



# Minnesota's Local Food Climate

*A report on local food commissioned by  
The McKnight Foundation*

Jay Walljasper



# Foreword

*In philanthropy there are trends that ebb and flow. Sometimes they are mere phrases that become the latest buzzwords, but other times they are more substantial concepts that stick around for years. In this latter category, food and food systems have increasingly been coming up on the Foundation's radar for the past few years. Our various program areas intersect with the food system in different ways, and have experienced increasing attention, conversations, and general concerns about where and how we get our food.*

*Because we at McKnight foster a spirit of inquiry among our staff we have had several internal conversations about how our work connects to the food system primarily to understand what our grantees are doing and to share information across our programs. Through these conversations we became aware of how complex and dynamic, both locally and globally, the growing "food - local foods - food systems" arena is. While there are a myriad of different interests and ways people are involved, McKnight's own interests are very specific and aligned with our current programs.*

*As part of our inquiry, we commissioned a paper about local food systems to help us develop a shared understanding of what's happening with food and increase our knowledge. We contracted with Jay Walljasper, noted Minnesota writer and journalist, to write a kind of "Local Foods 101" report, and we decided it was such a good piece that we want to share it with others who might be interested.*

*To be clear, McKnight is not creating or even exploring a new funding focus, we're just interested in learning more about how our current strategies connect with this issue. As we share Jay's report, we also want to provide our grantees and partners a clearer sense of what McKnight does in this arena and, as important, what we don't do — since McKnight doesn't have a local food systems program or do any local "food funding" except for notable points of intersection with our core programs.*

*For example, McKnight's **River program** is primarily focused on improving the water quality of the Mississippi River. Right now, however, our nation's agricultural practices are the leading cause of pollution in the river and the primary cause of the Dead Zone in the Gulf of Mexico. Since how we farm is in large part a reflection of federal policy and subsidy programs, our River program works with groups trying to change the most harmful agricultural practices so that growing food doesn't come at the expense of polluting America's greatest river. While this clearly overlaps with food and food systems, McKnight is involved purely because of our interest in water quality.*

*Likewise for the McKnight-supported **Minnesota Initiative Foundations** (MIFs) working in Greater Minnesota, local foods come up in the context of their work on economic and community development. Local foods have diversified some small town economies through farmers markets and local restaurants, but they are just a small part of the mix of businesses and community led projects that they intersect with and invest in. This isn't a specific focus for the MIFs, but certainly a logical part of their broader economic and community work.*

*Finally, our **Region and Communities program** focuses on affordable housing, healthy neighborhoods, and sustainable regional growth. The local food system has increasingly come up in the context of neighborhood development and urban land use — of interest to McKnight because we fund community building in several neighborhoods, and a few of our grantees have focused on urban agriculture to develop their neighborhoods. Again, we're involved because of our interests in improving neighborhoods, but our investments also have a collateral impact on local food systems.*

*Beyond these examples, McKnight's staff and board do our best to stay open to the changes happening in our community, and particularly the changes that our grantees are dealing with.*

*As an issue and as a part of our culture, food is clearly all around us, and is being given a lot of careful thought and attention. In this context, we offer this paper for your reading and reflection. If you have comments or questions, please send them to [programs@mcknight.org](mailto:programs@mcknight.org).*

**Kate Wolford**  
**President, The McKnight Foundation**

## MINNESOTA'S LOCAL FOOD CLIMATE

The sudden rise of public interest—indeed, outright passion—about locally grown food is unprecedented. It took a full generation for ideals like organic food and sustainable farming to achieve the widespread enthusiasm that the local food movement has gained in the last five years.

Even more surprising is that local foods represent an abrupt shift from what's conventionally viewed as humanity's path forward to the future: economic consolidation, technological complexity and, most of all, globalization. The sweep of history seems more likely to bring us brand-name microwave dinners trucked two thousands miles than farmer's markets, community gardens and heirloom tomatoes.

Well, actually we have the choice of both. A large share of our food comes out of an industrialized food system that puts a premium on fast, highly processed foods that need minimal preparation and are manufactured from the cheapest possible ingredients produced in massive quantities on far-away feedlots and highly-mechanized, chemically-intensive farms. This system delivers us a lot of calories that cost relatively little in the check out line, but with a hidden price tag in health care and environmental damage that comes due later. Local foods account for only a fraction of what we eat today.

