ASAP Local Food Research Center

Added Value in the Local Food System

The role of food entrepreneurs in a local food system building effort in the Southern Appalachians

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Introduction

In the Southern Appalachians, a community-based initiative centered around local farms and food has changed the region's food and farming landscape over the past two decades. During this time period, the region's population has come to highly value the area's farms and the food they provide. Today, the market for locally grown food is thriving. Farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), and farm stands have proliferated. An increasing number of farmers are growing a wide diversity of food for local customers, including an array of fresh fruits and vegetables as well as locally raised meats, artisan cheeses, eggs, honey, mushrooms, herbs, and more. In this environment of heightened interest, entrepreneurs have created businesses that focus on local food with a commitment to sourcing from local farms while also expanding the availability of locally produced foods into restaurants, food shops, schools, hospitals, and other locations. These entrepreneurial enterprises include existing food-related businesses that have expanded to include the sourcing and sale of locally grown food as well as new businesses that have emerged to fill perceived opportunities.

This paper discusses the findings of research conducted by ASAP's Local Food Research Center with entrepreneurs of local food in Appalachian Western North Carolina and Upstate South Carolina. The research investigated the experiences of local food entrepreneurs to understand their motivations for working with local foods, the challenges they experienced, and the strategies they used to make local food-centered endeavors financially viable. For this study, local food entrepreneurs are individuals who operate a food related business with a focus on local food and a commitment to sourcing from local farms. The concepts of "market embeddedness" and "non-market values" are used to bring understanding to entrepreneurs' motivations for working with local farms and to frame the challenges they encounter and strategies they employ. This paper also builds on an earlier study of the region's emerging local food system, which in large part looked at ways food buyers in retail and institutional settings negotiate the tensions between locally grown food and larger market-based realities.

Understanding the motivations, challenges, strategies, and impacts of local food entrepreneurs

The concepts of market embeddedness and non-market values bring insight into entrepreneurs' motivations for working with local farmers and food, the challenges they encounter, and, in response, the strategies they enact. Market embeddedness refers to the degree to which economic choices are influenced by social contexts and relations.[1] Economic systems that are more responsive to the social aspects of society are influenced more by non-market values. Non-market values are those intangible or indirect qualities that contribute to well-being and enjoyment, e.g.,

[1] Polanyi, K. (1957). The great transformation: The political and economic origins of our time. *New York: Rinehart.*; Hinrichs, C. C. (2000). Embeddedness and Local Food Systems: Notes on Two Types of Direct Agricultural Market. *Journal of Rural Studies*, *16*(3), 295–303.

clean water and air, scenic landscapes, social connections, trust, etc. In contrast to tangible goods and services, non-market values lie outside the considerations and economic goals of the mainstream economic system and are not directly priced in markets.

In the food system literature, scholars have drawn on these ideas to theorize the transformative potential of local food system building efforts.[2] Grounding the production, provision, and consumption of food in particular places (in the land, social relationships, conditions of communities), local food initiatives have the potential to strengthen the influence of non-market values. Social relationships and community contexts - like interactions with farmers and other community members on farms, at farmers markets, community and school gardens, and other places, imbue food with meaning.

A study in Western North Carolina completed in 2013 points to the value of community contexts and social relations for local food entrepreneurs and the role of entrepreneurs in local food system building efforts.[3] The study showed that the ability to develop personal market relationships with farmers motivated food buyers in retail and institutional settings to source locally grown food. The capacity to source from people they knew and trusted cultivated "quality" and a chain of accountability they found absent in long-distance supply chains. Quality for buyers in this study included things like superior freshness and flavor as well as larger community impacts, i.e., how local sourcing supported the local economy and community interconnectivity. Where local food bumped up against established food industry systems and standards and consumers' expectations (especially in relation to cost, availability, and convenience), buyers innovated. [4] To mediate their desire to support local food production and their need to make it financially viable, buyers employed strategies to shift food norms and expectations as well as to accommodate them, e.g., different procurement models to accommodate the scale and seasonality of the region's food production; marketing approaches devised to promote the values of local food and connect to the growing community of local food and farm supporters.

