Can Vermont Feed Itself?
By Bill McKibben

The question "Can Vermont feed itself?" is at first glance sort of like the question "Could you teach a cow to stand on its head?" Maybe, but what's the point? Vermont, after all, has supermarkets throughout the state and Sysco trucks plying its highways. We're tightly linked into the global food machine, and very few of us are starving. We're part of the modern world.

But let me suggest a few possible reasons to take the question seriously anyway—questions that might be grouped under the topic "What if the modern world stops working so well?"

- What if fuel got really expensive, or worse, really scarce? The modern global agricultural system basically grows food in oil; bringing one calorie of iceberg lettuce from California takes 97 calories of fossil energy, and one bunch of grapes from Chile is the same as leaving a light bulb burning all weekend. The average bit of food we eat has traveled at least 1,500 miles—and the average bite of supermarket organic produce has come even further.
- What if we had to get serious about climate change? All that moving food around sends huge clouds of carbon into the atmosphere; if you had to pay the cost of its environmental toll, distant food would be unaffordable—and many of the areas where it's now grown might be hot enough to destabilize harvests.
- What if something disrupted our food supply? When Tommy Thompson, secretary of health and human services, quit his post in 2004, he said, "For the life of me I cannot understand why the terrorists have not attacked our food supply because it is so easy to do."
- What if the decline in Vermont farms began to imperil our communities, sending money out of state and country, and replacing families with longstanding ties to place and neighbor with summer homes and ski chalets. I don't mean to be alarmist, this could probably never happen, but...
- What if people noticed that food from the supermarket tastes like crap? And that it was making them fat and sick?

Even if all those what-ifs suddenly came true, it's not immediately obvious that we'd be able to become food self-sufficient. After all, we live in a northern climate where the growing season can end pretty abruptly in mid-September. There are twice as many Vermonters as there were a hundred years ago when we were, more or less, feeding ourselves—and there are infinitely fewer farmers. (The state has been losing farms month after month, year after year; since the 1970s—81 more dairy farms kicked the milk bucket last year, dropping the state's total to 1200 or so. You do the math.) And we've grown accustomed to a far more diverse diet, one that changes little from season to season.

On the other hand, a look at the numbers is not entirely discouraging. A caution—there aren't that many numbers available, and they're sometimes contradictory. But a 1997 study found Vermont the closest to food self-sufficiency of any of the New England states. And a 2000 study by Dough Hoffer of the Livable Wage Campaign showed Vermonters were importing $1.8 billion in food, while exporting $1.2 billion. True, two-thirds of those exports were in the form of milk, which the state of course produces far out of proportion to its own needs, but it demonstrates that there is real reason still to think of Vermont as an agricultural state.

Even slight increases in local buying would have big effects. Hoffer reports: "If Vermont substituted local products for only 10 percent of the food we import, it would result in $376 million in new economic output, including $69 million in personal earnings from 3,616 jobs." In other words, shift just one dime per dollar from Philip Morris and Kraft to Trudy the egg lady and you've managed to create jobs on an IBM scale—not as well paid, but perhaps more stable. That's why the governor has radio ads urging Vermonters to look for groceries that come from close to home.

We'll know more about the numbers in a year or so. UVM graduate student Dave Timmons is trying to answer some of these questions with harder figures. "The Ag Department is urging Vermonters to get 10 percent of their food locally," he says, "but nobody knows how much we're doing now, so it's a little hard to assess effectiveness." In the absence of precise numbers, however, some anecdotal evidence.

Consider the Intervale. Though too many Burlingtonians take it for granted, there's really nothing quite like it on the planet. I spent a late October day exploring the idea of Vermont independence—political, economic, social, and spiritual. Look for us the last Friday of every month in the Vermont Guardian, and join our ongoing blog at www.vtcommons.org. We are unaffiliated with any other organization or media, and interested in all points of view. We welcome your letters, thoughts, and participation.

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Why Homestead Security?

W e put together this Homestead Security issue to explore answers to a single question: “Can Vermont feed itself?” To be sure, Vermonters know how to eat. As the days grow shorter and we stack our wood for the winter, we also honor the harvest. October is a month to celebrate the many edible gifts grown on our land—corn, pumpkins, tomatoes, squash, vegetables and meats of varied shapes, textures, tastes, and hues.

And, of course, Vermont’s mythology exudes food-related symbolism everywhere we turn, from the pine-carved statue of agriculture atop the State House’s 57-foot-tall dome, to artist Woody Jackson’s black-and-white bovines that peer out at us, so sweetly bucolic, from the chilled curves of Ben and Jerry’s cartons. For locals and Flatlanders interested in re-localizing their relationship with food, the state of Vermont is a consumer’s paradise. We are a state of small businesses and (though they’ve taken a huge beating for decades) small family farms. We take our food seriously in Vermont, and the rest of the world is more than happy to pay for the privilege of downing our maple syrup, apples, cheese, ice cream, milk, and the many other food-stuffs grown in Green Mountain soil.

But can Vermont feed itself? Go back three decades. After hitting Peak Oil in 1971, the United States found itself in the midst of an energy crisis, and two Vermont researchers set out to answer this question. James Nolfi and George Burrill created the Center for Studies in Food Self-Sufficiency at the Vermont Institute for Community Involvement (now Burlington College) to study energy, food, human, and environmental relationships. The Center initially focused on the use of energy in Vermont agricultural production and the feasibility of increasing local production to meet local needs. The research led to several landmark projects and a computer mapping technique for use in natural-resource and land-use planning. And their findings may still prove useful.

In one report entitled “Energy Utilization in Vermont Agriculture,” Nolfi and Burrill concluded that efficiency in Vermont’s four major agricultural sectors (dairy, eggs, maple syrup, and apples) proved low due to the relatively high place of these items on the food chain, as well as the high energy inputs required for each industry. And, no surprise, they also noted that Vermont farmers remained vulnerable to factors beyond their control, including rising energy costs and fossil-fuel-dependent products that were sometimes in short supply.

In another report entitled “Land, Bread, and History,” Nolfi and Burrill examined the changing historical patterns of Vermont agriculture, going back to the 19th century and running up to the 1970s. Feeding the entire state population could be done, they concluded, by using at least 490,000 of our 888,000 acres of arable land. This would be enough acreage to meet all diet needs (Of course, no New Zealand kiwis need apply) for the state’s population. “Land resources are present in adequate amounts,” they wrote, “to do much more than feed the present population of Vermont on a diet approximating the present one, except for tropical and sea foods.” Alas, no shrimp, lobster, or swordfish will ever be harvested in the Green Mountains, but Vermont-grown food, they stated, “could still be exported in goodly amounts.”

Nolfi and Burrill’s prescription for food self-sufficiency, not surprisingly, involved adopting a significant paradigm shift. “The concept of nutrition must also be redefined, with a view of the overall market structure and quality of life,” they wrote. “We must begin to consider more than the caloric or protein accounting which currently characterize our nutritional concerns.”

Can Vermont feed itself? The two researchers suggested a variety of changes to create a more self-

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sufficient Vermont food supply in four key agricultural areas: syrup, eggs, dairy, and apples. For sugaring, they called for more use of wood for evaporation in maple production and engineered preheaters, as well as integration of draft horses for skidding logs and pulping. For egg production, they suggested the use of manure and methane as either direct energy sources, or indirectly as fertilizer or feed supplement. Dairy efficiency could be improved, they noted, by increasing on-farm inputs like hay and pasture used as feed, combined with reducing herd size. Homestead poultry operations could become more viable, they suggested, by feeding household scraps to chickens and allowing them either full range or fenced yards for scratching. Apple production changes, they concluded, might include natural storage facilities and decreased use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

As the now thirty-year-old report explained, bringing Vermont food production into line with Vermonters’ consumption would require major changes in the control of land, food production, resource allocation, and the relationship of society with the rest of the natural world. What the Center outlined three decades ago, then, might best be called “relative self-sufficiency,” transitional steps that begin the process, and a solid methodology to guide the work that might be done.

