2013 Local Food Champions

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2013 Local Food Champions

Abstract
In Iowa, local food is turning heads and returning profits. We gathered these stories featuring some of Iowa's local food champions in action to illustrate a few examples of how regional and local food systems are being built in Iowa. All were produced as part of an evaluation of the Regional Food Systems Working Group, or RFSWG, by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture. (Download the full 2012 Economic Impacts report or the two-page impact brief connected to these stories.) Like the economic data collected by RFSWG members throughout the state, these profiles are not visions of how a local food system could work but concrete examples of how local food systems are already working in Iowa. Most of the profiles were written by Leopold Center program assistant Arlene Enderton, who helped compile data for the report. Visit our our Economic Impacts of Local Food in Iowa page for links to individual local food champion stories and additional information.

Keywords
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OUR LOCAL FOOD CHAMPIONS

In Des Moines, children from financially-strapped families learn how to prepare snacks from in-season fruits and vegetables. In northwest Iowa, a shrimp farmer spreads the word about his farm-raised product. A beekeeper expands his business and an eastern Iowa farmer processes fruit when they’re most abundant and at peak quality. These people are Iowa’s local food champions in action, where interest in local food is turning heads and returning profits. In some cases, expanded markets help families bring other members into the business, or stay in business at a more successful level.

We gathered these stories to show a few examples of how regional and local food systems are being built in Iowa. All were produced as part of an evaluation of the Regional Food Systems Working Group, or RFSWG, by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture. Like the economic data collected by RFSWG members throughout the state, these profiles are not visions of how a local food system could work, they are concrete examples of how local food systems are working in Iowa. Most of the profiles were written by Leopold Center program assistant Arlene Enderton, who helped compile data for the report.

Profiles include:
- Tom Arnold selling local meat in eastern Iowa
- Lyn Jenkins, nutrition educator in Des Moines
- Chad and Keely Dutler, farm-raised shrimp for Sioux City
- Pat Ennis, beekeeper
- Barbara Grijalva’s vegetable operation near Fairfield
- Nick McCann, creating worksite CSAs in northeast Iowa
- Paul Rasch, marketing fruit from Wilson’s Orchard
- University of Northern Iowa Dining Services
- Ed Kraklio, Melissa Freidhof-Rodgers, Quad Cities Food Hub
- Chef Bob Newell, Lakeshore Grill at Honey Creek State Park
- Dale Raasch, high tunnel grower in Adair County

All can be found on the Leopold Center’s “Economic Impacts of Local Food in Iowa” web page: http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/local-food

January 2014
The Economic Impact of Iowa’s Local Food Champions: Dubuque Eats Well
Face of a Food Champion: Tom Arnold

When Tom Arnold first took over the family farm after his father’s death in 1988, he continued to sell to commodity meat markets as his father had done. Now, he sells directly to customers, and credits the interest in high-quality, local meat with allowing his small farm to thrive while maintaining sustainable practices.

“We decided to begin retailing meats to make the farm work for the next generation,” says Arnold.

Arnold’s Farm is typical of those in the Driftless Region, with rolling hills susceptible to erosion. The property is about one-third timber, one-third pasture and one-third tillable. By transitioning away from commodity markets, Arnold says his farm has remained like how farms used to be, integrating livestock with pasture.

He cultivates some corn, oats and hay to use as livestock feed and says his customers validate what he already knows—they say his seasonal grass- and grain-fed beef, pork and poultry are the best they’ve ever tasted.

The farm phased into selling meat directly to consumers in the early 1990s, starting from whole animals and sides, to 25-pound meat packages, to individual cuts at farm harvest parties, to a buying club in Chicago, to a meat route in Chicago and at farmers markets. Today Arnold’s Farm delivers meats to 18 or 19 drop-off points on a route through the Chicago area, as well as several farmers markets and to Niman Ranch Pork, a natural meats company.

“When we sell to consumers I get more satisfaction,” says Arnold. And by developing a market for local meat over the years, he could pass on his farm to his children if they choose to take up farming in the future.

The children raised lambs when they were in school, but Arnold didn’t have the help he needed to continue raising the animals after they graduated and left the farm. To make up for this, he approached neighbors who raised lamb to sell their product. He also partnered with other producers at farmers markets, who valued his broad customer network. For example, he sells eggs from one producer he met at the Freight House Farmers Market in Davenport, and cheese from a Sunday farmers market producer’s milking herd. He adds their products to his delivery routes through Chicago.