Yet interest is skyrocketing. According to USDA data published in the *Washington Post*, local food sales are estimated to top \$7 billion this year, up from just \$4.8 billion in 2008. The number of farmers' markets nationwide jumped from 2456 in 1998 to 5274 in 2008. In the early 1990s, 86,000 U.S. farms sold directly to local consumers; now it's 136,000.

## MINNESOTA HOMEGROWN

In Minnesota, the figures are equally impressive. According to a report from the think tank Minnesota 2020, farmers markets alone contribute \$64 million to the state economy and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), in which households buy shares of a local farm's harvest, adds \$10.5 million more.

The number of Minnesota farmers' market has nearly doubled in five years, from 74 to 141, according to Paul Hugnin, Local Foods Coordinator for the Minnesota Department of Agriculture. Meanwhile CSAs have grown sixfold over the same period, 14 to 85. Eleven thousand Minnesotans were served by CSAs in 2010— three times the number in 2000, according to research cited at a McKnight Foundation program chat in August 2011.

And this accounts for only part of our homegrown harvest. Foods from local farmers are now served in 123 school districts, reaching 60 percent of the state's kids. At the head of the class are St. Paul and Hopkins schools, the Dover-Eyota district in southeast Minnesota and White Earth reservation schools in northwest, according to Hugnin. But the valedictorian of school-to-farm is Ridgeway Community School in Houston, Minnesota, which served an average of four pounds of locally grown food monthly to every student, thanks to partnerships with three area farmers

and Land Stewardship Project. A decade ago, only 10 school districts featured any kind of Farm-to-School program.

Sixty-eight percent of the state's hospitals are now serving local produce at least some of the time with St. Luke's in Duluth and Lakewood Health Systems in Staples undertaking major commitments to local foods, according to a report prepared by the University of Minnesota Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships with USDA funding. Sacred Heart hospital in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, plans to purchase at least ten percent of its food from a local farmers coop.

Thanks to the pioneering efforts of Minnesota's 42 food coops (half of which are located outside the Twin Cities), tens of thousands of state residents regularly sit down to enjoy locally raised vegetables, fruit, meat, eggs, dairy products, grains, wild rice, beans and prepared foods, sweetened by Minnesota or Wisconsin honey and maple syrup. Minneapolis's Wedge coop, the nation's largest with 13,000 members, now owns Gardens of Eagan, a 100-acre farm in suburban Farmington, Minnesota that has been selling produce locally grown since 1973. The Twin Cities-based grocery chains Kowalski's and Lunds-Byerly's also feature a wide selection of fresh and prepared local foods, and there is a program to get more local produce in Minneapolis' 360 corner stores.

Homegrown cuisine is now on the menu at restaurants across the state, 88 of which from Grand Rapids to Amboy have joined the Heartland Food Project sponsored by the Minnesota Project. You can also order from a wide selection of regional beers or wine at most of them—Minnesota now sports 12 breweries (plus a number of brewpubs) and 21 wineries, up from 9 in 2006. Despite local foods' reputation as pricey, eating out locally can meet any budget—from celebrated fine dining such as St. Paul's Heartland, Minneapolis' Lucia's and Grand Marais' Angry Trout to an inexpensive breakfast at the Birchwood Café or Common Roots. Common Roots, a casual spot famous for its made-from-scratch bagels, boasts that 90 percent of its food is sourced from the region between Fargo and Milwaukee. Even burritos from Chipolte feature peppers grown by Pahl's Farm in Apple Valley during growing season.

“A small group of people have been talking about local foods since the 1970s, but now there is so much going on that you can't even keep track of it all,” notes JoAnne Berkenkamp, local food program director at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy in Minneapolis.

This explosion of local food offerings has been sparked by enterprising growers, retailers, chefs and restaurateurs. Some have been in business for a century, such as Sno-Pac frozen foods in Caledonia and Carr Valley Cheese in LaValle, Wisconsin, while the ink is barely dry on the business plans of others. This bounty of fresh food encompasses fruit and vegetables from backyards, community gardens and urban agriculture plots along with growers such as Riverbend farm near Delano and Hoch Orchards in La Crescent. Local food also includes eggs from Larry Schultz in Owatonna, milk from Cedar Summit Farm in New Prague, grass-fed beef from 1000 Hills in Cannon Falls, butter from Hope Creamery in Hope and Pastureland Cooperative in Goodhue, hydroponic tomatoes from Bushel Boy in Owatonna and corn chips from Whole Grain Milling in Wellcome.