The current research

Using these concepts and expanding on the findings of the 2013 study, the findings of this research show that local food entrepreneurs have a significant and unique role to play in supporting the vitality of the region's local food economy. The role of local food entrepreneurs is unique because they work at the intersection of what is established and what is emerging - in the spaces where values-based local food businesses models meet the market realities of the conventional food system. Motivated by the capacity to develop personal market relationships and participate in the

[2] Allen, P., FitzSimmons, M., Goodman, M., & Warner, K. (2003). Shifting plates in the agrifood landscape: The tectonics of alternative agrifood initiatives in California. Journal of rural studies, 19(1), 61-75.; Kloppenburg, J., Hendrickson, J., & Stevenson, G. W. (1996). Coming into the foodshed. Agriculture and human values, 13(3), 33-42.; Perrett, A. (2013). Cultivating Local: Building a Local Food System in Western North Carolina.
[3] Perrett, A. Cultivating Local: Building a Local Food System in Western North Carolina. University of S Florida.
[4] With decentralized farming, seasonality, and the smaller-scale of production, locally grown food did not conform to the established procurement systems of the food industry or the expectations of consumers who desired local food but expected it to be the same in key ways.

development of a food system that values transparency and trust, community connectedness, and methods of production that are environmentally sustainable and humane, local food entrepreneurs have found ways to create more space for locally produced foods in the region's food economy. Designed to transform as well as accommodate the established norms of the conventional food system, entrepreneurs' strategies are strengthening the influence of non-market values in the region in relation to food and helping to create a culture that values and supports local food production.

Methods

The research conducted interviews with 21 entrepreneurs (representing 17 local food-related businesses) and gathered information about their food businesses from websites and social media accounts as well as from local news sources. Theoretical sampling was used to select a pool of participants to allow researchers to investigate entrepreneurs' motivations for working with local food, the challenges they experience, and the strategies they use to make local food financially viable for them. In addition to their operation or management of a food-related business, participants were chosen based on their consistent sourcing from local farms, location in the Southern Appalachian region, and willingness and availability to participate in an in-depth interview. The pool of participants was inclusive of entrepreneurs with shorter as well as longer term perspectives - those that began their businesses prior to the existence of a robust market for local food in the region and those that started their businesses in the context of greater community awareness of and support for local farms and food.

The entrepreneurs that participated in the research operated food-related businesses primarily in the area around Asheville (17 participants) but also west of Asheville (one participant), north of Asheville (two participants), and Appalachian South Carolina (one participant). The types of businesses sampled included restaurants, food retailers, artisan food producers, and wholesalers. [5] The businesses of most entrepreneurs were in three categories - food retailers, artisan food producers, and wholesalers. Some of the entrepreneurs were also farmers. In addition, entrepreneurs with businesses offering similar products and services were selected for cross-comparison including six food retailers that sold local meats, three produce wholesalers, six businesses that were grocers or that provided additional local food products in addition to their primary offerings, and eight restaurants or businesses that also included food service as part of their offerings. Fifteen participants were male and six participants female.

Research questions investigated entrepreneurs' definitions of local food, the values that drive the way they have operated their businesses, and why entrepreneurs have made local food an important aspect of their businesses. Other questions explored perceived challenges of working with local food and the strategies entrepreneurs have used to mitigate them.

[5] Food retailers sell food directly to customers. Wholesalers aggregate and sell food; they are part of the supply chain that sits between producers and consumers. Artisan food producers make value-added products with local ingredients.

One hour interviews were conducted and digitally recorded, and written notes were taken. Interviews were partially transcribed; sections that were not transcribed were summarized. Data from interview notes, transcriptions, summaries, and other sources were compiled into one-page business summaries to compare and contrast data across entrepreneur cases and analyze for common patterns and disparities. Business summaries were standardized to have the same key categories including local food value propositions, local food activities, key partner relationships, local food challenges and strategies, key resources, customer base, and marketing channels.