Arnold explains that the arrangement is good for his meat business as well as his partners’. He recently began selling pork through a retail store at the local meat locker, and says that he and the husband and wife team who run the operation “bend over backwards for each other” because they support each other’s businesses.

Arnold’s newest relationship is with the Dubuque Eats Well group. He says it has been an important place to connect with others interested in local foods, and that he would have a hard time entering Iowa markets otherwise. Some members of Dubuque Eats Well want to open a food co-op in Dubuque, and Arnold is exploring whether he might sell his sustainably produced meat to this new market once it forms.

For more information on the local foods work occurring in the Dubuque region, contact Brittany Bethel at bbethel@iastate.edu or by calling 563.583.6496 Ext. 12.

In the photo: Tom Arnold is helped by his neighbor Andy Jackson at the Glenview Farmers Market. Arnold sells sustainably produced meat to a large network of customers interested in local foods.
The Economic Impact of Iowa’s Local Food Champions: Eat Greater Des Moines
Face of a Food Champion: Lyn Jenkins

Children in Des Moines are eating and enjoying healthy, local foods in schools through the Pick a Better Snack program. Funded by Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) education, Pick a Better Snack is offered in schools where 60 percent or more of the children qualify for SNAP dollars.

“We talk about being active and eating healthy,” says Lyn Jenkins, SNAP educator. She and a team of fellow SNAP educators, as well as AmeriCorps and FoodCorps volunteers, visit kindergarten through third grade classrooms between six and eight times a year, and their 30-minute lessons on food and nutrition include a taste-test of a healthy snack.

Jenkins cites edamame as a recently popular snack. “It’s so experiential,” she says of the soybean, picked green, cooked and served cold, “the way it feels and popping it out of the shell... and it was neat for [the kids] to know it can be grown local.”

The team tries to include a local item at least once each spring and fall, and often buys spinach, which can be grown in high tunnels for most of the year and be turned into smoothies or salads.

Des Moines Public Schools (DMPS) uses local foods mostly for education, not in school lunches. But with the help of FoodCorps, in October 2012 DMPS tested local sweet potato fries at four schools during National Farm to School Week. DMPS also has more than 20 school gardens, “growing exponentially, it seems,” Jenkins observes. The garden produce is used in classroom lessons or sent home with the kids. Jenkins says this adds to the gardens’ value since families can take something home. “Especially when working with low-income families—that can make a big difference.”

DMPS purchases local foods from farms such as the Homestead, Grinnell Heritage and Coyote Run. Although it doesn’t have strong ties with any specific farmers, last year a FoodCorps member arranged for some farmers to visit elementary schools with produce and in one case, says Jenkins, a kid goat.

Jenkins orders some produce from the online Iowa Food Co-op, where she is a member. She also networks with several organizations around the city working in local foods, to contribute toward making healthy food available elsewhere beyond schools. Through the Healthy Polk 2020 movement, she connected with Eat Greater Des Moines.

Jenkins credits Eat Greater Des Moines with helping make sense of all the available resources for local foods and healthy living in the city. She says that it is hard to know what’s going on without such an organization to make connections and gather information “in a meaningful way.” For DMPS, she sees Eat Greater Des Moines’ meetings and website resources as a way to connect with people interested in food production or food education.

“Local foods have been a great piece in our education,” says Jenkins, explaining that even though Des Moines is surrounded by farms, within the city many children may not know that. “Simply tasting a local apple [...] how fresh it can be—that’s important, and changes students’ expectations on what kind of food they want to have.”

For more information on the local foods work occurring in the Des Moines region, contact Aubrey Martinez at amartinez@dmreligious.org, 515.491.1891, or Linda Gobberdiel at lgobberdiel@dmreligious.org, 515.321.7853.

In the photo: Pick a Better Snack educator Anita Turczynski connects children with local food, farming and gardens. Says educator Lyn Jenkins: “Any time we can do gardening, that is empowering to families and kids... to know they can be a part of their own system and grow their own food or go to the farmers market and support families in the area.”
The Economic Impact of Iowa’s Local Food Champions: Flavors of Northwest Iowa
Face of a Food Champion: Chad and Keely Dutler

Chad and Keely Dutler of Shrimp 59 LLC credit the demand for local food with bringing them “back to the farm” and closer to their family. Local food group Flavors of Northwest Iowa has further promoted their company’s success.

