

**Local View: Re-localizing our food makes the best kind of sense**

By [David Syring](http://www.duluthnewstribune.com/users/david-syring) on Apr 21, 2014 at 11:03 p.m.

Vhj <<http://www.duluthnewstribune.com/content/local-view-re-localizing-our-food-makes-best-kind-sense>>

Harnessing the excitement, energy and engagement of young people provides my first argument for re-localizing our food system. Over the past 10 years of teaching at the University of Minnesota Duluth I have seen growing student enthusiasm for local food research and activism. Young people, even those with no farming background, want to know where their food comes from, how it is raised and what they can do to provide more opportunities for themselves and local growers. I have enjoyed the challenge of creating learning opportunities to help them find out more.

This Wednesday, for example, students from the anthropology program will premier “Northern Roots: Growing Food in the Western Lake Superior Region.” Students created the film to profile four local growers and to highlight challenges and opportunities for local food production in our region. The premiere will include an open house with the growers.

Why does localizing our food matter?

Gayle Gonsior, my farmer, met me a few weeks ago at a commercial freezer in Superior. Gayle was happy to have arranged to store her product there. She’d grown tired of using inefficient chest freezers in her barn with the constant worry that a power outage or freezer failure could undermine the hard work of farming and providing food to customers.

We transferred three boxes into my car and chatted about how the animals fared this winter, her new storage arrangements, and the prospects for the coming year. We calculated the final cost of my purchase. I paid only about $4.50 per pound for organic, grass-fed beef, including everything from filet mignon, New York strip and sirloin steaks to roasts, stew meat and hamburger.

Gayle and her partner, Larry Fickbohm, raise cattle, sheep, hogs and laying chickens on a farm near Port Wing. About twice a year, I buy a quarter of one animal. The animals Gayle and Larry raise are well-tended, free to roam and humanely butchered at the nearest federally inspected slaughterhouse.

They are two of a growing number of local farmers who make a living providing meat, vegetables and fruits, cheese and other products to local people.

In fact, local food is among the fastest-growing parts of the food economy in the United States. In 1994, when the U.S. Department of Agriculture started keeping track, there were 1,755 farmers markets in the U.S. Today there are more than 8,000. Duluth, too, has seen such growth. There are farmers markets in the Duluth-Superior area now in several locations, including Lincoln Park, the East Hillside, UMD, Barker’s Island and elsewhere.

Two university research studies I participated in found that greater than 80 percent of residents in our community want more local food options. While we currently grow only 7 percent of our food locally, we could expand to grow much more, providing hundreds of jobs and fresh food to the community.

We are learning, as a regional community, that local food is good for farmers who get better returns on their work and gain a measure of control over their economic lives. We’re learning local food is good for the economy because money spent on food circulates locally and rewards the entrepreneurial efforts of small-business owners. We’re learning local food is good for consumers who get fresh, healthy produce at competitive prices. And we’re learning local food is good for the environment because food travels less, has less packaging and often is grown organically.

Demographers predict that by 2050 the world population will rise from 7 billion to 9.5 billion. From where will the food for these additional 2.5 billion bodies come?

The large-scale food system created in the past 60 years has a major reality check coming. When it takes as much as 10 calories of energy, mostly fossil fuels, to grow one calorie of food energy, the system cannot be said to be efficient. In fact, return one unit for every 10 spent in any other economic endeavor, and you’d fast find yourself broke. To spend so much tax money subsidizing a broken system is bad enough, but to hold it up as some kind of model for the future is even worse.

Some critics claim we cannot farm organically and locally to feed the planet, but many studies show that small-scale, local, organic agriculture already does feed the majority of people in many parts of the world. Organic farming is not “going back to the old ways” but instead is a sophisticated combination of old wisdom and modern innovations that help growers harness the beneficial effects of nutrient cycles.

We need more, not less, small-scale, organic, local agriculture to feed us well as a global society. And we are lucky to have growers of food around the world, and in our region, who still know how to get a real return on effort expended for food.

An old saying, “The best fertilizer is the farmer’s shadow,” seems true today.

David Syring is an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Minnesota Duluth.

**If you go** What: Premiere of the film, “Northern Roots: Growing Food in the Western Lake Superior Region,” which profiles four local growers and highlights challenges and opportunities for local food production

When: An open house with the growers is from 4:30 p.m. Wednesday until the 7 p.m. screening

Where: Zeitgeist Arts building and Zinema theater, 222 E. Superior St.

Cost: Free

**More online** For a directory to local farms, go to:

\* superiorgrown.org

A study the writer of this commentary participated in with Stacey Stark, a geographic information system lab coordinator for the University of Minnesota Duluth, and David Abazs, a farmer, details the potential of re-localizing the food system in the western Lake Superior region.

A summary is at:

\* d.umn.edu/gac/pdfs/HFHL\_4pg.pdf

A report on a study the writer completed on regional eaters’

attitudes on local foods is at:

\* cura.umn.edu/sites/cura.advantagelabs.com/files/publications/42-3-Syring.pdf