Findings

Local food entrepreneurs link "quality" to the capacity to develop personal market relationships with farmers

Without exception, entrepreneurs used the term "quality" to talk about what they are striving to create and offer to customers. Described by one entrepreneur, providing consistent high quality food to customers - who then "go out and beat the drum" - is the best marketing tool. How entrepreneurs define quality is multifaceted, referring to directly observable attributes like freshness and flavor as well as intangible attributes related to the impacts of food production and provision - the transparency and trust present in marketplace relationships, how food is grown or raised, how it connects to and supports community.

Local food entrepreneurs source locally grown food because of the personal relationships that provide the means to access and cultivate this expanded idea of quality. Entrepreneurs talked especially about the significance of long-term relationships with farmers and the quality that comes from the development of mutual trust and accountability: buyers committed to local farmers and farmer livelihoods, farmers committed to growing and providing high quality food to loyal customers.

Many entrepreneurs framed their desire to source from local farmers in terms of transparency and in contrast to the "green washing" and untrustworthiness of large-scale impersonal food operations. Knowing and trusting that the food they source is being produced differently from food in the conventional food industry - that it is "good" for the people, the communities, the environment, the animals in agriculture - underlies entrepreneurs' decisions to tie their businesses to local farms and food. All entrepreneurs linked local food production to community, citing the value of supporting the people and places where they live and work. They talked about wanting to support the livelihoods of local farmers through their businesses and by extension expand the food producing capacity of the region's agricultural base to serve more local people. Many entrepreneurs also linked local food to more sustainable and ethical practices, believing the small-scale farming in the region provides a means to support a human-scale alternative to industrially-produced food. To further clarify this point, one participant gave the example of industrial-scale organic production of "cage free" chickens that never go outside.

The importance of transparency for entrepreneurs was also about developing trust with customers who also want to know who is growing their food and how. One entrepreneur said customers want to know that their meat is free of hormones and antibiotics and that the animals have been treated well. Stated by another participant, customers shop with them because they trust the business and can talk to owners about products and the farmers that grew them. Many local food entrepreneurs interviewed said that they visit the farms they source from in order to be able to communicate information to customers from firsthand knowledge.

Local food entrepreneurs use different strategies to navigate tensions between local food and market-based realities

Food-based businesses are generally challenging, with high failure rates and tight margins. Locally grown product is not always cost-effective or available in adequate quantities because of factors related to farm production scale, seasonality, transportation, distribution and handling, infrastructure, and inconsistent demand. These challenges are detailed in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Key challenges with local food described by local food entrepreneurs

Inconsistent demand: Although people like the idea of buying locally grown and raised foods, they do so inconsistently. Shoppers sometimes feel daunted by fresh foods (produce as well as meat) that are unfamiliar or they just want food that is easy and convenient. National food brands, who have developed "clean" lines of food in response to customer demand, provide shoppers with "sustainable" alternatives that are more convenient and cheaper than local foods. This is especially true for meat. Marketed with sustainability language in attractive packaging, shoppers in grocery stores feel "good enough" to purchase it instead.

Quality control: In relation to observable qualities like appearance and flavor, locally grown food is not always perfectly consistent. In addition, lack of product standardization can increase costs for entrepreneurs who have to invest more time in preparation. Adequate infrastructure for transportation and post-harvest handling can impact quality and consistency of supply,

Scale: The smaller scale of food production on the region's smaller acreage farms (in comparison to state and national farm acreage averages) has relevance to cost. In relation to the scale of production, local food entrepreneurs cited the higher cost of growing food locally and, in relation to what some customers are willing to pay, tighter profit margins for them.

Volume: For local food entrepreneurs, sourcing the volume they need for the products they offer and make (for their restaurants, for their wholesale customers, etc) has been an ongoing issue and relates variously to the scale of farming, to seasonality, and to issues of quality control.