And what about Vermont today? Can we revisit this data? Are there other studies that may be of use? Can we actually think about feeding ourselves?

From my personal vantage point, hope springs eternal. My wife Kate (who writes about “Eating in Place” in this issue) and I have invested hours of time building and maintaining our ever-expanding raised-bed gardens, full of everything from basil, garlic, and greens to tomatoes, squash and several beautiful varieties of bean (rattlesnake pole, true cranberry, Maine sunset, and black coco are but four legumes we grew this season).

And for all of us, as Erik Wilkins-McKee and Elizabeth Wood suggest in their essays in this issue, our neighbors can be our allies. Two years ago, Kate and I invested in a local community-supported agriculture (CSA) program to support (and be supported by) a long-time farming family whose cows occasionally wander along the fence that divides our two properties, mooing their greetings. And our local farmer’s market, which appears without fail in season every Saturday on Waitsfield’s town green, brings together families from all over the region selling beautiful flowers, vegetables, cheeses, breads, and meats to all comers.

Businesses are part of the “food sovereignty” solution, too. We drop in to George Schenck’s American Flatbread organic pizza restaurant down the road. We make our annual summer pilgrimage to Blair’s organic berry farm in Rochester, where we spend a few hours catching frogs in the mud bog that passes for a pond, and filling up our baskets with pounds of blueberries and raspberries. When we do manage to sneak out for a quiet dinner, we seek out the Vermont Fresh Network seal at restaurants around the state (see Lee Ann Cox and Kevin Foley’s essay), to help support this exciting collaboration between local farmers and eaters.

But individual efforts alone, as tasty as they are, are not enough. And many Americans (including me, once upon a time) don’t give much thought to the food we consume daily. We are busy and overextended trying to work, pay our bills, raise our families, and find some time in our days for rest and recreation. We are overwhelmed with too much information. And we are conditioned to accept certain ways of thinking about our relationship to food, our value systems shaped by family, tradition, habit, and a corporately-owned media culture supported by the advertising, marketing, and public relations power of giant multinational food-producing corporations. (Think about personal responsibility, the “Healthier, Leaner, Fitter, Greener” message, or Archer Daniels Midland’s underwriting of National Public Radio.) Vermonters who are paying attention understand these pressures. It is no accident that we became the first state to pass a GMO seed labeling law last year after a big fight with Monsanto (thanks to Rural Vermont’s work), or that the phrase “family farm” still resonates with just about everyone I know.

We have bigger challenges ahead. Even the energy industry now admits, in slick and glossy full-page PR campaign broadsheets targeting the nation’s high-brow magazines, that we’ve got, at most, three decades of recoverable oil left. And the Peak Oil dilemma is not just about paying more at the pump for our gas. It’s about recognizing that much of our food supply is enmeshed in a much larger system built on dwindling global energy resources. More than 90 percent of America’s food is grown with fossil-fuel based fertilizers and pesticides, and maintained and harvested by a few giant machines. The average piece of food travels more than 1,000 miles by internal combustion engine before it reaches our plates. When a hurricane not only flattens a city of 500,000 people, but knocks 20 percent of the nation’s domestic energy production system flat on its back, while wreaking havoc with a Mississippi River port responsible for 60 percent of the United States’ grain exports, then the time may be ripe for hard thinking about the future of food for us all.

Vermonters understand all of these dilemmas more than most. The bottom line: all of the decisions we make about food are deeply political ones, and there are many actions we can take—individually and collectively—to ensure a more sustainable and equitable food supply for our Green Mountain communities as we look to the many 21st-century challenges ahead.

While the White House talks of “Homeland Security,” then, we speak here of “Homestead Security.” While Beltway insiders wonder, out of real fear or feigned ignorance, “Can we protect ourselves from terrorists?” we ask: “Can Vermont feed itself?” The pioneering work done by Nolfi, Burrill, and others, as well as our own efforts to relocalize our food supply, offers us places upon which to stand.

—Rob Williams

Thanks to Greg Gurnar for sharing Nolfi and Burrill’s research.
Freedom, Self-Reliance, and Dependence on Our Neighbors

By Erik Wilkins-McKee

I am a flatlander and a newcomer to Vermont. When my wife and I decided to leave Michigan, we considered where we might live. After ruling out the urban areas near our parents, we narrowed in on Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. For a variety of reasons, Vermont was the obvious choice, and jobs soon followed to allow it. We have been here six years, and have come to appreciate the rural and small-town character of our adopted home.

In *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith argued that human freedom is not curtailed by dependence on others, as long as the scope of our dependence on single individuals is sufficiently narrow. In other words, the more widespread our allegiances and interactions, the greater the likelihood that our interdependence allows sufficient freedom and agency to all. The more we expand our trade networks, the more we embrace products from abroad, the less dependent we are on the rich man down the street. Smith was building on the arguments of David Hume, but he put more emphasis on the improved standard of living that comes with such interdependence than did Hume. It was a simple argument, but one that goes a long way toward understanding the global economy and modern American communities. It also might be a key to understanding how to build alternatives, and the challenges that Vermont would face as an independent republic.

By identifying our freedom with the pursuit of different activities, and, in material terms, by the great variety of objects we can own, we fail to perceive how economic changes affect the interdependence upon which our freedom, and our communities, are founded. We mistake having a large variety of choices among material objects for having meaningful life options, and in doing so we ignore the arenas in which we are becoming more dependent on specific individuals and corporations. Probably the most important example of this lies in the production of our food, although it is true of material goods generally.

It has been argued in these pages that peaceable secession will not mean great changes in our lives, but will send a powerful message to the rest of the United States, reminding “the people” of the principles upon which their country was founded. The latter part of this is certainly true, but if we as Vermonters aim to secede in order to preserve our culture and the distinctive character of our communities, then we must secede from more than just the federal political system. Instead, we must leave the temple, and abandon our worship before the great altar of economic efficiency.

The best way to begin this process is by making a concerted effort to turn toward the local, and that begins in our backyards and on our dinner tables. Vermont is possessed of a wealth of natural resources, and with care we can sustain our production of lumber, maple syrup, meat, vegetable crops, and dairy products, including our growing specialty cheese market. But beyond relying on our farmers and agricultural producers, we must incorporate food production and the production of material goods into our everyday lives, even for those of us whose primary occupations lie elsewhere.

There are practical considerations to take account of if such an ethos is to grow and thrive. Without federal oversight and intervention, we might want to develop our own standards for food safety and purity. But much more important, we would all have to learn to do some things for ourselves. Every marine is a rifleman, they say. Every Vermonter should be a gardener, a woodworker, a husbandman of small animals, a cook. We might start this by incorporating food production into the curriculum of our schools, perhaps changing the school year’s calendar to enable students to help cultivate the food they eat in the cafeteria. Further still, our tables should reflect the seasons, with changing diets across the year.

In *Against the Grain*, Richard Manning illustrates how modern agribusiness and federal farm policy has worked to destroy local diversity in food production. If we Vermonters want to cultivate independence, we should make more deliberate choices about how and what we eat, shifting our diets over the course of each year to rely more on the local bounty of the different seasons. We could work to rediscover the lost food sources that we now ignore, but that served to feed this region’s Native Americans before the arrival of colonists.

Beyond but still including food, we should be naturally hesitant to participate in economies that extend beyond our neighbors, our towns, our republic, in order to procure the material of our lives. Growing your own blueberries is vastly better than buying organic blueberries shipped from New Jersey, as it reduces energy dependence and simply taps into the food source readily available here. Given the choice, then, we should cultivate in Vermont all the food and build all the goods that we can, and look outward for those things that we feel we must we but cannot produce here. My morning coffee will not come from beans grown out back, nor can I do without it; but my mint or chamomile tea can come from flowers and herbs along the house, instead of the Celestial Seasonings plant in Boulder, Colorado. The same is true of my furniture; if I cannot build a table, I can help sustain a healthy community of interdependent individuals by purchasing one from the craftsman down the road, rather than driving to Boston to go to IKEA.

