

## **Back to Basics: The food economy is the real economy!**

I have just returned home from another vacation on Ocracoke Island. We've been going for three years, drawn back each year by the local culture, the beautiful beaches and the magic of the island ecology. But mostly we return each year because of the fish – and Ocracoke's Working Watermen. The fish sold by the fish house is the finest I have ever tasted, anywhere on earth. And I've done a lot of traveling and eaten a lot of fish!

The Ocracoke Foundation's "fish house project" is an example of what is right in the United States economy. Even though it seems that big box stores, outsourcing and the banking industry have gutted our nation's livelihoods, I have seen much hope across the country particularly in the food business. All over the country people are returning to reliance on local farms and food producers to rebuild moribund economies. Last summer, while in my hometown in Northern California, I noticed that the one bright economic spot in a county with a 20% unemployment rate was the farmers' market. Each Saturday morning thousands of people bought fresh and prepared food from the 30 or 40 farmers who made up the Shasta County Growers Association farmers market. Shasta County had been a ranching and agricultural powerhouse for over a hundred years, but it had become more of a service economy due to migration of retirees in search of natural beauty and cheap retirement housing. When the recession hit the real estate market was eviscerated, leaving hundreds of houses in foreclosure and thousands of construction workers out of work. Signs of economic decay were everywhere, and heartbreaking to see in my hometown.

However, the people at the farmers market were not depressed – they were hopeful. I spoke with ranchers who found new direct and short-chain wholesale markets for grass-raised meat, retired schoolteachers who were putting the back 40 to use with row upon row of vegetables, and pit fruit growers who were finally making a living wage selling directly to customers, restaurants and small food product companies. Many people who thought they were going to have to sell up and move out were finding new ways to make a living – while supplying the people of Shasta County with healthy and tasty food.

My interest in farmers markets is due in part to my work – I am a nutritional anthropologist who works to promote healthier eating habits – but also because I have started a not-for-profit educational organization that runs a farmers market in the town where I live, near Philadelphia. Members of the Pennsylvania Association of Sustainable Agriculture, which has been the primary force behind the redevelopment of local food economy in Pennsylvania, report that they can't keep up with demand for Pennsylvania farm products. Customers at my farmers market prefer local food for its freshness, perceived safety and better flavor - and they love being able to support local farm families.



Driving across the country last November I heard that story again and again; people were reaching out to local short and direct supply chains for food and services. They were buying and selling with neighbors, supplying local restaurants owned by young chefs, and even the grocery stores were beginning to stock local fruit and vegetables. In the last couple of years the number of farmers markets grew 25% - to approximately 6800 nationwide. For many of those farmers the direct-to-consumers sales at the market are only part of an economic strategy that includes small-chain wholesale relationships with regional food producers and restaurateurs. A recent report from Canada has recommended that to improve access to healthy food and rebuild regional economies such rural entrepreneurial action be encouraged through support of small and mid-sized processing plants (what they call the 'return of the cannery) and that local governments support smaller-scale farms and urban/rural community food centers where people can exchanged products, knowledge and skills (to download the report go to [www.metcalfoundation.com](http://www.metcalfoundation.com)). In other words, Metcalf recommends that communities all over apply the kind of wholesale/retail production, distribution and trading structure that the Ocracoke Foundation has established for their local fishing industry.

The key variable to economic growth in the food sector is the presence of regional food processing and distribution centers because they bridge the gap between small-scale direct sales (farmer/ fisherman directly to customer/eater) and full-scale wholesale distribution. They allow small food producers (farmers or fishermen) access to short-chain sales by offering a means to scale up through natural growth while (hopefully) protecting them from competition from large-scale food businesses that rely on economies of scale and foreign labor to decrease the cost basis of production. And they often succeed because they garner customer loyalty by providing higher quality and fresher food. Local food is thus not just a feel-good shortcut to a simplistic nativism, but, when backed by farming and fishing integrity, can be a modern-day "Good Housekeeping" seal of approval for ensuring better quality food for families and restaurants. And customer loyalty can help to reconstruct local trade relationships that multiply each dollar's effective use within a region. This is exactly the process that can lead to a localized economic recovery, as examined in [The Town That Food Saved](#). Ben Hewitt, a Vermont farmer, has written about how regional food economies can rebuild local community connections and short and medium-sized trading links. Food works as a starting point for rebuilding trading relationships because food is, on a daily basis, fundamental and required. While the newest iPod isn't \*really\* necessary, food is required everyday, which makes trade in food utterly essential; other sectors of production and consumption simply don't provide the economic immediacy or multiplier-dollar-effect of food. And because food is so important, re-localizing trade in food can increase the money flowing through communities better than many other kinds of consumer spending.

With OWWA and other local business and citizen networks Ocracoke Island has a powerful means to support many sectors of the local economy – from the obvious (selling fish to residents, tourists and restaurants) to safeguarding relationships with on and off island service industry personnel such as mechanics and accountants. And when these relationships benefit participants reciprocally, community social connections increase, resulting in a stronger and more positive community and economy. In other words, I'm very impressed with the Ocracoke Foundation, the Ocracoke Working Watermen's Association and the other related community groups, and am very impressed that the people of Ocracoke have worked hard to construct and maintain these organizations and connections – it's what makes Ocracoke Island far more than just a fun place to visit.

And oh, did I remember to say that the fish is the best I've ever tasted?

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