price for the product (as discussed with the producer) and the price for your food service.
- Work with the food producer and your Extension office to provide the chef or caterer with advice or requests on how the food is to be prepared.
- Remember to mention your locally produced foods in meeting announcements or event marketing materials. Local flavors can help bring people to the table.
- One week prior to your event, check with the food producer and food service to see if the food order, delivery, preparation, and service details are as discussed.
- On the day of the event be available on site early to help resolve any last minute questions.
- Sit back and enjoy some homegrown goodness courtesy of your hard work.
- After the event review comments about the food on meeting evaluations and ask participants about their impressions. Keep this input in mind and put it in the file to help plan your next successful meeting with local flavor.