Smith lived in a world of seemingly endless resources, where the European powers settled colonies and expanded markets. We live in a world where local communities are still colonized and run from afar, but by government and large corporations, promising jobs in exchange for our resources (until they run out), offering cheaper goods (until our neighbors are driven out of business), feeding us processed food products that cost less than the vegetables at the local farmer’s market (until our health deteriorates). For the classical economists, these were not yet problems (unless you were a colonized native), since they believed that trading with a wide and far-flung group of producers would increase the variety and availability of goods. In this, they were indeed correct. These same theorists argued that increased freedom would follow, but in this they have been proved incorrect. As Wendell Berry has rightly noted, the people of rural communities (and this could apply to small states such as Vermont as well) are the “new Indians.”

And that is the crux issue in any attempt to envision a future for an independent Vermont. Being careful to choose what we cannot live without, and being deliberate about where we get what we need, is the clearest way to move toward independence for ourselves as individuals, as communities, and as a united political entity. The more we come to see that what we need the most is right around us, the faster we will understand that paying a little more to our neighbor for milk is the essence of a free community, where we are all interdependent and free, without being inordinately dependent on anyone.
Community Supported Agriculture

By Elizabeth Wood

In a globalized food system where even the supermarket food labeled organic may come from halfway around the globe, some people are rediscovering the value of eating local food. One way of connecting with local farms is the system I use at my farm called Community Supported Agriculture (CSA).

The CSA concept, which arrived in the U.S. from Europe and Japan in the 1980s, has caught on fast here. Already, there are more than 1,200 CSA farms in the U.S., according to Sharing the Harvest, a book about CSAs by Elizabeth Henderson and Robyn Van En. There are dozens of CSAs in Vermont.

Community Supported Agriculture is a system of farming in which families and individuals become farm members by providing an annual financial contribution to cover the production costs of the farm. In return, they receive a weekly selection of produce from the farm. Members share the risks of lower crop yields due to factors such as bad weather and reap the rewards of bumper crops when all goes well.

Members of CSAs join for the growing season before the year’s first crops are harvested. Then they come to a pick-up place—often at the farm—once a week to collect a share of the crops that are in season, picked that day. Some CSA farms allow members to pick extra flowers, berries, herbs, or vegetables on their own.

“My favorite thing about being a community farmer is that it allows me to concentrate on growing the best possible food and not worry about where the money is going to come from,” said Anthony Graham of the Temple-Wilton farm in New Hampshire, which was the first CSA in the nation when it opened in 1986. “I visit other farmers who grow for supermarkets and I can tell that when they look at their rows of vegetables, they’re not seeing food, they are seeing money. In the past four or five years, interest in our farm has just exploded. We now have a waiting list of over 75 families. If it keeps going like this, soon we will have more people on the waiting list than we have members.”

People may choose to join a CSA for the same reasons they would shop at a local hardware store instead of at Home Depot. Buying locally keeps money in the community. Farms keep Vermont’s landscape looking beautiful. And eating locally is better for the environment.

However, those who join for idealistic reasons soon discover another reward: high-quality fresh food. The difference in flavor between bitter old brussels sprouts that have been in refrigeration for weeks and fresh ones harvested just after the first frost is amazing. Likewise, supermarket carrots and tomatoes can’t compare to those fresh out of the field.

CSAs reintroduce people to the idea of eating what’s in season in their region. At my CSA farm in southeastern Vermont, we harvest from the last week of May through the first week of November. Though I use some season-extension techniques, I obviously can’t have tomatoes, peppers and cucumbers all the time. Many CSA members say they enjoy breaking out of cooking routines I provide recipes and cooking advice, especially for veggies that may be unfamiliar to members.

CSA members should observe, and ask about, the growing practices and labor conditions at their farm. Most CSA farmers grow all or most of their members’ food. But some CSAs function more like buying clubs, purchasing much of the members’ share from other farms. It’s a good idea to ask questions to make sure you really know where the food is coming from. As a farmer, I appreciate it when people ask questions about how their food is produced. It lets me know that they care about issues that are also very important to me.

I’ve also found that people join and keep coming back to the CSA for the chance to visit the farm. There is a desire to connect with the earth through agriculture that nearly everyone shares. People want to see the farm and meet the farmer, not only to make sure that farm practices are in keeping with their values (organic, pasture-raised farm animals, etc.) but also to experience a little bit of the process of bringing food out of the earth. Parents want to show the farm to their children. Children are fascinated by seeing the chickens eat or the goats get milked or even a butterfly on a flowering plant.

Many CSAs offer social events for their members like on-farm potluck meals or voluntary work days. Most offer monthly newsletters with farm news and recipes for cooking the dozens of varieties of vegetables available. A few deliver food to their members’ homes. Many offer discounts for low-income families.

For farmers, the benefits of CSA include getting to know the people who will eat the food they work so hard to grow, and being able to spend the warm months in their fields farming, not driving a delivery truck first thing in the morning marketing and trying to collect overdue bills from stores and restaurants. Farmers also appreciate not having to store, package, and ship their crops. CSA farmers can pass all these savings on to their members.

CSA farmers have all their marketing done by the time the first harvest is ready. And CSAs let farmers earn $1 for every $1 of their food consumers buy. The average American farmer, by contrast, gets less than 20 cents for every $1 of their food sold to consumers.

Buying direct is also good for the planet because it reduces the amount of fossil fuels burned to transport food from the field to your dinner table. It’s often said that the average American meal has traveled 1,300 miles by the time it’s eaten. Studies show that vegetables lose nutritional value every hour after they are harvested.

As organic farming has become a multibillion dollar industry, large corporations that employ questionable practices have begun to produce the organic food found in many grocery stores. They often use tons of plastic sheeting to cover their fields and prevent weeds, and employ Mexican immigrants in conditions that labor unions call exploitative.

As the federal government has taken over the organic certification process, some small-scale farmers question whether the small number of inspectors can really guarantee that farms the consumer will never see aren’t using banned farm chemicals or other nonorganic practices. Independent studies have found pesticide residue on supposedly organic food in U.S. supermarkets.

Seven decades ago all farms were “organic” because there were no man-made farm chemicals. With the end of World War II, military contractors went looking for a new market for their new poisonous chemicals. They found that market in American farmers. It wasn’t until the 1970s, with the birth of the modern environmental movement, that the term “organic farming” became popular.

And Vermont may be the birthplace of the modern organic farming movement. If the then-Putney-based Northeast Organic Farming Association wasn’t the first organization for organic farmers when it opened in 1971, it was close to it. Vermont farmers have been pioneers in the organic movement. Hopefully we can redirect that movement in a way that ensures a connection with local communities. Community Supported Agriculture is one way to make that connection. •
Fresh Voices from the Vermont Fresh Network

By Lee Ann Cox and Kevin Foley

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omething is seriously wrong with a country that has more people in jail than farming the land. And in light of the resulting calamitous slow-motion corrosion of civil life and open landscape in the United States, anything that helps keep small-scale farmers in business and land open and productive starts to look downright revolutionary.

As the U.S.’s first organization to foster direct marketing between farmers and chefs on a local level, the ten-year-old Vermont Fresh Network is literally and figuratively revolutionary. The group’s 300-plus members are a mélange of farmers, food producers, and chefs; they produce everything from venison to rabbits to radicchio; they cook at earthy diners and tony inns. The group’s defining insight is that going local can create niches in a corporate, consolidated international food market that flattens both prices and diversity.

As such, the network is about sustaining Vermont landscapes and livelihoods. It’s about alternatives to Frankensteinerian chicken “fingers” conveyed by Sysco eighteen-wheelers to neon outposts of out-of-state chains. It’s about building relationships and learning techniques that boost prices and just might help make the sad spectacle of dirt-road dairy farm auctions a little less common through fairer prices and local markets.

Most of all, the network is about helping people eat something tastier than the pallid, mealy, flavorless flesh of a February tomato. The network charges a small annual fee for membership to support its outreach and education efforts, but the crucial requirement is that farmers partner with at least one restaurant, each eatery, in turn, build relationships with three farmers. The result is middleperson-free pricing, great flexibility, and better, fresher food. The network, through its forums, publications, and little green signs, also reaches out and educates the public about the environmental and social resonance of paying a higher price to eat local.