The Dutlers grew up surrounded by conventional farming—their families raised hogs, cattle, corn and beans—but worked full-time in unrelated sectors. “We had pretty tight schedules,” says Chad, a former engineer technician. Keely worked as an administrative assistant and personal trainer and, between them, “we had a lot to do when we got home.”

Starting a shrimp farm in February 2012 changed all that, and they are now able to dedicate more time to their children. “It freed up a lot of time to do what is important to us,” explains Chad. “We are home with the kids when they go to and from school [...] and are able to attend and participate in more of [their] activities.”

The Dutlers were originally interested in using a popular aquaponics system to raise fish and vegetables, but decided on a shrimp farm after consulting with others around the country. It was a costly and disappointing start—the company they originally worked with created a business plan that turned out unsuccessful. “We worked with them for four months,” says Chad, “but found the [farming] system did not work and basically started from scratch and came up with our own setup.”

The Dutlers now sell their produce at the Sioux City Farmers Market, whose customers, they noticed, were looking to stay local with their purchases. The Dutlers wanted to move a high volume of shrimp each week and reasoned that word of mouth would help their product become popular in the area.

“It has taken a lot of things off of our hands,” explains Chad. “People come to the market each week just to get farm-raised products. [Our] turnaround time is faster and we don’t have to do a lot of advertising because people know we will most likely be there each week if we have shrimp available.”

The Dutlers became familiar with Flavors of Northwest Iowa through the farmers market. In August 2013, the local food group invited them to be part of a farm-to-fork tour for Ida County. Tour participants learned about Shrimp 59’s beginnings and heard what happened on a typical day at the farm as they toured the facility.

“It went really well,” says Chad. “We prepared some of our shrimp in three different marinades, and also had taste-testing of our cocktail shrimp versus store-bought ones.”

The following day, several participants stopped by the Dutlers’ booth at the farmers market to say how much they’d enjoyed the tour. They appreciated the sweet taste and texture of the Dutlers’ shrimp and wanted to buy more. “Word of mouth travels well through Flavors of Northwest Iowa,” says Chad of the experience. “It seems to be our best way to advertise!”

For more information on the local foods work occurring in the northwest region, contact Margaret Murphy at mmurphy@iastate.edu, or Laurie Taylor at ltaylor@iastate.edu.

In the photo: Chad Dutler holds up one of his shrimp, demonstrating how clear it is.
Increased interest in raw, local honey has helped Spring Valley Honey Farms expand. In 2013 they added two new jobs to help keep up with demand—that of a sales person and an additional beekeeper.

“Our sales are up because people are looking for a raw product,” says Pat Ennis, who runs the northern division of Spring Valley Honey, “that’s why we added a second person to the sales room.”

That new person is his wife. By taking over honey bottling and sales, and expanding the business’ market to reach grocery stores and the Mason City Farmers Market, she now makes twice as much compared to her previous, off-farm job.

“Most people think when they talk to me that I have a few hives, but I run bees from over by Charles City to Mason City down to Belmond, Webster City and Fort Dodge,” says Ennis, whose crew comprises four other beekeepers, including a new hire. The southern division of Spring Valley Honey, managed by owner Curt Bonnenberg, has bees from Stratford to the Missouri border.

Approximately 15 percent of Ennis’ sales are through farmers markets, 25 percent through the on-farm store, and 60 percent through wholesale. Much of the wholesale honey goes to Sue Bee Honey, another Iowa company.

Spring Valley’s direct-marketing sales continue to grow strong as consumers learn more about honey. Ennis explains that most grocery store honey is heated and pressure-filtered to increase its shelf life. The filtration removes pollen particles that would cause the honey to crystallize. The heating, while it may destroy microbes, also destroys many of the honey’s natural enzymes.

Ennis believes that consumers who are aware of this processing prefer raw honey, which is unheated and retains beneficial enzymes. Raw honey also is filtered by a simpler method and contains local pollen particles. He explains that this is important for consumers who believe it helps them build immunity to allergens.

“If you want something [raw and] local the best place to get it is at the farmers market or to know a beekeeper,” says Ennis. He adds that Spring Valley’s sales also have increased because of the exposure the business gets through Healthy Harvest of North Iowa.