Yet credit for the remarkable rise of local foods in Minnesota also belongs to some names you will never see in the grocery aisles of your favorite store. Food processors like Lorentz meats in Cannon Falls and distributors like Coop Partners Warehouse in St. Paul, are essential to local foods becoming more widely available.

A whole constellation of volunteer efforts and non-profit organizations awakened Minnesotans' interest in eating closer to home. These includes government initiatives like the municipally-sponsored Homegrown Minneapolis and the state's 30-year old Minnesota Grown label; university programs like the UM-Morris's ambitious campaign to promote local foods throughout the campus and the community; major institutions such as Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota which launched a 5-year campaign to promote healthy eating in North Minneapolis; think tanks like the Institute for Agriculture and Food Policy and Crossroads Resource Center; advocacy groups such as Land Stewardship Project and Minnesota Food Association; and scores of other worthy projects.

Scores of grassroots organizations—such as the Main Street Project, Lanesboro Local and plentiful volunteers at farmers markets—focus on helping people in rural communities grow and sell more food locally. While other groups have sprung up to promote urban agriculture, including Youth Farm Market, Gardening Matters, Frogtown Farms, Community Table and Northside Fresh. The Urban Ag Alliance Task Force (funded by McKnight's Regions and Communities program) convenes many inner city groups to exchange ideas and create collaborations.

## WHY LOCAL? WHY NOW?

In her new cookbook *The Northern Heartland Kitchen*, Minneapolis author Beth Dooley offers ten good reasons for the booming interest in local foods. Here are her thoughts, along with my commentary based on more than 20 interviews with local food authorities from many walks of life

1. **Better Taste:** Each item on a Midwesterner's dinner plate has traveled on average 1500 miles, so locally grown foods naturally taste fresher.
2. **Greater Variety:** There's no place for delicious heirloom and heritage foods in the industrialized food supply, which prizes mass-scale standardization over diversity and regional delights.
3. **Healthier Diet:** The nutritional value of food evaporates due to lengthy shipping and the over-processing done to prevent spoilage. Dooley notes that a bag of spinach loses at least half of its key nutrients on the trip from California to your table. The long-distance, high-calorie, high-preservative food that dominates grocery shelves is linked to obesity and a host of health problems. The annual health care cost for diabetes alone is \$147 billion—20 percent of America's total food budget.

4. **Cleaner Environment:** Celery, bacon and ice cream travelling halfway across the continent spew pollution and waste energy. Seventeen percent of U.S. energy use goes to the food system, according to federal research, a lot of it for shipping. Long-distance food also fosters massive agricultural operations dependent on dousing cropland with pesticides and synthetic fertilizers.
5. **Stronger Economy:** Buying local keeps wealth flowing through your community, rather than being siphoned off to mega-farms or corporate headquarters elsewhere. Even in a major farm state like Minnesota that is home to some of the world’s largest agribusiness companies, 90 percent of our food comes from somewhere else, which adds up to \$11 billion dollars lost according to June Mathiowetz of the Minneapolis Health Department. Ken Meter of the Crossroads Resource Center points to a local food initiative in eight counties surrounding Waterloo, Iowa that sparked \$2.2 million in new food sales.
6. **Safer Food:** The further food travels, the higher the risk of contamination. The origin of recent food poisoning outbreaks, which struck people across the country, has been very difficult to trace.
7. **More Farmers:** Local food supports small farms, which opens up opportunities for more people to make a living on the land. In Minnesota, Land Stewardship Project and the Minnesota Food Association run training programs to help new farmers—including many youth, immigrants and women—meet the growing demand for local foods. Small-scale agriculture on the edges of metropolitan areas shows promise for creating green jobs and checking the growth of urban sprawl.
8. **Richer Sense of Community:** Farmer’s markets and other local food opportunities bring us together with our neighbors and with farmers. “It’s human nature to want to know the people who grow our food,” explains Julie Ristau, co-chair of Homegrown Minneapolis and co-director of On the Commons. “We yearn for that kind of connection.” This raises hope that more people buying locally grown food will boost rural Minnesota’s economy, helping bridge the state’s stark urban-rural divide.
9. **Deeper Connection with Nature:** Local food links us with the surrounding landscape. And when we cook with the seasons, it means eating dishes that are in tune with our bodies for the time of year. Beth Dooley calculates that 70-80 percent of our winter diet can be easily sourced locally.
10. **Promoting Fairness:** Mustafa Sundiata launched Northside Fresh after learning that Minneapolis’s North Side suffers the highest rates of heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol—all of which are related to diet—of any community in Hennepin County. This is just one of many groups springing up to increase opportunities for low-income people to eat fresh food, grow their own, and learn about cooking and preserving. Additionally, workers on distant megafarms are paid rock-bottom wages and exposed to pesticides.