The VFN, of course, is no panacea. While Vermont has far more farmers than prisoners, only a little more than 2 percent of the state’s employed people worked on farms in 2002, down from 5.5 percent in 1981.

But the network is a hopeful, thriving movement, growing here and being adopted elsewhere, helping preserve and extend the state’s capacity to eat itself, and feed itself well. We talked with members and friends of VFN to get their firsthand thoughts on the farming life, buying local, and the challenge of wresting a living from Vermont land.

Listen to their voices, then look for those green signs.

Meghan Sheradin, Vermont Fresh Network

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er life choices may be mystifying to her dad, who couldn’t wait to get off the farm, but Sheradin’s embrace of the agricultural life has led her to a place of power—power to affect what we eat. After growing up in rural upstate New York, she got her bachelor’s degree from Cornell in animal science and has held a number of agriculture- and community-advocacy–related jobs. She’s worked with dairy farmers, with beef farmers in Wyoming, sold produce at the New York City Greenmarket, and lobbied for remediation of Superfund sites. Her challenge today is getting out the message that we have a choice about what we eat—and that this choice truly matters. Sheradin, VFN’s new executive director, explains:

“When my father was growing up, all the food came from near his place and he couldn’t wait to not know where his food was coming from. It skips a generation. Now we’re interested in finding out where our food is from. There’s value to that so it comes back around. It’s an old idea that’s sort of new again.”

“Getting local foods available to everybody is a problem. Price is a factor. We are asking the world to make an enormous change. We have so been accustomed to cheap food and now it’s going to be even more difficult with the cost of gas going up. Everybody makes such different choices. We just want them to know that the choice is there and that there are absolute benefits to buying locally. If they start with just cheese from Vermont when their family comes over, any little step is a big step, and so with talking to the consumers, it’s sharing the stories, it’s trying to connect with some piece of them that finds that value and pulls them in.

“We’re getting more and more family restauranteurs as members of this organization because they’ve been connected to their communities for their entire existence. They’re a family restaurant and lo and behold, they’ve been buying local milk from the local family—I’m thinking of Thomas’s Dairy and Monument Farms. So many of our people buy that milk and those are produced by two farms. Once you start to think about it, you realize that there are pieces of who you are that have been connected to your food system your entire life, and it starts to roll down that hill and you start to think about what you buy that’s local and pretty soon it’s just a part of going to the grocery store.

“I don’t know that we have to be totally self-sufficient. We need to grow what we can and still be developing this idea that it is a global marketplace. The goal is to feed ourselves, not isolate ourselves. We are a part of this world that we live in and we should be balancing our land use with our food needs and yet recognize that that’s still not going to service everybody in the state. Could we raise more? Yes. Would it be good for our economy? Yes. But it doesn’t have to be all or nothing. Think about our coffee. We’re going to import it, but we have lots of coffee roasters who are thoughtful about where the coffee comes from.

“If local food is going to be sustainable, we all need to pay a little bit more for it. We have for years not been paying the true cost of our food production and we just have to pay a little bit more and take some more responsibility. Know where your food comes from; be a little more thoughtful about your food purchases. Once you know what goes on at an enormous chicken farm you will never want to buy your chicken from one. You could never feel good about that. And that’s a lot for people; that’s way more information than most people want, but I think knowledge makes a difference.”

Amy Huyffer, Strafford Organic Creamery

The milk homogenizer is broken and its replacement parts come from Israel, the metal bowls necessary for the bow being ground into sausage are AWOL, and the supply of glass milk bottles is dangerously low. It’s a reasonably typical afternoon on the 600-acre Strafford farm, and Amy Huyffer, who runs it with her husband Earl and their family, doesn’t want to be anywhere else.

The all-organic operation bottles five kinds of milk, makes butter and ice cream, and sells wholesale to food co-ops, restaurants, and small grocery stores around the state. Every day is hectic: haying, repairing, milking, skimming, tending cows, hogs, chickens, and three small boys. Endless work, but also, Huyffer says, endless rewards, including an autonomous living. “Work is work. You do what is in front of you,” she says. “I feel very lucky that my only boss is necessity.” Here are more of her thoughts on Vermont food and farming:

“I’m excited about this new energy going on right now, the focus on going local. I was making salsa the other day, and I was going to add some cumin, and I found myself not wanting to. I thought about it, and I realized that I didn’t want to put in anything that I didn’t grow. I left the cumin out, and it was much better salsa.

“It drives me crazy that Lebanon co-op has milk and yogurt from California and Oregon. I don’t know who asked for it, and it disgusts me every time I see it. It’s perfectly fine yogurt, and it would be great—if we didn’t have Butterworks and Stonyfield.

“I pretty much feed myself from the farm, but I also kind of like buying peaches. Salt and pepper have a strong place in my life and I would have a hard time giving them up. Could Vermont feed itself? It’s an interesting idea. In terms of staples and things, if people were to think about what they could get locally, that would be great.

“There are very few Vermonters who couldn’t buy many of their essentials from around here and not necessarily spend a lot of money. Any Vermont can find a farm to buy half a cow from. In terms of turning people on to that idea, I don’t know. Food habits are like toothbrushes, everyone has their own. I know a lot of people who have fervor about this stuff—wouldn’t it be great if only everyone spent $5 more a week on local stuff? Sure it would. But guilt is not where I’m coming from. Nostalgia is a huge thing in cooking. I know organic dairy farmers who have Velveeta in their refrigerator. I don’t know that I want to change anybody from a ‘should’ point of view.

‘Food is personal; it’s about wanting. That’s the thing about ‘Buy Local’ advertising that bugs me.
It’s a great campaign, but from my point of view, ‘Try Local’ should be the message. I don’t want sympathy; I want you to buy our milk because it’s better.

“The Vermont Fresh Network, in terms of its core mission, is hitting it all. The tasting parties they throw, the forums, the farmer’s dinners, the directories. Those are great, they do exactly what they’re supposed to do, connect farmers to chefs, chefs to consumers. I walk around the VFN forum and it’s great how many people come up to me. Giving that rock-star stage to farmers and to chefs is huge. We all work so hard, and those biscuits help.

“I’d love to see more input from farmers into the direction of the VFN. You live and think differently when you are at the base of the food chain. I’d love to see something happen with mentoring, having farmers support each other. It’s been so valuable for us to hook up with people who are trying to do similar things and have similar problems.”

David Hugo, Starry Night Café

Of the many life-lessons a kid who grows up working on a farm absorbs, the single most important for this chef and North Ferrisburg restaurant owner is pretty simple: he knows what a green bean or a berry is supposed to taste like. He knows that fresh and ripe are qualities perhaps best discerned with eyes closed. And that makes all the difference in his cooking. Hugo, who has worked in kitchens from San Francisco to Paris, is committed to buying as much as he can from local farms. Without the economy of scale he knew in California, where farmers would deliver directly to his door, it takes an effort. And he’s not ready to give up lemons or salt or old-vine zinfandel. But in finding the balance, Hugo leans heavily toward the farmer down the road:

“I think it’s a community and you have to support the local person. I’m helping out my neighbor, I’m helping myself out and I’m helping my customers out because a vegetable is going to be much better if you’re using the stuff that was just picked yesterday or this morning. I think that’s a commitment you have to follow through on. Is it easier to just pick up the phone and order from a big distributor? Yeah. But is it better for the customer? And really, who are you doing it for?

“I define local within this area, a twenty-mile radius. That’s not always feasible with cheeses and things like that, but I found when I lived in Chittenden County I would deal more with the farmers there. Now that I’m in Addison County, I find myself working with the farmers in Addison.

“Cooking seasonally is quite simple. This time of year, the fall raspberries are coming around and so are apples. If I gave you a choice between having a strawberry or a nice fall raspberry or apple dessert, which one would you choose? If I use raspberries, I’m going to have to make them taste good. I’m going to have to put seasonings in; I’m going to have to add sugar; I’m going to have to bump up the acid and put some kind of spice in it to bring out the flavors a little bit more and mask some of the unripe flavor. Whereas with apples, I’m working with that flavor because the flavor is there and it’s perfect and I’m building around that flavor instead of masking it.

