

Local Food Programs: Overcoming the Challenges to Find Success

By Amy Blum

Getting fresh, local produce back into communities has gained popularity in recent years, especially on our country's seaboards and large metro areas in the Midwest. A growing number of restaurant menus boast farm-fresh products from meat and dairy to fruits and veggies. Even in the smallest of towns, community garden plots and farmers' markets are anticipated events.

With so many communities across the country yielding research that supports the incomparable benefits of local food programs, one might wonder: Is there progress in South Dakota?

Growing Big Ideas from Small Seeds

Though becoming a new grower in South Dakota presents unique challenges, Stephanie Cavenee of rural Bonesteel believes the return outweighs the investment.

Cavenee, who also operates a graphic design business, started "Stephanie's Garden" in 2012. She became involved with the Burke Area Farmers' Market, and today, serves as the nonprofit's secretary.

"For me, it started out as a way to get involved in the community and make a little money while doing something I truly love," Cavenee said. In addition to offering her garden produce, Cavenee bakes a variety of breads and rolls, sells farm fresh eggs and offers canned goods like pickles.

To participate in the Burke Area Farmers Market, all vendors must have proper licensing and product labeling as required by the state. This helps ensure consumer safety and confidence in the local produce.

In Cavenee's case, she had to obtain a \$20 candling license to market her eggs. Additionally, each of her canning recipes must be tested and approved by the state at a cost of roughly \$100 per recipe. Baked goods must bear a label with specific information required by the state, including the product's baked date, ingredient list and a statement informing consumers the goods were not produced in a commercial kitchen.

"The rules can seem intimidating, and I know there are people who have wonderful stories and delicious foods but don't share because of the extra work. Personally, I really believe the extra effort is worth it. My customers tell me how much they enjoy my products, and they show me each week by paying a premium for my homemade goods. It's a win-win," she said.

According to the mother of two, her community's market is well-received each week and complements their local grocery stores well. Cavenee is growing her business already with the addition of a high tunnel, which will allow for produce from roughly April through December. She is also staying open to the idea of offering lamb and other ag products.

"I can absolutely see our market growing, and I'm excited to be part of it," she said.

Where's the beef?

Locally produced beef has found a niche in South Dakota communities, especially in metro areas. While selling beef at a farmer's market or in a retail store is not hard, it is more time-consuming to start.

Meat processing in the US is regulated by the Federal Meat Inspection Act and compliance is conducted by the Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS). According to USDA FSIS regulations, meat sold direct to consumers at farmers markets must be processed at either a USDA or state-inspected plant and can be sold by carcass (or half, quarter, etc.,) or as individual retail cuts. Products from state inspected plants cannot be sold outside of state in which it was processed.

There are a number of producers in South Dakota who have found the reward worth the effort. From 34 Ranch Meats in Black Hawk to 5th Generation Farm in Marion, producers are successfully connecting with consumers by sharing their story. In turn, consumers are saying 'thank you' by paying premium prices for a local product.

According to www.34ranchmeats.com, consumers can purchase a whole grass-fed beef for \$7.75 per pound. That's roughly \$3,100 for 400 pounds of meat.

Weeding through the Challenges

With over 20 years working at various levels in the local food system, Pat Garrity of Yankton, SD has seen the success of buy fresh, buy local programs firsthand. Garrity, who partners with the SD Value-Added Agriculture Development Center as the State Coordinator of the Buy Fresh Buy Local chapter, also had a role in weeding through issues that challenge local food efforts.

According to Garrity, South Dakota's ruralness and tendency toward independent business models versus cooperative models present real challenges to the expansion and long-term viability of the state's local food efforts. From his vantage point, getting local food programs into communities like Frederick, Eagle Butte, Miller, Faith, Mobridge, Burke and others is paramount to building a strong foundation for success.

"These communities are our real areas for opportunity. South Dakota isn't the only state with rural communities," he said. "We have great opportunity to figure rural distribution out well in order to share it with others. If Bountiful Baskets can do it for large commercial producers, we should be able to figure it out for our local producers."

"My frustration, though, often falls into this: Land grant institutions are there to provide information to all agricultural ventures. Yet, they are dependent on financing, which almost becomes the top layer ... get the money; then decide what to research. This philosophy makes it very difficult to get research."

Garrity believes there is room at the table for everyone; unfortunately, even though groups like Monsanto are supportive of all efforts to a degree, they almost drive the industry to a fault.

Chris Zdorovtsov, SDSU Extension's Community Development Field Specialist, covers South Dakota in an effort to help facilitate community food projects of all types and sizes. Zdorovtsov is working to build useful guidelines for producers and sees distribution and quantity as huge issues.

“For many producers, the logistics of getting product harvested and transported is a big deal. Every step of the process from a producer perspective has to carry enough value to justify the investment,” she noted.

According to Garrity, collaboration has long been a focus of local growers and organizations across the state. “Finding common ground can be a challenge sometimes because each group has such specialized focus,” Garrity said. “But, it’s coming. More and more people are starting to talk, and when we communicate, we move forward.”

Garrity sees excitement in more rural areas, especially with hospitals, schools, nursing homes and daycare.

“To make a major inroad, buyers are saying, ‘I’ll buy local if you can make the order and delivery process streamlined’. The interest is there, but to grow, we’ll have to use a cooperative model.”

Planning for the Future

Dr. Abby Gold, PhD, MPH, RD, nutrition and wellness specialist/assistant professor and extension specialist with joint appointments at North Dakota State University and the University of Minnesota, has seen progress in the Midwest’s efforts to bring local produce to the masses.

“There is huge momentum in [Minnesota for local foods](#). The state department of health is even spearheading a state food charter. The state got extension involved to develop a unified message, policy and documentation. Once that happened, groups like nursing homes, assisted living units, schools and small hospitals came out of the woodwork to participate,” Dr. Gold said.

In 2010, Dr. Gold led a research project in Minnesota to determine what factors lift a local product program off the ground and keep it sustainable. Gold’s team discovered four programmatic codes to success.

1. **People.** Sustainable programs have a champion person. This visionary helps others understand through small successes how a project can work on a larger scale; they focus everyone on low-hanging fruit first.
2. **Program.** Successful programs maintain flexibility in relation to seasonality and climate. Planners must learn to go with the flow of a growing season. Having a trusted commercial (mainstream) back-up is essential.
3. **Shift.** Though slow, change is happening successfully. One success lends itself to another, and small shifts soon make a big difference. Before attempting the shift, it is helpful for project champions to clearly understand the roadblocks.
4. **Reason.** Sustainable programs make the need clear. They utilize grant programs and build strong relationships with local growers in order to build strong relationships within the school system.

Investing time and resources into any local food program takes commitment. Fortunately, the foundation has been laid, and [resources to help ensure success abound](#). For more information on establishing a local food project in your community, contact the lead person at your local farmers’

market, Chris Zdorovtsov at Christina.Zdorovtsov@sdstate.edu or Holly Tilton-Byrne with Dakota Rural Action at (605) 697-5204.