“Advertising is a key to success in any business... through [Healthy Harvest’s] website and the newspaper and pamphlets available at farmers markets it lets people know we are there,” says Ennis. He says when new customers visit the show room in Goodell, they’re asked how they heard of the farm. “They see [us] in the newspaper or the Buy Fresh, Buy Local directory. We know our advertising is beneficial to us.”

Spring Valley primarily sells honey, but their product range includes bees, wax, propolis, pollen and other secondary hive products. The company also provides pollination services to fruit, vegetable and nut producers. Ennis says they sent seven semi trucks of bees to California last winter to pollinate almond trees. In the summer, their bees pollinate crops throughout Iowa.

For more information on the local foods work occurring in the northern region, contact Jan Libbey at libbey.jan@gmail.com or by calling 515.851.1690.

In the photo: Pat Ennis, who manages bees throughout northern Iowa, says, “People want locally produced food and in the case of honey they want it raw and pure.”
The Economic Impact of Iowa’s Local Food Champions: Hometown Harvest of Southeast Iowa
Face of a Food Champion: Barb Grijalva

When Barb Grijalva began selling vegetables from her garden at the farmers market 13 years ago, she could not have predicted what a productive livelihood it would become.

“I wasn’t thinking of local food,” she explains, “I began more out of need. I was getting divorced and I needed to support myself and my two kids. At the time, I just thought I could sell some things [...]—I didn’t see the whole picture.”

Soon, people began requesting different produce. To keep up with demand, Grijalva and her fiancé Rick Sieren purchased and moved to a 10-acre farm. She ordered seeds of plants she’d never heard of, like collard greens and arugula. “Now [arugula’s] one of my best sellers,” she says.

The family operation has since grown to 20 acres, with additional organic acreage rented from neighbors. Grijalva farms full-time, with part-time help from Sieren and her children. Her daughter, a culinary school student, began cooking at the farmers market this year using produce from the family farm and other market vendors.

The Fairfield farmers market is certified local, and vendors are inspected yearly to ensure that they grow or make their own products. Currently the market’s president, Grijalva uses organic farming techniques but isn’t certified as organic. This way, she can keep prices down for her customers, which now include restaurants and institutions such as Noodle Restaurant, Garden Restaurant, Hy-Vee and the Mother Divine Program for women in Fairfield.

Garden Restaurant and the Mother Divine Program both found Grijalva through a “Buy Fresh Buy Local” directory published by Hometown Harvest of Southeast Iowa. The publication is available in print and web format. Says Grijalva, “If a restaurant is looking for a particular item they can look us up. If they want 10 pounds of arugula or Swiss chard they can call you.”

She points out that most vendors at the Fairfield farmers market are part of Hometown Harvest, participating in sponsored events like the Farm Crawl. On July 4, 2013, for example, Hometown Harvest organized a “Celebrate the American Farmer Farm Crawl,” with tour stops at seven farms, a park, and the Calico Press Design Company.

“It’s like an open house,” says Grijalva, “There’s a map and information about each farmer on [a printed] flier. People can go to any [of the stops] they want.”

Grijalva had a potato dig at her open house—almost a hundred visitors crawled through her field, digging potatoes, which they could then take home. She estimates that 80 percent of her guests would not have attended had Hometown Harvest not created a directory, fliers and the other advertisements. “[They] put our name out there,” she says.

Another Farm Crawl is planned for September 2013, though Grijalva does not expect her farm to be one of the stops this time. “I’m so busy—I wouldn’t put something like that together myself. It’s easier for us [farmers] to be a part of it, because Hometown Harvest puts it together.”

For more information on the local foods work occurring in the southeastern region, contact Jan Swinton at jan@Pathfindersrcd.org or by calling 641.472.6177.

In the photo: Barb Grijalva at her stall at the Fairfield farmers market. She says, “We have [...] people coming through from all walks of life, including different countries.“ She expanded her farm to meet their food needs.
The Economic Impact of Iowa’s Local Food Champions: Northeast Iowa Food & Farm Coalition
Face of a Food Champion: Nick McCann

We caught up with Nick McCann one day as he navigated the streets of Decorah assembling bags of food for a workplace food box program, a new type of community-supported agriculture (CSA) enterprise. It is organized through a northeast Iowa regional food hub.