“I would say for vegetables 90 percent of what we use is local. The potatoes, the onions, the peppers, the tomatoes, zucchini, eggplant. Right now is an amazing time of year. If you’re not doing it now, you’re not going to do it. In the winter it’s a lot of winter squash, dried fruits, stuff like that. You still can get it; it’s in the cellar. By the end of February, beginning of March, I think a lot of people are looking for a lighter fare and so am I. I know it’s not local, but I look at the practices of how it was prepared, how was it grown, is it organic, how did it get here and try to go from there. I wish you could do it year round, but unfortunately you can’t.

“I would love to cook with even more local foods. I think that’s what the VFN and all these people are trying to do. It’s great because you have to be more creative than just your run-of-the-mill get-it-in-frozen and throw-it-in-a-Frialator. That’s the whole reason why I cook; I can get more creative with it. For me, that’s the fun part of cooking. I would love to see that.”

Tod Murphy, The Farmer’s Diner

The New York Times Magazine called Tod Murphy a “short-order revolutionary” and marveled at his entrepreneurial energy, calling him a “seamless mix of organic farmer and high-octane businessman.”

The founder of The Farmer’s Diner in Barre wants his restaurant to buy its ingredients from producers within a 70-mile radius. That isn’t easy, given competition from chains, the difficulty of finding diverse suppliers, and the need in some cases to create local agricultural infrastructure like slaughterhouses. Murphy went in with his eyes open. Much of the impetus for the diner and its affiliated pod of farms and infrastructure was his previous experience trying to sell pasture-raised organic veal. “So much has become vertically integrated and centralized far away that local producers are excluded from the market by the lack of scale-appropriate infrastructure,” he says. So progress has been bumpy, but the restaurant now spends 65 cents of all its food dollars locally, and Murphy is shooting to hit 80 cents and beyond.

“The diner took a hiatus this August, but Murphy vows he’ll be back. He expects to reopen in October, ideally with another restaurant in Burlington or Lebanon that will share suppliers and equipment and provide more economies of scale, not to mention another place to enjoy a Vermont organic milkshake with a juicy hamburger of local beef. Here’s Tod:

“Look, this really is a goofy-sounding, idealistic thing to say, but it is true: Democracy—the opportunity for people to be fully realized, to manifest in this world the purpose, the love, the compassion, the transformation that humans feel is possible—is dependent upon having the majority or almost majority of people as independent land owners taking the bulk of the necessities of life from their place on earth.

“The huge breakdowns, the inequalities, the destructive tendencies that abound today are a result of having 98.4 percent of the U.S. population disconnected from the land and from the immediacy of physical life tied to the land.

“I often say I was born a farmer, it just took me 32 years to get here. My affections, my sympathies, my desires stem from the foundation of good, enduring farming. Farmer’s Diner and my own farm are simply manifestations of my purpose in life. But it is very difficult. Restaurants are hard; farming is hard. Putting them together doesn’t magically become easy.

“One positive is that the level of discourse about local food is high in Vermont. As a result, many more customers understand the value of buying local. But while our talk is high, the doers are low.

“Could Vermont one day feed itself? Vermont citizens/farmers could produce about 70–85 percent of the calories we consume as a state. To get from where we are today to that would take about six years and a substantial financial investment. The issue would be the people. Right now there are roughly 6,500 farms here. We would need about 60,000 to 100,000 farms and processors of various sizes to meet the needs of 650,000 residents. This combined with becoming energy-independent are the two most worthy objectives of government and citizens.

“What local means to me is within the watershed, or as close as we can possibly find the stuff. Eventually I think the standard for local would be a reasonable horse and buggy ride.”
My kids eat dirt. Occasionally they do this directly: hands hunt for worms in the dirt, hands feed crackers to mouth, hands don’t stop at the sink in between. More frequently, their dirt consumption is in the form of our garden peas, bush beans, greens (yes, my kids like kale), tomatoes, and, come winter, the dry beans that we shelled on our mudroom floor one grey autumn afternoon and the pesto that they helped concoct in the blender. Recently, we bought a split half of dirt—I mean beef—from a friend across the Green Mountains that form our back yard.

It’s powerful dirt, local dirt, that my kids are eating. Tended for our collective consumption, it is an active player in the shaping of bones, muscles, skin, and temperaments. I love this. I feel a growing sense that my husband and I are sowing invaluable seeds of placelessness. We are cultivating children whose very cells are constructed of the radical elements of localness, stewardship, and community, elements that we believe are critical to creating a viable future for subsequent generations.

How does this play out in real terms? Let me reconstruct a recent and fairly common shopping experience for our family. On a summer Saturday, we head for the farmer’s market. We’ve glanced in the garden to see what’s coming ripe, and in the fridge to see what we have left from the veggies we picked up mid-week at the CSA here in our valley. We set out to fill what gaps we can at the farmer’s market, and then to head to our local grocery stores to get the rest. We chat with friends and eye the produce at various stands. We buy from our local valley vendors, but are often also drawn to the interesting or early produce of the out-of-valley stands. We always leave with more than we came for, and we’re always glad for these pleasant Vermont surprises.

Then we head to our local grocery store to cover the remaining gaps. We head home with primarily organic, largely local items purchased at Vermont-owned independent stores—but (gap) we are imperfect. The challenge when we hit the stores is that our kids like candy. At least for our little sweet teeths, brown maple candy produced in Vermont doesn’t hold a candle to brightly colored Nerds and seasonally hued Skittles. So, it is sometimes with skillfully bargained M&M Mars products gripped in sticky fingers that our children wander the aisles with us to find the local and organic items on our list.

Vermont has a long tradition of self-sufficiency, and I would say our family’s current efforts to shorten the distance between food source and table fits squarely in this tradition. With a twist. While self-sufficiency is certainly at the core, I would describe what my husband and I are doing on our small fold of earth in our river valley of small towns as cultivating community. By growing more and more of our own food, we are not only building our sufficiency, we are binding ourselves to place. By binding ourselves to place, we increase our commitment to filling the gaps in our sufficiency through local markets and producers, and in so doing we are doing our best to build the capacity of our community to sustain itself.

Many Vermonters are far more advanced along this path than are we. My husband and I have learned so much from friends and neighbors who have shared garden techniques with us, have told us where to buy organic chicken feed, have opened their greenhouses to us, have fed us. We have so much more to learn. And this is the edge where it gets really interesting and potent, where food—eating dirt—becomes a vehicle for cultural, political, and social transformation. There’s always more to learn, and it is from our neighbors that we learn to cultivate communities that have staying power in a future where energy resources, food security, and human infrastructure face significant challenges. As we bind ourselves through food more closely to the earth, we create new ways to bind ourselves together as partners building communities that have the local wisdom, understanding, and skill to thrive.

It’s important to note that all of this cultivation is hard work. Just as an invasion of cutworms can devastate an entire bed of seedlings, or an unusually cold summer can limit the tomato harvest we were counting on, so too can the vagaries of human temperament and communication challenge community collaborations. The anonymity of purchasing food and supplies at a box store can seem astonishingly simple and cheap by comparison. But if we change our thinking about the return on investment for each local transaction—in our own garden, paid by sweat; at the local farm stand, cash to our neighbor; at town meeting, investment in the social capital within our community—then the cheapness of the “conventional” transaction becomes, well, cheap, and the degradations of community connections all too apparent.

We happen to have chosen the dead end of a dirt road in a rural valley of 6,000 lively souls as the place to cultivate community. The dirt tastes pretty good to us here. But dirt can be made to taste good anywhere. Lawn is the fourth largest crop in the United States, behind corn, wheat, and soybeans. There’s ample room in suburbia to cultivate backyard gardens, and there’s certainly room to build stronger ties with neighbors. “Can I borrow your rake?” and “How do you get such early tomatoes?” could well be the questions that turn the tide on suburban isolation. Not all suburban dwellers are going to want to do this work, but they can, and I think that’s important. Even in urban settings, community gardens have proven to be powerful well beyond their minimal acreage. The potential for cultivating community exists everywhere, and my best hope is that more and more small groups in all kinds of places can enact the local power of eating in place.