## WHAT, EXACTLY, IS LOCAL FOOD?

There is no precise definition for local food. A rule of thumb for many people is anything produced within 400 miles of where you live. For folks in the Twin Cities this includes a swath of prime farmland sweeping roughly from Chicago to Omaha to Winnipeg. Some “locavores”—the 2007 Oxford American Dictionary’s “word of the year” meaning people dedicated to eating locally—draw the line at 100 miles, which still includes most all of local-food-rich southeastern Minnesota and producers as far away as Willmar, St. Cloud and Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

What local food does *not* mean is someone hectoring you for enjoying coffee from Guatemala, curry spices from India, bananas from Ecuador or lettuce from California in the depths of January. Only the most extreme locavores would limit our diet to what can be found locally in the middle of a Minnesota winter. However, chomping a New Zealand apple while Minnesota orchards feature tasty Honeycrisps and Haralsons might elicit a friendly suggestion from local food advocates.

Maggi Adamek, a food policy strategic consultant and affiliate of the UM Center for Rural Design, adds another layer of meaning when she describes local food as “Food from here for here produced in a way that builds local economies and promotes environmental sustainability.” In this sense, “local” describes not just food from nearby, but the whole system of production, processing and distribution that brings it to our tables. Local food system implies a satisfying web of relationships, not just a commodity on the grocery shelves about which we know nothing except its price. Even if we aren’t buying food directly from the farmer, we’re reassured that it was grown in a way that did not pollute the earth, deplete the land, mistreat animals or exploit workers.

Rob King, an applied economist at the University of Minnesota, notices that “people equate local with a lot of things they really want”—a clean environment, better access to good food for everyone, better nutrition (although he is not convinced that local food is necessarily “the best way to accomplish all of these goals”). Yet currently, there is no requirement that local food be anything other than grown locally.

## LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS VS. INDUSTRIAL FOOD SYSTEMS

Richfield-based researcher Ken Meter, who has conducted 56 Local Food System Assessments in 23 states, describes the purpose of a food system as “to build health, wealth, connection and capacity in our communities.” He goes on to note, “Wealth is certainly built by our current food system, yet primarily for the intermediaries who buy primary farm products, process them into convenient consumer items, and distribute them to retail outlets.” That model represents the dominant industrial food system, to which many local food activists are working to create an alternative.

But that alternative has yet to reach many in low-income communities and rural Minnesota, notes Julie Ristau, a former hog farmer who later held an endowed chair in agricultural systems at the University of Minnesota. Even if they have misgivings about the quality of food produced

by the industrial system, most folks—including many with high incomes—continue to buy it for four major reasons:

**Access:** In many places, there are simply no fresh and few unprocessed foods available. “It’s ironic you can be in the middle of farm country and not find any local produce,” observes a representative at Blue Cross Blue Shield.

**Price:** The industrial food system succeeds wildly at one thing: delivering us food in large quantities at low prices. “People expect food to be cheap,” concedes Riverbend Farm’s Greg Reynolds, who since 1992 has grown organic produce on 80 acres near Delano. “But the food is cheap because of exploitation—of workers, animals and the land.” Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin, a native of Guatemala who helps Latino immigrants take up poultry and vegetable farming through the Rural Enterprise Center in Northfield, adds, “I am surprised by how much the idea that food is cheap has sunk into the American psyche”

**Familiarity:** Packaged, processed food packed with preservatives, sugar and sodium is what many people grew up eating. A lot of households are not sure how to cook with fresh, local ingredients, which is why cooking and canning classes are now becoming popular.

**Farm Policy:** The one big reason behind all these other reasons is federal agriculture policy. The industrial food system tower rises upon a solid foundation of federal farm programs that overwhelmingly encourage commodity crops like corn and soybeans. In fact, all fruits and vegetables are termed “specialty crops”, and receive almost no subsidies or crop insurance protection. “We need to level the playing field for local and organic food production compared with the industrial food system,” advises Berkenkamp. “Most farmers today only make it through government payouts,” adds food strategy consultant Maggi Adamek.