“What this is designed to do is to create a win-win,” says McCann, business specialist for Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. “The customers end up with a weekly delivery [at their workplace] of local food at a reasonable price. The farmers have an additional market for their product at a fair price and don’t have to deal with the demands of marketing and logistics.”

McCann is researching the viability of a weekly food delivery program as the primary revenue source for a broader food aggregation service in northeast Iowa. Worksites are targeted because of the volume of business they provide per stop. He works with a team to locate and collect local produce and products, then package and deliver these to employees of businesses like Rockwell Collins and Upper Iowa University. Food box contents vary weekly and seasonally, but typically include local produce, meat, bread, eggs and milk. There are no limits on what items the boxes may contain. In winter, organic produce from a food cooperative may be substituted for local produce.

As a food system value chain coordinator, McCann helps farmers develop new products, leads discussions and research on product collection and distribution, and identifies new partners and urban markets for these products in the Driftless Region. USDA Rural Development funds some of his technical assistance. He learned about similar programs in other parts of the country by taking part in a study hub facilitated by the Wallace Center at Winrock International and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Study hub members take part in bi-monthly teleconferences and have the opportunity to tour different types of food hubs across the country. After observing these models, McCann decided to test if such a program would work in Iowa.

While the food box program essentially covers all the delivery costs for a truckload of food, it offers several other advantages. For example, it allows McCann to easily find markets for surplus food. “Farmers typically overplant for their growing season,” explains McCann, “allocating extra land and labor to insure they have adequate produce no matter the growing and weather conditions.”

McCann also notes that it can be difficult for local farmers to manage packaging, transport and marketing on top of production. “It’s not just the amount of work,” he says, “It’s the amount of focus that it requires to get everything done.”

The northeast Iowa regional food hub partners include Iowa State University Extension, Allamakee New Beginnings, the Northeast Iowa Food and Fitness Initiative, Northeast Iowa Funders Network, Convergence Partnership, Community Foundation of Greater Dubuque, and USDA Rural Development.

For more information about this program, visit: www.iowafoodhub.com.
Watch a video about the food box program at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=y0R1KzIMWic.

For more information on the local foods work occurring in the northeast region, contact Teresa Wiemerslage at wiemer@iastate.edu or by calling 563.794.0599.

In the photo: Nick McCann builds a food system, one box at a time. Here he examines produce before packaging and delivery.
The Economic Impact of Iowa’s Local Food Champions: Field to Family Food Coalition
Face of a Food Champion: Paul Rasch

Paul Rasch has been orcharding his whole life, but is relatively new to Iowa, having moved about seven years ago. Originally from Michigan, he is the fourth generation of his family to be in the fruit business, and owns and operates Wilson’s Orchard near Iowa City. Despite being relatively new to the area, Rasch quickly has become involved with others working to promote local food.

He has good reason to do so. He explains, “It’s really the resurgence of interest in local foods that keeps this place going. Without that you have nothing. If everyone thought a Washington apple and a local apple were the same we wouldn’t have a business.”

Wilson’s Orchard is located in a scenic area by Rapid Creek that includes old oak forest. Here, Rasch cultivates 130 unique varieties of apples. He has an on-site retail store for visitors to buy harvested apples and a U-Pick operation so people can pick their own. He also grows pumpkins, and the store has a bakery offering pies and turnovers, as well as applesauce, cider and cider vinegar.

The orchard offers events throughout the fall, including an applesauce weekend, back-to-school weekend and a blueberry bonanza. Wilson’s Orchard cider and apples are sold at local Hy-Vee stores, and the cider may also be found at the New Pioneer Food Co-op in Iowa City.

Rasch is involved in the Field to Family Community Food Coalition and the Johnson County Food Policy Council. Both organizations are relatively new, and run by local foods coordinator Jason Grimm. Rasch says he benefits from participating in the Field to Family Community Food Coalition because it expands his customer network. Through Field to Family he has connected with schools to sell his apples. New customers also have found Wilson’s Farm because it is featured in Field to Family’s Buy Fresh, Buy Local directory.

Meanwhile, as a member of the Johnson County Food Policy Council, Rasch and other members are entrusted to develop a set of policy recommendations meant to increase local food supply, production and consumption in Johnson County. Rasch explains that most of the recommendations relate to planning and zoning, “to reduce barriers to small, local production and value-added products [that] address both growing and processing [issues].”