Willingness to pay: Stated by one entrepreneur, "customers talk local but they don't want to pay for it." Accustomed to the cost of mass produced foods in mainstream markets, some consumers perceive local food to be more expensive; they do not factor in the higher cost of smaller-scale and/or more sustainable production.

In the context of the dominant marketplace, local food entrepreneurs' strategies are about making local food work financially while maintaining their values. Emerging directly from their expanded ideas of quality, entrepreneurs' strategies focus on building relationships with farmers and other local food entrepreneurs to cultivate quality and to build mutually supportive local-food focused networks. They use educational and engagement strategies to build trust in their businesses, to connect to communities, and to get people excited about the region's farms and locally produced foods. Strategies of diversification, perhaps more obviously than other strategies, allow entrepreneurs to negotiate market-based realities and build stability. These strategies are detailed below and summarized in Figure 2 at the end of the section.

Build relationships with farmers

All participants talked about the primacy of relationships, especially with farmers. The development of relationships between farmers and local food entrepreneurs builds mutual trust and a sense of mutual responsibility that is key to cultivating quality. Direct contact allows entrepreneurs to communicate what they want from farmers (e.g., products and growing practices), and ongoing feedback to farmers gives them the capacity to influence and improve the quality of farmers' products. Entrepreneurs observed that the consistency of relationships motivates farmers to provide high quality products as well as experiment and innovate with new practices and products. Equally, entrepreneurs talked about what they have learned from farmers - the nature of local, small-scale farming, how it differs from large-scale agriculture - and how that has impacted their expectations and the ways they work with local farmers and local food.

Collaborate with other local food entrepreneurs

Without exception participants talked about the presence of a community of local food entrepreneurs and the importance of collaborating with them. One entrepreneur characterized the local food community in the region as one with an "unspoken philosophy" of helping one another. Expanding on this, he stated, "everyone just wants to see this whole food community we have flourish and support itself." Another entrepreneur, a wholesaler, talked about the interdependency he feels between his business and his customers' businesses; when they are doing well, he is doing well. The chefs interviewed talked about the competitive but collaborative nature of independent restaurants in the region. Expressed by one, "We're not competition. There is enough room for all of us." Echoing this sentiment, another chef talked about the circle of independent restaurants who are all working to support local farms and communities but each in their own way.

Participants named multiple forms of collaboration with other local food entrepreneurs including sharing supplies and cost sharing space to store, process and preserve local crops, and/or create value-added products. All talked about the existence of a learning environment and a culture of sharing information, experiences, and strategies for working with local farms and food. Entrepreneurs with store fronts talked about sourcing and selling the products of other farmers and artisan food producers, a collaboration that provides an additional outlet for others' products and a means to diversify and increase the appeal of the product mix in their shops. Some entrepreneurs talked about the process of co-creating products, e.g., farmers growing special crops for chefs who create signature seasonal dishes and name them for the farm; or artisan food producers and chefs

collaborating on the creation of unique products for restaurant menus; or two artisan food producers combining their products to create a new product. Entrepreneurs also described the strategy of co-branding - where co-created products are named to show the partnership and communicate it to customers. Explaining the importance of co-branding, one entrepreneur said, "It's a selling point for us and people like to see those connections."

Diversify product offerings, market outlets, and/or business enterprises

Among the entrepreneurs interviewed, diversification emerged as a significant strategy. Entrepreneurs described three primary forms of diversification - diversifying business ventures, products, and market outlets. These strategies provide them with ways to reduce waste and increase profit margins, engage different kinds of customers, mitigate fluctuations in demand for their products, as well as source more local products. Expressed by one entrepreneur, "…I have a hard core devotion to diversity, because at this scale an entrepreneur can't afford to risk everything on one product, or one market, or one anything."