As I write this, it is the golden harvest of late summer. I lie in bed at night and visualize the way in which the garden earth outside my window is transformed into the growing bodies of my children down the hall. As a family, we are eating in place, eating of place, and becoming place. The activist in me is renewed by the power of these daily domestic choices and actions. The spiritualist in me believes that the food of grace our family shares before each meal makes sacred this work we are trying to do, and that this matters. The imperfect human in me worries about how much more we have to learn and how paltry are our efforts compared to those of some. The poet in me is made breathless by connected images of stalk and bone, rind and skin, juice and blood, as I hear my son turn in his sleep while the night wind rustles through the pole beans.
Eating Locally Year-Round

By Pete Johnson

Imagine a Vermont where every village feeds itself. The local dairy farms produce milk, cheese, yogurt, and butter and none of it travels more than a few miles before it is eaten. A wide variety of meat animals graze hillsides, lawns, and lands too poor for cultivation, turning fields that are mowed or bush hogged into an important resource that produces quality protein. Instead of supplementing the animals’ foraging diet with grain imported from the Midwest, we grow our own grains and other nutritious and easy-to-store crops such as turnips and beets to feed them through the winter. Some grain is sent to the local mill to be ground and baked by the village baker.

Imagine 95 percent of a village’s food produced locally, with only a few items such as citrus and olive oil imported, compared to the current reality where special culinary treats are produced locally and the bulk of daily consumption comes from elsewhere. This may not just be a bucolic dream of a few rural idealists but a possibility that we need to prepare for—whether we want to or not.

The vast majority of the food eaten in this state is trucked in from far away. We have come to accept this as the norm, and forget that the system of immense agriculture and transportation that allows this is only a few decades old and is considered by many to be unsustainable. If it is not sustainable it will end someday. We live in uncertain times. Climate change, terrorism, and especially the end of cheap oil threaten to disrupt or end the systems that deliver our food. If the flow of food-filled tractor trailers ever stops, how long before Vermont’s starve?

I own Pete’s Greens, a four-season vegetable farm located in Craftsbury, Vermont. At my farm we have long had an emphasis on season extension, attempting to grow and market as many crops as possible for as long a season as possible in our challenging Zone 3 climate. We have great success producing baby greens and other leafy vegetables in our minimally heated greenhouses from early March through December, but that leaves two and a half months of reliance on imported vegetables. Recently we have begun growing a wide assortment of crops outdoors, storing them in our root cellar, and selling them all winter and even into the next spring and summer. Using the simple and inexpensive technology of the root cellar, it is possible to provide many crops 365 days a year.

A quick scan through a seed catalog generates this by-no-means-complete list of crops that can be stored in a root cellar or other similar storage facility for two to twelve months: dried beans, four colors of beets, broccoli, cabbage, brussels sprouts, Chinese cabbage, five colors of carrots, three colors of cauliflower and Romanescas cauliflower, celeriac, Belgian endive, radicchio, bulb fennel, garlic, kohlrabi, leeks, onions, parsnips, an array of colors and types of potatoes, pumpkins, storage radishes, daikon radish, scorzonera, salsify, shallots, rutabaga, winter squash, turnips, and Jerusalem artichokes. Add in a few good freezing crops like spinach, berries, melon, and whole tomatoes and it is possible to feast on local produce throughout the Vermont winter.

In order to feed ourselves in this way we need a lot more winter vegetable farms and the facilities to store the produce. And we need to educate consumers about the joys of eating the vegetables listed above, none of which top the list of sexiest vegetables. While celeriac and brussels sprouts may not have the mass appeal of strawberries, they are great winter food and much better fuel for the body and soul in February than tasteless and nutritionally weak imported strawberries. We grow a baby white salad turnip that is great eating both raw and cooked. When we began growing it several years ago nobody would buy it because of the name turnip. Now it is one of our most popular offerings and the single most missed item when we don’t have it at farmer’s markets.

In some cases we already have the facilities and farms but are not taking advantage of them. For example, last December my local co-op had three types of New Zealand apples but no Vermont apples. (Is there anything more spectacularly wasteful than shipping a fruit that is mostly water halfway around the world?) But then in the middle of June the same co-op had very good Vermont Paula Reds. All you hear about the Vermont apple industry is doom and gloom, and yet we could and should be eating Vermont apples for ten or even twelve months of the year.

So what will it take to get there? Obviously the most effective incentive for local food is market forces that make it comparable in cost to imported food. While this is likely to happen over the next years and decades, I believe that we need to start building the infrastructure to feed our state now.

We need meat-processing facilities, small dairy plants, freezers, root cellars, smokehouses, commercial kitchens, and many more farms that diversify into every possible niche. We need to remove restrictions that make it difficult for small meat and milk producers to sell to their neighbors (for example, it is illegal to raise free-range chickens, slaughter them on the farm, and sell them at a farmer’s market), and we need to push both our state and federal governments to spend money that encourages local food consumption. The Vermont “Buy Local” campaign is a good example of this, but its budget was cut this year.

The federal government’s response to hurricane Katrina indicates that we may not be able to depend on it if there is an event that stops the flow of food to Vermont, and in many cases it has laws and subsidies that favor corporate food over local food. We need to organize as communities and perhaps openly defy some of the laws that make it hard to sell locally. Vermont has the land, skills, and independent spirit to build a local food system that will make our citizens healthier, happier, and more secure.

The Twenty-Fifth Annual E. F. Schumacher Lectures

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Eating Locally Year-Round

By Pete Johnson
Near the end of the 2004–2005 school year, some students, faculty, and staff at Champlain College started discussing whether it would be possible to convince Sodexo, the company that runs dining services at the college, to add organic and local foods to its daily menus. This would be a shift away from the standard frozen and processed ingredients that are prevalent in large food service providers’ offerings.

Most folks are aware that “organic” is big business in the United States. More and more people are turning to organic and natural foods as evidence piles up that eating processed and packaged foods grown with industrial pesticides, not to mention genetically modified and genetically engineered foods, might not be good for you. (As if we needed science to tell us that the orange cheeze stuff on our 7-Eleven nachos isn’t so healthy, or we ought not to eat chemicals that kill bugs, not to mention how all that plastic our Ding Dongs are wrapped in isn’t good for the environment.) Organic food, though it comprises just a little over 1 percent of all food sales in the U.S., is a $33 billion industry, according to the USDA.

In short, Americans are waking up to the fact, after three generations of Betty Crocker, Nabisco and Kraft unwholesomeness, that good food is good for you—and bad food isn’t, even though it tastes good. And members of the Champlain College community are no different. Since so many of us chose to move to or stay in Vermont, where healthy living and local products are premiums, it’s even more likely that Champlain College would be a place ripe for the return to natural and organically grown foodstuffs.

Getting Local

As a board member of the Hinesburg Land Trust, which is facing huge projects in the near future to try to preserve open space for “traditional use”—farming, sugaring, cross-country skiing, hiking, hunting, equestrian—I participate in one of countless community-based organizations that are thinking about these issues, even as many farmers simply give up, believing the assumption that “farming is dead” in Chittenden County, and the only way to make a living on the land is to sell it off for housing lots, clustered neighborhoods, and shopping centers. This fatalism about farming (and development, for that matter) is often corroborated by politicians, like Vermont Agriculture Secretary Steve Kerr, who tells farmers they have to be big to be profitable. But our elected officials, and the corporations that influence them (by a count of 9-to-1 vs. nonprofit lobbyists), forget that there’s more to farming than milking cows.

Preserving the land is just the first step. The long-term goal is to build community nonprofits/for-profits that can own the land or sell it to new owner-farmers who: sell their future development rights to protect the land in perpetuity; farm the land (or pay for it to be farmed), ideally with a wide range of crops for a well-rounded and rotational produce and meat selection; sell the products, with the intent to distribute primarily to local shops, restaurants, and institutional dining services; and build peripheral businesses around the stuff.