The members submitted their recommendations to the Johnson County Board of Supervisors in April 2013. Rasch says the supervisors are supportive, and look favorably upon the members’ ideas.

When asked what the council’s greatest achievement has been so far, Rasch says it was simply to get a dozen of them together, on the same page. “We have different philosophies, goals and passionately-held convictions. It takes some time just to organize... and form committees.”

After forming in 2012 and spending half a year getting organized, Rasch now says the organization has more steam. “Once we got on to [creating the policy recommendations], people got more interested and plugged in.”

For more information on the local foods work occurring in the east-central region, contact Jason Grimm at jason@ivrccd.org or by calling 319.622.3264.

In the photo: Paul Rasch’s picturesque Wilson’s Orchard, seen here in fall of 2009. He grows over a hundred different varieties of apples, and sells many products made from the harvest.
University of Northern Iowa (UNI) has worked with the Northern Iowa Food & Farm Partnership (NIFFP) since it started as a Buy Fresh Buy Local group in 1997. Today UNI’s food service spends approximately 29 percent of its total food purchasing dollars on products from within 250 miles of the university, and more than $100,000 on food from the seven counties where NIFFP works.

Lisa Krausman, administrative dietician and purchasing manager for UNI’s Residence Administration, says using local food helps farmers in the community and also the university. And whether or not students, UNI’s primary audience, are aware that their food is local, Krausman hopes “they know it when they taste it and say, ‘Wow! This is a really good cucumber!’”

The purchases include fruit and vegetables, honey, meat, poultry and dairy products. A local meat locker ensures that the meat comes from within the seven NIFFP counties. UNI also buys produce from campus student gardens organized by NIFFP. Most of the food is served in one of two student dining facilities, but the university also serves the retail area of Maucker Union, two convenience stores, a catering service and three kiosk areas in academic buildings, thus reaching faculty and staff.

UNI hasn’t tracked whether any jobs have been created as a result of its local food purchases, but Krausman believes that the sheer quantity must make a difference keeping farmers in business. UNI is able to reduce surplus waste by purchasing items like sweet corn, available in large quantities for short periods of time. It also buys hard-to-sell items like blemished but otherwise edible produce.

“A few farmers that primarily sell through a farmers market can kind of clean out their products by selling to us,” she says. “Because we [have a processing facility, produce] doesn’t have to look perfect, because we’ll be sending it out chopped or in strips. Even if it has a weird shape we can use it.”

Krausman highlights NIFFP’s role in helping UNI get in touch with farmers. She gets information on current stock and pricing details from NIFFP’s local foods coordinator, Rachel Wobeter, saying this reduces the amount legwork the university has to do finding suppliers. She says NIFFP also encourages farmers to sell locally and educates them on the needs of the buyer, for example when selling tomatoes.

“[The end user] may want standard size tomatoes,” explains Krausman. “The farmer may need to give different prices on different sizes of tomatoes... [NIFFP] has helped in those educational elements.”

UNI has greatly increased local food purchases, particularly these past five years, but Krausman points out that it serves five to six thousand meals per day—more than what local producers currently supply. And as other businesses get interested in buying locally, this further limits UNI’s potential purchases, “because everyone pulls from the same sources.”

“In a perfect world, we try to get more farmers out there producing specialty product, but that takes time,” says Krausman. NIFFP plays an important, ongoing role in strengthening the local foods infrastructure to meet the needs of farmers’ and buyers like UNI.

For more information on the local foods work occurring in the northern region, contact Rachel Wobeter at rachel.wobeter@uni.edu or by calling 319.273.1494.

In the photo: Student gardener Abigail Breitbach (left) brings the first-ever delivery of produce to UNI Dining Service, from the first student garden on UNI’s campus.
The Economic Impact of Iowa’s Local Food Champions: Quad Cities Food Hub
Face of a Food Champion: Ed Kraklio

Ed Kraklio, operator of Nostalgia Farm and Fresh Deli in Davenport, has a vision for the food system that is much bigger than just his farm and restaurant. He believes in partnerships, saying, “It’s a misconception that a lot of people have, that one farm can handle it all... you can’t.”