Right now the contest between local and industrial food systems is no match. Despite the huge growth in recent years, both nationally and in Minnesota, local food accounts for only a tiny dab on Americans’ plates. While \$7 billion in sales sounds impressive, that’s out of \$800 billion in total food sold, or about one percent. “It’s a drop in the bucket of all the food that is consumed,” points out Rob King.

Still in an industry this immense there is plenty of room for homegrown Davys to thrive before Goliath even notices. Ken Meter lists the Twin Cities-Madison-Chicago corridor as one of four local food strongholds nationally along with New England, California and the Pacific Northwest. “I already live in an alternative food system—I shop at the co-op or Kowalski’s, grow a big garden in my backyard, go to the neighborhood farmer’s market,” says Julie Ristau of Minneapolis. “But that’s not available to everyone.”

If local food sales continue their steady growth, aided perhaps by further spikes in gas and diesel prices, then the industrial food system may have something to worry about. But first, Minnesota’s nascent local food systems will have to overcome the following challenges, with help from the philanthropic community, forward-looking business investors and political reforms in agricultural policies.

## CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE EMERGING LOCAL FOOD SECTOR

**Challenge: Minnesota’s long winters and short growing season.** Let’s face it: We’re not Northern California—the birthplace of America’s local food movement where crops grow nearly year-round.

**Opportunities: The Lost Science of Food Preservation. Indoor Farmers’ Markets. Extending the Growing Season. Solar-Powered Greenhouses. Indoor Agriculture.** The truth is, Native Americans and white immigrants did find enough to eat in Minnesota through long winters—though without the variety we’ve come to expect at the grocery store. We can relearn some of the lost art of food storage and preservation practiced here a century ago. Beth Dooley notes that some varieties of carrots actually taste better in February when kept in a root cellar, and in January Corinne Shindelar of the Minneapolis-based Independent Natural Foods Retailers Association enjoys fresh tomatoes, which she carefully wrapped in September. Of course, we’ll always eat some imported lettuce, vegetables and fruit during the frigid months but local sources can provide our meat, fish, milk, cheese, eggs, bread, grain, potatoes, canned and frozen produce, etc. More year-round public markets—as found in Milwaukee, Madison, Cleveland and other snow belt cities—would aid local food efforts. The Minneapolis Armory, currently a parking garage, would make an excellent market venue, according to Dan Spock of the Minnesota Historical Society.

Innovative farmers are also extending the growing season by building hoop houses, low-cost greenhouses fabricated from plastic sheets which give them a head start on the planting season and help fend off early frosts. Traditional greenhouses are being made more affordable and sustainable by renewable energy. Red juicy Bushel Boy tomatoes grown in Owatonna greenhouses can be found year-round in local grocery stores at prices competitive with the hard pink ones shipped in from California or Mexico. Shindelar and June Mathiowetz both advocate building community greenhouses, offering a solution to getting fresh food into inner city communities.

In frosty Milwaukee Growing Power—founded by former NBA player Will Allen, who Michael Pollan just recognized as one of the world’s “7 Most Important Foodies”—is pioneering vertical agriculture, where fish farms, solar-powered greenhouses, commercial kitchens, classrooms and storage facilities share a five story building. And Burlington, Vermont—which matches us snowfall for snowfall, cold spell for cold spell—boasts Intervale Farm, a 350-acre non-profit urban farm created 30 years ago on abandoned land that now provides 10 percent of the city’s food, according to *Kiplinger’s* magazine.

**Challenge: Producing local food in big enough quantities to supply grocery stores, restaurants and large institutions.** Reliability is key to the industrial food system’s business model. Customers know they will get what they need when they need it. Small local food vendors typically can’t offer this kind of certainty.

**Opportunities: Food Hubs. Commercial Kitchens. Small Business Incubators. Improved Processing & Distribution.** “If I want to buy 200 pounds of local apples a week, how many

farmers do I need to get in touch with?” asks a Blue Cross Blue Shield representative. “Well, a food hub can make that easy.” Food hubs aggregate a variety of foods from numerous of producers that makes them convenient for large-scale purchases. The best known example is the Co-op Partners warehouse in St. Paul, which ensures a steady supply of local food to local co-ops—a successful model that could be expanded or borrowed from to serve other sectors. There’s also growing interest in creating community food hubs around the state, which would combine a distribution center or network with other needs such as a commercial kitchen for food processing, classrooms for cooking classes and maybe a food shelf of healthy local food. Gardening Matters, a network of community gardeners, organized three hubs in inner city Minneapolis neighborhoods during 2011.