For instance, we could grow an array of green vegetables, fruit, corn, alfalfa (to feed our herd), beef, chicken, turkey, barley, and grapes in Hinesburg on our 300-acre farm—a small farm by today’s corporate farming standards, but larger than the LaPlatte Angus Farm or the Misty Knoll chicken farm, both of which provide high-quality natural meats to numerous restaurants and specialty supermarkets in northern Vermont. We could then set up spinoff short-for-profit or cooperative companies to distribute or sell these products to businesses and consumers. They could be anything from a farm stand to wholesale distributors to local food markets and restaurants, to a winery (Hinesburg was once famous in Vermont for the “Hiney Winery,” local legend has it), a brewery, or a pub/restaurant. In other words, the entire food chain could be local. Certainly, some of this food could make its way to Champlain College’s dining hall. In fact, it would take some advance commitment by a responsible, forward-looking institution like Champlain College to make the concept work.

Proven Concept

“Chevrier’s nuts,” you say? I’m a pipe-dreamer, an idealist, a radical. Maybe so. If not here in our great state, then where could we build a sustainable economy (not to mention a local food source for northern Vermont communities that could survive a major fuel shortage, or other cataclysmic event that could debilitate shipping foods across the nation) that puts an end to our tenuous reliance on California, the Midwest and Latin America for our meat and produce? Besides, great restaurants in the area like Smokejack’s, American Flatbread, the Black Sheep Bistro (in Vergennes), the Bobcat Café (in Bristol), Starry Night (in Charlotte), and numerous other Vermont eateries are already profiting from the premise that the best foods are natural, and organic and local when possible. More organic, cooperative farms would only improve the supply to these businesses to help them service and feed the demand for good food.

University of Maryland political economy professor Gar Alperovitz, in his book America Beyond Capitalism, calls the concept of community and cooperative-based ownership community development corporations (CDCs), and cites the Burlington Community Land Trust (the founder of the Interval network of farms and farm-based businesses) as one of the pioneers of the concept. He cites other successes in rural areas like Wisconsin, Michigan, Kentucky, and South Carolina, as well as in urban areas like Los Angeles, San Antonio, Portland, Oregon, and Memphis. According to Alperovitz, CDCs number as many as 6,000 in the U.S., an increase from “a mere handful” three decades ago. And it doesn’t have to be food-based. Some successful CDCs work in textiles, electricity, biomass fuels, and other sustainable, locally produced goods and services.

Fringe benefits of CDCs, besides the provision of local, sustainable business, include cooperative residential homeownership, resulting in much lower housing costs (30 percent or less of total income per family) for residents and farmers than skyrocketing retail Vermont real estate prices would allow; far less pollution than corporate counterparts; jobs for local workers; and overall increased appeal of smaller communities, which struggle to keep young people close to home.

Just think of the possibilities. Fruit tainted with less carcinogenic pesticides. Meat and dairy products without worry of the harm of bovine growth hormone, or meat products from animals that weren’t forced to eat animal feces for sustenance. Vegetables that haven’t been genetically modified. Food that doesn’t come wrapped in plastic that will be on earth forever.

And think how cool it would be to be a student in—or a customer of—the Champlain College Hotel and Restaurant Management Program. For the years we spend at Champlain, we’d know we were eating to live well.
McKibben, continued from page 1

summer day there this year, and as always it was a revelation. On a couple of hundred acres on the wrong side of the tracks near what used to be a dump, a dozen farmers and perhaps fifty farmhands have created a kind of Eden. “This place produces 500,000 pounds of food on about 110 acres,” says Kit Perkins, head of the foundation that oversees the operation. Depending on how you count, that might be 6 or 7 percent of the city’s fresh food. That’s not a pilot project or a test kitchen; that’s real production. The Intervale Community Farm may be the largest community-supported agriculture farm in northern New England; the composting operation which helps underwrite the whole project is the state’s largest; there’s even a black-bean farmer producing enough on an acre for all the burritos at Pennyclue café.

It’s not as if this is out of the mainstream. See that guy with the ponytail out there in that meticulously weeded field? That’s David Zuckerman, chair of the House of Representatives Agriculture Committee, not to mention proprietor, with his wife Rachel Nевitt, of the 15-acre Full Moon Farm. How quickly could Vermont feed itself if it had to? “I think we could feed ourselves by the end of that full growing season,” he says. “Many of us could grow more storage crops for winter eating. Land that’s now being used for corn and hay can be converted. And now that we’ve got High Mowing Seeds company, we’ve got a lot of seed, more than the state could use.

But, luckily, we don’t need to become self-sufficient overnight. There’s room for incremental growth, taking advantage of the burgeoning number of skilled growers around the state. Zuckerman, for instance, apprenticed alongside Will and Judy Stevens, whose Golden Russet Farm in Addison County is one of the state’s showpieces. In the Northeast Kingdom, Jack and Anne Lazor at Butterworks Farm have seen sales grow 10 percent or better, year after year after year; now they’re offering cornmeal and beans across the state. Ben Gleason in Bridport has been growing wheat for a quarter century, which is now in demand at bakeries like Red Hen and breweries like Otter Creek. Champlain Orchards, started by Bill Suhr with help from the Intervale Foundation, has become a year-round source of local cider for the state. And on and on and on—old farmers and new, passing on information, a kind of alternative agricultural network that coexists beside the dominant dairy industry with its ever larger farms trying to compete in a global market selling commodity crops. (And of course there’s an incredible knowledge base in those dairy farmers old and new, the people with the real living skills that need to get passed on, and who need the support to find new agricultural paths that don’t lead down the dairy dead end.) What marks most of this alternative production is the attempt to avoid becoming mere commodity, the attempt to add some value—whether through organic growing practices, or winter delivery, or clever marketing—that will allow them to survive.

If instead of merely surviving, such enterprises were to sprout dozens of new allies—if the state was really interested in approaching food self-sufficiency—then there are all kinds of steps it might take. Imagine what would happen if, in addition to going on the radio and urging Vermonters to buy more local food, the governor urged the legislature to pass an institutional buying law. Say the state prisons and state colleges were forced to buy 10 percent more of their food locally, and that the percentage had to rise a little every year above that. The demand would begin to create supply.

And say the state invested modest amounts in building the kind of processing facilities that would allow more of the region’s September surplus to make it through the winter. Nothing elaborate, but community kitchens, small freezing plants, help for new slaughterhouses. . . the list of possibilities is long. Maybe the building code should require root cellars in new construction.

If Vermont was really interested in its long-term future, it would probably be investing more state money in buying the development rights to farms. That way, the land would be affordable enough for young people to take up agriculture. Already the state’s land trusts have shown a real ability to make such projects happen.

One concrete possibility is the expansion of local currencies. The city of Burlington, for instance, is currently considering backing Burlington Bread—accepting the script for tax and utility payments. That would be enough to get lots of the money in circulation, which would in turn increase the number of residents wanting to buy local produce (Hannafords isn’t going to accept Burlington Bread, after all), which in turn increase the amount of acreage under cultivation, which would . . .

For the moment, however, Vermonters need not wait for government to act. (A wait that could take a while. The state’s commissioner of agriculture remarked not long ago that he wasn’t too worried about the decline in the number of dairy farms because the total volume of milk produced hadn’t dropped. This is the industrial food viewpoint at its best—in his ideal world, one giant cow would spray enough milk for the whole planet from a volcano-sized test.) This is one of those reforms that it really is possible to spur through consumer action. All you have to do is be willing to spend a little more for food.