Some entrepreneurs have diversified within their businesses to add services and products as a means to draw more customers as well as reduce waste and increase revenue. Multiple entrepreneurs who began with a focus on fresh product (local produce as well as local meats) expanded into creating and selling prepared foods to address both perishability and profitability. For sellers of local meats, especially, prepared foods are a business avenue that can offer higher profit margins. One local meat entrepreneur explained that a business model that relies solely on selling meat retail, i.e., through the meat cases of local grocers, is not financially viable. Because local meats in the region are produced at smaller scales and are thus more expensive to produce, they have a relatively lower profit margin. Turning some of the meat he sells into hamburgers enables him to mitigate the financial challenge. Explaining this strategy, he stated, "There is more margin in the bread, lettuce, and french fries than in the meat. So when you put the meat with the bread and fixings you can raise the price of the sandwich." At the same time, he reflected, selling prepared foods provides him with a way to reach people who are intimidated by fresh meat counters. Offerings like local hamburgers and hotdogs create an "entry point" for those customers and create opportunities to educate them about the value of eating locally raised meats.

Entrepreneurs' strategies of product diversification also include vending the value-added products of other local food entrepreneurs as well as selling non-local products to satisfy a larger proportion of customer needs and tap into convenience. Two produce wholesalers variously added local meats, dairy, breads, and condiments to their selections to broaden their appeal. An entrepreneur of local meats talked about his decision to sell wine at the urging of his regular customers who would make separate stops to buy wine to have with the meat they purchased.

Several entrepreneurs also described the need to diversify their customers to manage the risk of uncertain markets. For some this strategy emerged from the experience of losing significant wholesale or retail accounts. These entrepreneurs and others talked especially about the peril of being too heavily reliant on one customer, and the strategy of a mixed customer base that might include retail grocers, restaurants, wholesale distributors, and direct markets. For the entrepreneurs who are also farmers, including direct sales (e.g., through farmers markets) in their overall market

mix is key to the way they build a loyal customer base that seeks out their products in other outlets.

Some entrepreneurs have diversified by opening other food-related businesses. In one example, a wholesaler of produce later opened a restaurant. The restaurant sources local produce from the wholesale business, and they use the restaurant to increase awareness in the community and create more demand for local food. In another example, a chef has diversified by opening more than one restaurant. The restaurants specialize in different types of cuisine and together appeal to a wider variety of customer tastes and preferences. This strategy has increased the chef's buying power and capacity to source more local product. The restaurants source whole animals and share a "nose to tail" butchery program, and together they source and preserve local foods into things like seasonal jams, sausage, and bitters.

Engage and educate customers

Activities focused on customer engagement and education are paramount for entrepreneurs. They use them to elevate the visibility of their businesses, establish trust in their offerings, and connect to the base of customers that want to feel connected to the people growing and producing their food.

Primary for entrepreneurs is communicating the names of the farms and other local food businesses producing the foods they offer, e.g., on boards and menus, on store signage, on product lists (i.e., of wholesalers), through social media and newsletters, and through face-to-face contact. Entrepreneurs talked about the trust this kind of transparency creates with customers who believe in the integrity of food being produced by local farmers. One chef explained, "[if] you talk about the product you are using, continually talk about the farmers you support, then the given is 'you are farm to table,' the given is that 'you are local,' the given is 'I trust you…cause I know you are always going to give me the best possible product.'" Another local food entrepreneur, tying locally sourced ingredients to integrity, stated that it is important to promote the source of their ingredients "to assure folks we are not selling out, not making an inferior product."