Another strategy is to stock existing food distributors with more locally grown products. The Minnesota office of Sodexo, a national food distributor with \$8 billion in sales, now delivers 75 local or sustainably raised products to 40 corporate food services, 20 hospitals and 12 colleges in Minnesota, according to Ken Meter’s report “Promising Community-Based Food Systems Initiatives”. This effort began when the University of Minnesota-Morris contacted them about serving more local and sustainable foods.

The lack of processing facilities is another hurdle to the local food movement. Although Minnesota is home to more than 200 meat processing plants and lockers—many of which survive thanks to an aspect of local food not often discussed, deer hunting—most don’t cater to small farmers or are not inspected, which means the meat cannot be sold commercially. Food safety regulations and the lack of facilities for small batches also stymie other kinds of local food growers and entrepreneurs. Minnesota’s recent pickle bill does allow home-canned goods to be sold at farmers’ markets, but only if sales total less than \$5000 a year. To incubate new food businesses the city of Minneapolis has opened five commercial kitchens for public use, and others can be found in Wadena, Willmar and Northfield. Even more ambitious is the Western Wisconsin Local Food Enterprise Center in Viroqua, which hopes to replace 80 jobs in a closed NCR plant by turning the 100,000-square foot facility into a distribution and processing center serving the growing taste for local foods in the Twin Cities, Chicago, Milwaukee, Madison and points between.

**Challenge: Feeding 7-9 Billion People With Local Food.** Dating back to UM grad Norman Borlaug, it’s been argued that only export-oriented industrialized agriculture can feed the world. First organic and, now, local food advocates face frequent charges that they are indifferent to the plight of starving millions in Africa and Asia.

**Opportunities: Level the Playing Field Between Small and Large Farmers Internationally. Focus on Food Access.** Nationally recognized food systems researcher Ken Meter turns this question around: “Can we feed the world with industrial agriculture?” with the high levels of environmental damage, energy use and topsoil depletion caused by chemical-heavy mechanized farming. “A lot of studies show that small farms are more efficient in growing food,” Meter says. “It’s largely the tax structure that makes big farms more profitable.” Additionally, agricultural policies in the U.S. and around the world have consciously shortchanged small farmers in the belief that massively scaled agriculture is more efficient.

Aimee Witteman of the McKnight Foundation Environment Program notes that 75 percent of U.S. grain is exported to the world's 20 wealthiest countries, not impoverished nations in the developing world. "When I worked at Oxfam America the lesson we learned is that communities do the best when they can grow food where they live."

Dating back to Frances Moore Lappe in the 1970s, analysts and activists have argued that hunger is a problem of distribution more than of production. There's enough food to go around, but it's not getting to all the people who need it. The city of Belo Horizonte (2.5 million), located in Brazil's agricultural heartland, got serious about improving access to local food 20 years ago by opening "people's restaurants" serving healthy homegrown lunches for less than 50 cents a portion. They also opened farmer's markets, including moveable ones that tour low-income neighborhoods, community and school gardens, plus nutrition and cooking classes. The result: Infant mortality fell by 50 percent and Belo Horizonte is the only Brazilian city where consumption of fruit and vegetables has increased. All of this, which serves 40 percent of the city's population according to city officials, is accomplished for about \$10 million yearly, less than two percent of the municipal budget.

**Challenge: Reducing Overblown Expectations About What Local Food Can Immediately Accomplish.** The meteoric rise of local foods may leave the impression that it's a cure-all for our pressing problems. Nourishing the poor. Creating green jobs. Reknitting communities. Reducing energy use. Reviving local communities. Restoring public health. Saving the Earth. "I worry about too many feel-good stories coming out, which makes people think more fundamental change is happening than actually has," confesses Joanne Berkenkamp of IATP.

**Opportunities: Urban Co-op Farms. Good Food Charter. Food Congress. Pesticide Tax. Local Food Regional Plan. Farm-to-School Programs.** Clearly the local food movement has struck a chord with millions of Americans, and shows genuine promise for improving health, nutrition and local economies. But even after five years of steady growth, and the support of influential figures like Michelle Obama, it's still a ragtag operation compared to the economic might and political clout of agribusiness. There's still plenty that needs to be done for local food to live up to its potential.