And in fact, the little more isn’t necessarily measured in money. I spent last winter conducting an experiment—to see if I could get myself through the winter eating food only from the Champlain Valley. I was worried at first; I mean, the winter is long. But in fact there were enough farmers remaining to feed me like a king. (A root-vegetable-dependent king, true, but a king nonetheless.) Monument Farm milk, of course, but I also found a guy growing fifty kinds of potatoes near Rutland, and folks raising not just beef but bison and deer. Fish from Lake Champlain (though not much, thanks to the mercury floating in from the Midwest), and crisp apples from the storage lockers in Shoreham. Great restaurant meals from the Farmer’s Diner to the Blueberry Hill Inn. And lots of wheat beer from Otter Creek, brewed from the fields of Bridport. It didn’t actually cost me any more than shopping at the supermarket, mostly because I was buying ingredients instead of processed food. It took more time to collect it however—time that you could consider either a cost or a benefit, considering that I got to meet all sorts of neighbors, to know my country in a different way.

I began by asking, “Can Vermont feed itself?” I think I know the answer. A couple of years ago, on assignment from Harpers magazine, I went to Cuba to look at their agricultural system. Twenty years ago they were as fully enmeshed in the world industrial food system as Vermont—probably more so. They shipped sugar cane off to Eastern Europe just like we ship milk; the boats came back full of grain. They even had the world’s single most productive dairy cow, named White Udder, who survived on East German grain extracts. But then the Soviet Union collapsed, and Cuba was left to fend for itself. Not only were there no boats full of grain arriving in Havana (and no customers for overpriced Cuban sugar), there were also no fertilizers or pesticides, thanks to the U.S.-led boycott. Agriculture collapsed; the average Cuban lost twenty pounds, as food intake dropped from 3000 calories a day to below 2000.

But food is not optional. Cubans figured out how to do what they needed to do: build a huge series of small more-or-less organic farms—many, like the Intervale, on abandoned urban land. Far more Cubans went to work as farmers. Many of the university experts started devoting themselves to low-tech de facto organic solutions. They didn’t work miracles—the country is still short of milk and meat—but within a couple of years caloric intake was back where it had been. They’d become perhaps the most self-sufficient nation on earth, not by choice but by necessity.

We face no such crisis. We have the luxury of time, to move slowly and deliberately towards a food system that makes more sense for the planet and for our communities. We don’t need to go all the way; after my winter experiment I’m glad to be back eating the occasional banana. But we do have far more ability to take care of ourselves than we might imagine.

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Homestead Security Equals Free-Range Chickens, a Good Dog, and Jerusalem Artichokes

By Jim Hogue

A riddle:

Carl Hammer has 1,400 free-range, egg-laying hens. He lives in Montpelier, where temperatures drop to -40 degrees F. His barn is unheated. His hens lay twelve months a year. The fecal matter from the chickens does not pollute. Coyote, fox, fisher, skunk, raccoon, and aerial predators make their livings in the same niche. This is not Carl’s primary business. He turns a profit. How?

Answer: garbage.

Living in the state capital, Carl has access to all the garbage his flock could ever want, especially when the legislature is in session. He charges a tipping fee to local restaurants, which supply him with appropriate food refuse. He feeds this to his chickens (Australorpes, Buff Orpingtons, Wyandottes, and Rhode Island Reds) mixed with nutrient-rich and seed-rich late-cut hay. This mixture is fodder, heat source, and compost.

The chickens add to the food mixture a nitrogen-rich substance that chemists refer to as chicken manure. The food/hay buffet provides a bed for the efficient collection of nitrogen, and the ammonia gases are released so slowly that they are unnoticeable and nontoxic. The product (not to mention the eggs) is a nitrogen-rich addition to Carl’s compost that is further refined into potting soil.

But mention eggs I must, because that is the story. Wholesale, Carl gets $2.40 a dozen for his eggs, which retail at $2.95. That is what people will pay for extra-large, fresh, free-range eggs. The reason the eggs taste so good is the infinite variety in the food source.

Anyone observing free-range hens can watch them select from nature’s table with individual and rational discrimination. What I have noticed is that they prefer meals that are moving. Carl’s hens are free to roam, or leave, in search of whatever they like. In winter, when confined by subzero temperatures to the barn, they still get a good supply of live, varied, and tasty food. And even in winter they are able to choose from the constant, ever-growing buffet. The environment in the barn is a metabolizing ecology: a constant succession of species that live off of the decaying matter and off of each other.

The environment of the farm is also particular. It must take advantage of the climate and the geography, considering water sources and drainage. It is, like all farms, situation specific. Carl collaborates with chickens. The more they are able to do what chickens do (express full chickenhood, if you will) the more successful he is. It is a study in the sociology of chickens. It is, by necessity, a way of taking advantage of the work done by 7,000 pounds of chickens every day.

There is also something to be said for the healthy and humane conditions that Carl affords his flock. They choose their food, which they get to play with. They are free to leave. They live ‘til they die. And they are protected by a large German Shepherd. I know folks with tiny flocks who have lost everything to predators—and those flocks were not even free range. So, do not try this without a good dog. The skunk’s aroma may linger, but that is a small price to pay.

The other part of Carl’s formula for a ready New England food supply relies on a local wildflower called the Jerusalem artichoke. Acres of community plantings would protect us against the worst-case scenario of food shortages from transportation slowdowns, natural disasters, or financial meltdowns. And the billions spent on homeland security should spare a few thousand to get things started.

Jerusalem artichokes, perennials that resemble sunflowers, are the only “vegetable” native to New England. They are six to ten feet tall, propagated from tubers, and bloom in the fall. They are easy to cultivate and produce large, edible tubers if separated and planted in rich soil. They provide their own compost and mulch by dropping their leaves, and seem to produce tubers forever. The tubers may be eaten instead of potatoes, and are marketed as “sunchokes.”

Says Carl, “If you suddenly discovered in February that you were short of food, you could follow the walk and find the tubers. If you were trying to lay out relatively inexpensive strategies to feed the population of Central Vermont, acres of Jerusalem artichokes would be one of them.”

They are, furthermore (and here is where we cleverly integrate the chicken story), an effective filter of leachates because they are ravenous utilizers of nutrients. The more nutrients they get, the bigger they get. They work well with high-carbon substrates in preventing leachates from getting into the watershed. A good design is a layer of bark filters with Jerusalem artichokes planted in it.

They are a fantastic chicken habitat for several reasons. 1. It is cooler in a dense Jerusalem artichoke thicket. 2. Worms collect in this environment, as Jerusalem artichokes manage their own ecology. 3. They like chicken manure. 4. Chickens eat the foliage.

Good advice is, of course, plentiful. Bad planning is the rule. Economic collapse is always predicted by the few and ignored by the many. We are at a turning point in history: Peak Oil, Global Warming, and ruthless empires grabbing the last resources from the weak. It is possible that, soon, many people in New England will find it hard to get food. Those who can function, as did their grandparents, with less, with Yankee ingenuity, barter, and knowledge of the natural world, are much more likely to make it in the coming years.

Carl warns, “A populace that has no control over its food supply is hard put to describe itself as free. Eating is one of those things people do pretty often, and need to. It’s hard for Americans to imagine how that could affect their freedom, not having had a situation where money couldn’t buy food. Central Vermont has a food supply of 72 hours, and within 24 hours there’s a shortage of fresh produce. I don’t know if you’ve seen the co-op when the truck doesn’t come for a day. It gets pretty lonely and empty in there. Three days without food and people’s values shift. They give you the keys to their BMW for a glass of water and a bagel. We need a shift in resources: from surveillance equipment for the constabulary to food planning. Many understand that the stalwarts with their fingers on the trigger still need to eat. The Swiss articulate food planning as part of their national defense strategy. And they articulate it carefully. But, for myself, constantly belaboring the obvious is getting kind of old.”

If there is a universal in the ongoing story of Carl Hammer, it is that knowledge and the ability to objectively observe, measure, analyze, and apply data are crucial. Each part of the puzzle is important.

Another lesson, which goes against what so many have been taught for so long, is that economy of scale does not mean racing to enormous size. The Amish have shown us this. But many in the business and governance of agriculture refuse to learn the lesson.

In an age of Peak Oil and potentially devastating climate changes, governments cannot let the serendipity of Carl’s success be a substitute for careful planning and for supporting rural entrepreneurs who, by going back in time, are preparing for the future.

Illustration by Joan Gaboriault