Of all the ways entrepreneurs can educate and engage with customers, most highlighted the power of face-to-face contact. Entrepreneurs talked especially about the value of cooking demonstrations, sampling, and taste testing on farms, at farmers markets, or in shops. Customers try products while listening to local food entrepreneurs talk about their farm or business story, give information about farming or business practices, and/or provide tips and instructions on how to prepare or cook with what customers are sampling. For entrepreneurs, these types of experiences are personally satisfying and often positively impact sales. One purveyor of locally raised meats talked about the difference sampling makes for customers with "sticker shock." He explained, "We cook samples [of local meats] as often as our staff can keep up with it…and there has not been one time that in almost two years where somebody said, 'meh.' Everybody says this is amazing!" One chef, referring to his experience cooking at farmers markets for shoppers, reflected that the impact is financial (in terms of bringing market customers to the restaurant) as well as personally gratifying: "…I am not going to lie to you and say I don't see the financial benefits from it, I am in business to be in business…but even greater for me is the opportunity to connect what I do for a living as a person and a chef with my community and touch people on the level of food."

Several entrepreneurs talked about the value of charity events for connecting directly with the community. Participating as product vendors or chefs, these events provide them with another space to engage directly and promote their businesses and products. In comparison to traditional forms of marketing like advertising, some said they prefer to participate in charity events. One entrepreneur explained, "We do a lot of events.…That gets us the face to face and have people taste our product and have that conversation with them, and that is probably the best marketing tool."

Chefs and entrepreneurs with shops stressed the key role of their staff in creating "in-house experiences" that connect patrons to farmers and to the larger sense of community patrons are looking for. Several entrepreneurs make staff engagement with local farms and food a priority so that staff can educate customers about local offerings from firsthand experience. Some entrepreneurs invite farmers to the business to educate staff about their farm and products. Others organize farm field trips for staff. Of farm field trips, one chef said they get staff more excited about their work, more appreciative of the products farmers grow, and, for kitchen staff in particular, more creative in the kitchen. Another entrepreneur reflected that this kind of investment in staff has resulted in long-term employees who are vital to creating a welcoming community experience for regular customers: "…there is a comfort when our customers come in the store and see the same faces, and we know what you want, and we start getting it ready before they even start telling [us] what they want. People love that stuff."

Figure 2: Key strategies entrepreneurs use to work with local food

Build relationships with farmers

- Visit the farms that grow or raise the food being sourced. With first hand experience, entrepreneurs and staff are better able to share information and educate customers.
- Invite farmers to visit the business. Farmers experience the ambiance and culture of the business and learn how their products are used and/or presented to customers.
- Plan with farmers. Organize meetings with farmers to establish plans for the upcoming season, discuss products, price, and/or new opportunities, and build relationships.
- Cross-promote farms and local products to customers. Use in-store signage, boards, menus, social media, and other outreach to promote the farms where local food is sourced. Co-brand with farmers, e.g., name menu dishes or artisan products for the farms that supply key ingredients.

Collaborate with other local food entrepreneurs

- Cost share space to store, process and preserve local crops, and/or create value-added products. Source supplies together.
- Share information, experiences, and strategies for working with local farms and food.
- Source and sell other local products. In shops and at farm stands, the products of other local food entrepreneurs to offer a wider variety.
- Co-create products. For example, chefs collaborate with farmers to grow special crops for signature seasonal dishes; artisan food producers and chefs collaborate on unique products for restaurant dishes and menus; artisan food producers combine their products to create something novel.
- Co-brand. Name co-created products to show and promote entrepreneur collaborations

Diversify product offerings, market outlets, and/or business enterprises

- Diversify products. Source and vend the products of other local food entrepreneurs as well as products from non-local sources to increase the appeal of product offerings, draw more customers, and tap into the desire for convenience. For entrepreneurs that sell fresh product, expand into creating and selling prepared foods to address product perishability, increase profit margins, and appeal to the desire for ready-to-eat foods.
- Diversify into other business enterprises. Open other food-related businesses to increase buying power, cross promote, and access other customer bases. For some entrepreneurs, this strategy enables them to source more locally produced foods.
- Diversify markets. Diversify the mix of market outlets/customers to manage the risk of uncertainty and the vulnerability of being too heavily invested in one customer.