The good news is that local food advocates in Minnesota and western Wisconsin are animated by original ideas and examples from across the heartland that could make a difference here. Mustafa Sundiata looks to Cleveland's Evergreen Cooperative, which has a contract with the Cleveland Clinic to grow fresh greens on inner city farms. Julie Ristau points to the Michigan Good Food Charter, drafted by farmers and community groups across the state, and the Ohio Food Congress which connects local food producers with activists, artists, investors and one another. Ken Meter's wide-ranging research highlights a regional master plan in Waterloo, Ontario, that encourages local food production and Iowa's tax on farm pesticides which funds the Leopold Center's groundbreaking study of local and sustainable agriculture practices.

Rob King, who registers some skepticism about the movement, nonetheless gives Minnesota high marks for farmer's markets, local food in grocery stores, CSAs and especially farm-to-school programs throughout the state, which he praises for "really making a difference. It shapes kids' food habits and touches their lives."

Collie Graddick of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture launched the Community Table project to link Hmong Farmers with inner city communities in need of nourishing food. Pakou Hang just launched the Hmong American Farmers Association to raise income and opportunities for the immigrant farmers who raise a healthy share of our local produce. Reginaldo Haslett-Marroquin launched the Rural Enterprise Center, a training program and poultry cooperative to help Latino immigrants put their experience as small, sustainable, local farmers into practice for the benefit of everyone. Mustafa Sundiata launched Northside Fresh to spawn new local food businesses to improve both the physical and economic health on Minneapolis's North Side.

Maggi Adamek proposes extending the idea of enterprise zones to local food to revive economically struggling communities, starting with Benton County in central Minnesota and Minneapolis's North Side. Corinne Shindelar envisions a new version of the state Extension Service devoted to local food and economies. Beth Dooley wonders why local can't get a few of the breaks we gave to the software industry in the early days. Jan Joannides, a co-founder of Renewing the Countryside and an Endowed Chair in Agriculture Systems at the University of Minnesota, advocates letting people invest some of their tax-free retirement funds in local food businesses. Many interviewees suggested creating revolving loan funds and enlisting community bankers to raise capital for transformative new businesses and projects. June Mathiowetz urges us to celebrate farmers as much as we do chefs or rock stars.

Advice for the philanthropic community includes supporting cultural projects centered on local food, funding public education campaigns about eating healthy and convening a wide conversation about what a sustainable local food system would look like and how to make it happen.

## **DOES LOCAL FOOD POINT US IN THE DIRECTION OF NEW ECONOMIC MODELS IN OTHER SECTORS?**

It's too early to make any definite declarations. After all, one more challenge facing local food growers right now is how to make a living commensurate with the long hours and economic risk. Greg Reynolds of Riverbend Farms says "you have to be a little bit crazy to work so hard for not a lot of money", and Pakou Hang is concerned that the meager income Hmong Farmers earn at farmers' markets verges on sharecropping.

But looking ahead, food seems the ideal way to think differently about what really matters in our society and our economy. After all, we depend upon it and are always looking forward to our next meal. "Food is about life, health and pleasure," says Julie Ristau. "It's the core of family, community and tradition in every single culture." To which Ken Meters adds, "If we can't make a change with food, we can't do it anywhere else."

## ABOUT FOOD FOR THOUGHT

This publication was commissioned by The McKnight Foundation as part of the Food for Thought Series – a collection of third-party reports that inform our program strategies and are shared with the fields we support. This publication is available for download at [www.mcknight.org](http://www.mcknight.org).

## ABOUT THE MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION

The McKnight Foundation, a Minnesota-based family foundation, seeks to improve the quality of life for present and future generations. Through grantmaking, collaboration, and encouragement of strategic policy reform, the Foundation uses its resources to attend, unite, and empower those it serves. Founded in 1953 and independently endowed by William and Maude McKnight, the Foundation had assets of approximately \$1.9 billion and granted about \$91 million in 2011.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

An award-winning writer, Jay Walljasper has extensive experience reporting on subjects ranging from urban issues and contemporary ideas to music and travel. Walljasper is a senior fellow at and editor for *On the Commons*, and the author of *All That We Share: A Field Guide to the Commons* and *The Great Neighborhood Book*. He is also senior fellow at Augsburg College's Sabo Center for Citizenship & Learning and at Project for Public Spaces. Previously, Walljasper was editor of *Utne Reader*.

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