He and his partner Joe Dennis began Nostalgia Farm in 1996, cultivating a variety of berries, apples, cherries and other fruits. They expanded into baking, quit their off-farm jobs, and added vegetables, poultry and lambs to their production. In 2012, they opened Fresh Deli together, which makes everything in-house, from breads to sauces to soda. Kraklio explains, “We freeze, can and dry to preserve food ourselves for the winter so we don’t run out.”

The restaurant opened as a direct result of participating in the Quad Cities Food Hub. Kraklio was on the Food Hub’s startup committee, and found through their searches that “there was [...] a calling for a local foods restaurant.” Fresh Deli uses food from Nostalgia Farm, as well as other local producers. Smaller producers who are unable to supply to the restaurant regularly are featured in the retail area at the front of the store or during special events. “We promote their product,” he explains. “It’s all about working together as a community when it comes to farming.”

Kraklio’s work has always involved partnerships with growers and consumers. He worked to unify two farmers markets in Davenport to create the year-long Freight House Farmers Market, with 150 to 185 vendors on peak market days. Fresh Deli and Nostalgia Farm employ between eight and 15 people, depending on the season, and also indirectly impact other businesses.

Kraklio estimates between five and 10 jobs may have been created by his vendors. Fresh Deli is already meeting the goals the Quad Cities Food Hub set out for it, but Kraklio wants to take the concept further. “Now we’re training the right people in our kitchens and up front so Joe and I can go to another location and redevelop in another area to expand what we’re doing. We want the deli to live on beyond what we are.”

Face of a Food Champion: Melissa Freidhof-Rodgers

Ross’ Restaurant has served local food in Bettendorf since 1938. The current manager, Melissa Freidhof-Rodgers, credits her grandfather, the restaurant founder, with setting the precedent: “I call him the original localist [...] he got it early on.”

Freidhof-Rodgers has expanded the use of local food in the restaurant, particularly in the last five years. She calls local foods a personal passion, “the triple win—it’s healthier, tastes better, and it’s better for the local economy.”

She is aware of her restaurant’s impact on local farms. They use thousands of pounds of tomatoes in the summer, and can go through 5,000 eggs a week. She says, “Because of our [demand for] eggs one farmer was able to get into farming fulltime. He had been in a manufacturing job.”

She appreciates having a personal connection with her suppliers, explaining that, “being a family business, it means a lot to work with suppliers that are also families. I feel good about the product and the relationships.”

For more information on the local foods work occurring in the Quad Cities region, contact Wendy Saathoff at wendyjeanqcfodhub@gmail.com or by calling 563.639.2283.

In the photo: Farmer and restauranteur Ed Kraklio holds up a bag of Nostalgia Farm cherries in the retail portion of Fresh Deli.
Bob Newell worked at private clubs, city clubs, hospitals, retirement centers, colleges, and restaurants before becoming executive chef at the Rathbun Lakeshore Grille in Honey Creek Resort State Park in southern Iowa. This allows him to fulfill a dream—working with local food.

“I've wanted to [work with local farmers] for 40 years,” he says, but explains that the companies he worked for in the past would not let him, because they required their suppliers to have insurance that most growers cannot carry. Honey Creek Resort is unique, because it is located in a state park. “Here the state encourages me to use as much local as possible. It keeps tax dollars inside state boundaries.”

When Newell moved back to southern Iowa in 2012 to run the restaurant, he met up with Melanie Seals and her husband Mike, who operated Country Road Produce “about two miles down the road.” They looked at what Country Road could grow and what Honey Creek could use and developed a plan for the year. In 2013 Honey Creek purchased a variety of vegetables from Country Road, including carrots, radishes, lettuce, spinach, tomatoes, peppers, zucchini, yellow squash, cucumbers and sweet corn.

For the first few months Country Road couldn’t keep up with the restaurant’s demand, as the Grille served up to 500 meals a day when the resort was full. Additionally, the restaurant catered for meetings, weddings and other functions at the state park. But the Seals soon adjusted. “It works out great,” says Newell of the relationship. “They deliver two or three times a week and [the vegetables] go right out the door.”

Since the partnership, Newell and Honey Creek Resort have received a lot of publicity. Both Newell and the Seals are quick to say where their produce comes from and goes to, and that generated “a fair amount of business,” says Newell. “Other restaurants jumped on board, too.”

At least two other restaurants now source from Country Road, says Newell, and he referred one of them. He says that Country Road is working now to increase its accounts with restaurants and sell less through farmers markets.