Engage and educate customers to build trust and demand

- Be transparent. Communicate the names of the farms and other local food businesses where food is sourced, e.g., on boards and menus, on store signage, on product lists, through social media and newsletters, etc.
- Engage customers through face-to-face contact. This elevates the visibility of businesses, builds trust in business offerings, and provides customers with a connection to their food
    - invite visitors to the farm/business/facility; show them what is grown, what is made, processes and practices, etc.
    - conduct cooking demonstrations, sampling, and taste testing
    - participate in community charity events as vendors or chefs
    - engage staff with local farms and food so that they can educate customers about local farms and local offerings from firsthand knowledge

Local food entrepreneurs support the creation of a regional culture that values local farms and food

Through collaboration, local food entrepreneurs have helped to create networks of independent businesses linked in their desire to support local agriculture and make local food central to what they do. Entrepreneurs' activities have helped to create a regional culture that values the region's farms and the food they produce, which has impacted the way people shop and eat as well as what and how farmers grow. Increased demand for local food has created more opportunities for entrepreneurs to start or expand into enterprises with a local food focus.

Local food entrepreneurs' activities stimulate the local food economy

Entrepreneur collaborations have created a web of relationships around local farms and food, which has elevated the visibility of local farming, increased demand for local food, and created opportunities for other local farm and food linked enterprises. Among the entrepreneurs interviewed were those that self-identified as early pioneers in local food in the region. For these entrepreneurs, awareness of and demand for local food largely did not exist when they started their businesses, some of them as early as the 1990s. Chefs in particular were some of the earliest entrepreneurs in the region who, putting a premium on freshness and flavor, saw the value of the region's farming base and the opportunity it provided to source exceptional ingredients.

Entrepreneurs that came later (to local food and/or to the region) reflected that the region's culture was integral to their decision to start a venture tied to the region's farms. Two of them said the region stood out as having a population that wanted "good food." One, a chef, talked specifically about the role that farmers markets played in her decision to open a restaurant in the region. She observed, "…there is some kind of a tie between successful farmers markets and a thriving independent restaurant community." For her, the vibrancy of the region's farmers markets was an external sign that the region's population was supportive of restaurants that prioritized quality and creativity in food. Another entrepreneur, a wholesaler, also said that in looking around the country for a location to start his business this region stood out as one with a population that desired high quality food.

Reflecting on changes in the region over the past 20 to 30 years, early entrepreneurial leaders noted that with shifts in awareness and demand the economy tied to local farms and food has flourished and created more opportunities for more entrepreneurs and farmers. With the changes, there are "better systems and more local options" - easier ways to get local food and a greater diversity of food grown and made locally. There is no need to "hunt for local." Though farmers markets are still a valuable resource, entrepreneurs rely on the webs of relationships that have developed with other local food entrepreneurs and community organizations that are supportive of local farming and food. In addition, alongside more demand, people are willing to pay more for food produced locally and sustainably. Noted by one entrepreneur, "[now] there is a market available in this area…the concept of local and sustainable agriculture creates an environment where we can survive and thrive…"

Local food entrepreneurs influence the qualities of local food

Reflecting on the relationships they have developed with farmers, entrepreneurs observed how those relationships have influenced what farmers grow and how. Communicating their concerns about food grown with harmful chemicals, they have seen changes in farmers' growing practices, and through ongoing feedback to farmers, they have seen qualities like flavor and appearance improve. In addition, entrepreneurs observed that relationships not only provide the means to cultivate the food qualities they desire, they provide farmers with the motivation to experiment with different products and practices.

Chefs in particular reflected on the influence of independent restaurants on the region's local food system, and specifically the role they have played helping to expand the diversity of foods that are grown and available locally. Described by one, chefs "thirst" for ingredients that are new and different, and they encourage farmers to "break out" of growing the same crops and crop varieties year after year. Noted by another, chefs also influence what products show up at farmers markets for the broader public and, in doing so, help to increase demand for a wider diversity of foods. Describing the relationship between chefs, farmers, and the public, he stated, "You introduce the farmer to something new, and they introduce it to customers and other farmers."

