The Buy Local Food Trend in West Virginia
Who Buys Local and Why

The buy local food trend is sweeping the nation for a variety of reasons including:
• support for the local agricultural economy and rural community,
• conservation of energy and the environment,
• desire for fresher foods and better nutrition.

Collaborative for the 21st Century Appalachia and West Virginia University Extension Small Farm Center recognized two and a half years ago that this local food trend presents an opportunity to stimulate rural West Virginia economies and at the same time, to provide nutritious and wholesome foods in a State with a high rate of obesity and diabetes. While WV Department of Agriculture statistics show increased sales of locally grown products, there was little detail to provide direction for how best to take advantage of this trend.

Since additional information about perceptions and use of local foods was needed, early in 2008 the Collaborative for the 21st Century Appalachia (with support of the C.W. Benedum Foundation) joined with West Virginia University Extension’s Small Farm Center and Director Tom McConnell, to develop a mechanism for gathering data regarding West Virginia’s businesses local buying behavior. While not a formal research analysis, information was nonetheless gathered in a systematic way using a survey instrument developed with input from Professor Cheryl Brown, Davis College of Agriculture at WVU.

During 2008 and 2009, Dale Hawkins, Director of the New Appalachian Farm and Research Center, gathered information concerning purchases of locally produced food by various WV food facilities. Hawkins personally interviewed individuals representing approximately 110 different facilities including: restaurants (both full-service and limited service/fast food), resorts, schools, hospitals, and groceries.

In this survey of 110 food facilities, the findings were essentially bifurcated. Like other parts of the country, retail food facilities...
highly attuned to market trends and competing for consumers’ discretionary dollars (like fine dining and even groceries) were more likely to buy locally and to describe to their customers that they did. Food facilities, whose food products were based on convenience, speed, and uniformity (e.g., fast food restaurants), without exception did not buy locally. Complex and/or public institutions feeding a “captive audience,” like hospitals and schools, were less likely to buy locally produced foods (Figure 1).

The data of note in the survey was, that in those facilities that were purchasing local food, there was a dramatic increase in local food purchases during the period studied (Figure 2, Figure 3). Resort/hotels increased their purchasing of local products by 360% from 2006 to 2008. In dollars this means the six hotels surveyed increased from $124,000 to $580,000.

The 17 full service restaurants increased by 275% in this time period. The increase in 2007 from the previous year was 150%, from 2007 to 2008 was 87%. These changes represent a dollar increase from $36,000 in 2006 to $135,000 in 2008.

Grocery stores similarly showed a significant increase of almost 60%. The dollar amount represented by this shift was almost a million dollars—from $1.4 million in 2006 to $2.3 million in 2008.

The dollar difference totals for these three groups (which represent only 35 properties)
increased interest in nutrition and sustainability, which also ranked high in the survey.

In fact, they are such important reasons for buying local that they serve as countervailing forces to the next five on this list—consistent supply, freshness, packaging, delivery, and not having to order everything individually. With exception of freshness, these same requirements often pose difficulties for small local farms.

The next group of key parameters in order of importance in the 80th percentile included growing from $1,458,000 to $2,996,032 more delivery and packaging, followed closely by consistency of supply, guarantee, and not having to order each product from different purveyors. Meeting these requirements is often problematic for small farms and thus can be a hindrance to local sales.

It may not be a surprise to many that public institutions were in general more sensitive to price and required more "pre-processing" of the foods they used (e.g., already sliced and diced) because the lack of these qualities corresponds to increased labor costs and additional time required for preparation. In the survey, only one school district in the state indicated that prior to 2008 they were using local foods.

Limited service restaurants (fast food operations) were basically concerned with price, consistency, and uniformity of product—not 1 of the 36 bought locally. These factors also made it difficult for local farmers to sell to these restaurants.

An illustration of the critical importance of mystique and branding regarding buy local may be seen in this example: a change in executive chefs at a West Virginia resort in 2009 changed spending patterns on local farm products from a high of $303K in 2008 to only $35K in 2009—only 10% of the previous year. (Figure 6) Some chefs “tell and sell the buy local story,” and in these cases his/her persona and using...
local ingredients become of prime importance and add cache to the high-end restaurant.

Chefs in the full service restaurant category stated that if they are paying a premium (which many were willing to do), they expect freshness and are not willing to accept substandard products. A recurring comment during the interviews was the expectation that the food producer have the same respect for a product as the chef who ultimately prepares it and puts it on the table. Most chefs in this category were not interested in preprocessed food, e.g., sliced and diced vegetables. However, the type of processing these chefs demand is that the product be sorted, graded, clean, and packaged appropriately.

Limited service/fast food restaurants focus on uniformity, price, and dependable, quick service and thus, do not purchase locally.

Nearly all chefs and food service managers prefer dealing with a few reliable sources who can deliver a quality product on a consistent and reliable basis vs. dealing with multiple individual vendors for each of the products they purchase.