Newell purchases as many Iowa-grown products as he can, many of which are available through his distributor, Sysco. He uses Iowa-made Barilla pasta and Cookies BBQ Sauce, and buys Farmland and IBP meats, which are processed in Iowa. He has also found the Fareway store in Centerville to be a good partner, and since Fareway’s meats are Iowa-raised, “I get all my steaks and pork from them—it keeps the money in Centerville and provides them with a living. Fareway sends business out to me—it’s a win-win for both of us.”

Newell continues to make new connections with local producers and suppliers. He is searching for local honey and wild game. He explains that being in rural Iowa, it’s important to utilize the people around him to build business relationships. “It keeps them busy and keeps customers coming to me. A lot of people know the [producers] raising the [food I purchase] and come in and come back.”

For more information on the local foods work occurring in the south central region, contact Amber White at awhite78@iastate.edu.

Photo caption: Bob Newell makes bananas foster to order at Honey Creek Resort for a daddy-daughter dance in the ballroom.
The Economic Impact of Iowa’s Local Food Champions: Southern Iowa Regional Food Systems
Face of a Food Champion: Dale Raasch

Dale Raasch and his 24-year-old son Tyler take pride in working their two-man farming operation, the 40-acre Bridgewater Farm in Adair County. They market their products with confidence because they know they are high quality, healthy and sustainably grown. By creating new marketing relationships and taking advantage of networking opportunities, they have reached new customers with their meat, eggs, fruit and vegetables.

Raasch, who has farmed for 35 years and hails from a family of farmers, describes himself as an unconventional farmer swimming upstream. Four years ago, he started the shift toward farming practices that do not use pesticides, antibiotics, hormones or GMOs, believing it better for people, animals and the environment. He recognizes that Americans face a health crisis due to poor eating habits and reiterates his son’s advice on the importance of making mindful food choices: “By buying better food now it’s just like an insurance policy. Pay a little bit more now and eat better, and you’re going to be healthier. If you don’t, you’re going to pay for it later. It may even cost you your life.”

Raasch sells his products at farmers markets in Creston, Johnston, Atlantic, Greenfield and Winterset, Des Moines’ Farm Bureau Farmers Market and Drake Farmers Market. He also sells to specialty and mainstream grocery stores, hospitals, restaurants and nursing homes, and through a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). He says he built a loyal customer base because people like knowing where their food comes from and enjoy the taste of his locally grown produce. “That’s one of the biggest selling points,” Raasch says. “If you can get them to try it and they like it, they’re going to be back.”

Networking has been a crucial tool for Raasch. He expanded his customer base by participating in networking opportunities hosted by Southern Iowa Resource Conservation and Development’s local foods coordinator, Alexi Groumoutis. Raasch attended three Southern Iowa Local Foods Initiative food council meetings and met with food council member and Creston Hy-Vee store manager, Chuck Irelan, to discuss selling his produce at Creston’s Hy-Vee.

Through stakeholder updates sent by Groumoutis, Raasch learned about the Des Moines’ Farm Bureau Farmers Market, which allows vendors to sell produce at no additional cost. And in a March 2013 meeting between producers and institutions hosted by Groumoutis, Raasch met a representative for the French Icarian Village outside Corning, and arranged to use their discontinued community garden as a CSA drop-off site for his business.

Raasch produces antibiotic- and cage-free broiler chickens and eggs; cattle that are pastured part-year; hogs, duck eggs, vegetables and fruits. He has 12 acres in vegetable production and a 30x96-foot high tunnel. In 2013, he planted 1,150 tomato plants, 1,100 pounds of potatoes and 2,000 sweet potatoes. He also grows herbs, radishes, kale, squash, spinach, cauliflower, broccoli, kohlrabi, peppers, berries and watermelon, to name a few.

Bridgewater Farm is located at 2409 Brown Avenue in Bridgewater, Iowa. Raasch can be reached at 641.745.5368. Bridgewater Farm is also on Facebook.

For more information on the local foods work occurring in the southern region, contact Alexi Groumoutis at agroumoutis@hotmail.com or by calling 641.782.4033.

In the photo: Dale Raasch (left) and son, Tyler, show off produce in their high tunnel. Raasch’s operation grows numerous vegetables and fruit; in addition, he raises cattle, hogs, chickens and ducks.