Figure 3: The relationship between chefs and farmers markets in the region

Chefs with a focus on local, seasonal food rely on farmers markets to

- find sources of locally grown food
- meet farmers and develop relationships with them
- find inspiration for menus
- learn about what's grown and what can be grown in the region

Chef-led cooking demonstrations at farmers markets

- introduce market customers to new foods and different ways of cooking
- inspire market customers to cook at home with new foods
- increase sales of farmers' products
- increase the community visibility of chefs' restaurants

Seasonal restaurant menus

- introduce patrons to a wide variety of locally grown foods
- inspire patrons to look for those foods at farmers markets to cook with at home

Local food entrepreneurs influence the way people eat

Many of the entrepreneurs interviewed noted that they see the role their business plays in connecting patrons to the region's farms and local foods - creating more awareness and demand and impacting the way people shop and eat. Chefs in particular reflected on their impact through seasonal menus and the cooking they do at farmers markets. One chef, referring to his experience with cooking demonstrations, reflected that he teaches shoppers how to use local product that they may not know or know how to prepare. Recalling the last time he did a cooking demonstration, he relayed farmers' observations on the value of cooking at markets: "…I pull in my truck to unload, and I have three different farmers come over and thank me for being there…They say, 'we see an

increase in our sales when you are here.' I said, 'why?' They said, 'because whatever you cook, [shoppers] want to take home and try to cook themselves.'" Another chef described the "trickle down effect" a restaurant can have on patrons. Chefs that tie restaurant menus to local farms and seasonal ingredients introduce patrons to new foods. When customers see foods they've tried at restaurants at the farmers market, they want to buy and cook with them at home.

Entrepreneurs of locally raised meats also described seeing the influence of their educational activities on customers. Customers that hear farmer's stories, learn how locally raised meats are different, and taste the flavor of local meats, are willing to pay for more sustainably and humanely produced meat. One chef in particular reflected on her restaurant's shift to a whole animal meat sourcing strategy and its impact on restaurant customers. In conversation with a farmer, she learned that it would take 24 cows to fulfill one order for a case of skirt steaks. Recognizing that small-scale meat production does not have the means to realistically fulfill demand for common cuts of meat, she began buying beef in forequarters to butcher in-house to better support local farmers and a more sustainable model of meat production. Talking about this shift, she stated, "So by buying a forequarter we get to then look at that whole thing and turn the whole thing into what is going to work for us." Continuing, she explained that this approach to sourcing local meat gets passed onto customers through novel cuts and information about why the restaurant does it in this way: "…then we get to educate our guests when we have a variety of different steak cuts on [the menu] that change and this is what we are serving because there is only one of those [on an animal]…"

Conclusion

This research points to the active role of entrepreneurs in local food system building and to the significance of personal relationships. These relationships are central to local food entrepreneurs' decisions to link their businesses to local farms and other local food enterprises. They are key to cultivating quality, which entrepreneurs conceptualize broadly to include tangible attributes (like freshness and flavor) as well intangible non-market values tied to transparency, trust, and community and environmental wellbeing. Sourcing food from local farmers and other purveyors of local food is a means to not only procure exceptional products, it is a means to support the development of a different kind of food system, one that provides an alternative to mass-produced food production. The entrepreneurs in this study see their role in its creation.

Local food entrepreneurs have a vital role to play in local food system building efforts precisely because they are working in the spaces where values-based local food intersects with the realities of the dominant marketplace. In this context, they have employed strategies to both shift societal food norms and industry standards as well as accommodate them. Entrepreneurs see the impacts of their efforts - in influencing the diversification of locally produced foods, in creating an environment that supports more local food entrepreneurs, and in engaging the public with food in meaningful ways and changing the way they eat. Through their strategies to create more space for local food and make it financially viable for their businesses, local food entrepreneurs are strengthening the importance of non-market values and helping to create a regional culture that values and supports local food production.