

Local food and farming are essential

BY VALERIE DANTOIN



Picture a table with a smorgasbord of food: ripe tomatoes, a green leafy salad, plump purple grapes, maybe a nice piece of fish or a hamburger, some lovely cheese and a loaf of bread. We take these things for granted. We believe that food just shows up in the grocery store, we fill our cart and cupboards, then cook and dine at our kitchen table. Most people simply enjoy eating and have no worries or give little thought to how food gets in front of them — until now.

Red lights are flashing! The food system and supply chain are breaking. We fear we won't get milk or pork chops or toilet paper. Suddenly, sharp bones in the system that some of us have long warned about may choke us.

I teach about food systems. There are often a lot of blank stares at first about this concept. What is a food system? Why should I care? What can possibly go wrong? COVID-19 has lessons to teach us. A food system, in a simple view, is a chain composed of the many links that bring food from the earth to your table.

Seed > farm > harvest > processor > distributor > store or restaurant or institution > your plate > waste.

At the start of the chain are the growers or producers — you know, the farmers who plow soil, fertilize, plant seeds, weed, tend the crop or manage the animal, then bring the harvested raw product to market. Often those are commodity (large) markets. A livestock auction barn for cattle and hogs or a grain elevator or a canning factory. There, commodities are turned into food or reduced to ingredients to be used by other processors as they make food.

THE FIRST SHARP BONE OF THE SYSTEM CHOKES FARMERS. THEY SIMPLY CAN'T MAKE MONEY SELLING RAW PRODUCT.

The National Farmers Union reports that based on U.S. Dept of Ag (USDA) Economic Research Service (ERS) data “for every dollar American consumers spend on food, U.S. farmers and ranchers earn just 14.6 cents. This value marks a 17 percent decline since 2011 and the smallest portion of the American food dollar that farmers have received since the USDA began reporting these data in 1993. The remaining 85.4 cents cover off-farm costs, including processing, wholesaling, distribution, marketing and retailing.” We are

"Help shorten the supply chain and secure your food supply. Buy from local farmers now and into the future."

hemorrhaging farmers at an alarming rate. Only factory-size farms with immigrant labor will be able to make it on the pennies per pound of product received. They cash flow by putting a huge volume of raw product through the system. There is an alternative, teaching farmers how to find a sustainable path, a direct connection to consumers that can provide them with a living wage.

ANOTHER SHARP BONE: THE SUPPLY CHAIN HAS SPLIT INTO TWO; 1. AN INSTITUTIONAL CHAIN (EATING OUT), AND 2. A GROCERY CHAIN (EATING IN).

Before the pandemic, the U.S. had just recently crossed a threshold in which more than 50% of all food consumed in the country was eaten somewhere other than people's homes. Therefore, a chain that supplies restaurants, schools, hospitals and other institutions sprang up. Processors packaged food in large quantities for institutional use; five-gallon buckets of tomato sauce, 5-pound blocks of cheese, large volume bags of milk (or tiny school-use cartons), slabs of pork and beef and totes of vegetables. When the eat-out institutions closed, these processors could not retool fast enough to put the food in the right-sized package for the eat-in, grocery store, home-bound consumers. That's why milk was dumped — no more school, no more tiny cartons or giant bags. But the cows kept milking.

Another choke point that has kept the pork off your plate is the immigrant labor that got sick in the large meat packing plants. Prior to it affecting dinner, most people thought this was just another liberal social justice issue. I've been in the packing plants, it's not nice, but someone's got to kill the animals, take the hide and hooves and guts and then cut the carcass down to size. Wisconsin is extremely lucky to still have small meat processors that can take local animals from local farmers and turn them into your supper.

continued on page 23 →

SO HOW CAN YOU DO ANYTHING ABOUT A CRIPPLED SYSTEM, SHORT OF GROWING YOUR OWN FOOD?

Support a LOCAL food supply chain. Get your meat and veggies directly from farmers either at their farms or at farmers markets. Because of COVID and food shortages, Full Circle Community Farm has experienced a doubling of CSA shares from 75 last year to over 200 this year. Our SLO Farmers Cooperative, which sells a local meat share monthly box, tripled from 30 customers to about 90. Buy products from local processors that use local wheat for bread (Voyager Sourdough Co.) or local herbs for teas (Sweet Willow Herbs).

Help support new farmers. This is not a hippie-dippy pipe-dream job. Students want to change our food system and grow your food. Some say it's the most important thing they can do. It's a hard job, just as hard as the meat packing plant work. New farmers are essential workers. Help shorten the supply chain and secure your food supply. Buy from local farmers now and into the future. Food shortages are just one broken link away.

You can become a supporter of New Food Forum, a local group that advocates and educates about policies that help small local farmers better connect directly with you, the consumer. Here is a graphic that shows a more robust picture of how a local food system might look. Find your place in this system and keep food on your own plate. Let's stay resilient and sustainable and local. We had almost forgotten this basic truth: farmers are essential. Let's grow more of them. 🌱



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