From Land to Plate:

The dilemmas and victories of alternative food distribution in Ontario

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Ontario Culinary Tourism Alliance

SUSTAIN ONTARIO the alliance for healthy food & farming

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Introduction

How do you get the rich harvest of Ontario's farmlands—fresh, delicious, with a wealth of flavour and variety—to local stores, markets, and the shoppers who increasingly care about where their food comes from and how it gets to their plate? When many elements of local food infrastructure—distribution, processing, storage, and markets—have been reduced or eliminated by decades of consolidation and centralization, how do we rebuild regional food systems?

This report examines the work of Ontario's local food entrepreneurs who are doing just that in five regions of the province.

First, Eat Local in Sudbury is a co-op storefront that links local farmers and local consumers through a market they both own. Much more than a market, it is a regional hub for local food information, education, and events to celebrate the rich local harvest.

Second, the challenges of accessing local food across Ontario are addressed by a business called 100 Mile Market, which is creating regional hubs to link local farmers with local chefs, stores, and consumers. The market provides access to urban consumers for a growing group of farmers, as well as support for farmers who want to scale up their production.

Third, Wendy's Mobile Market, a distribution company owned by a Prince Edward County farmer, is filling a distribution gap for her farm and those of others in the area.

Fourth, the upper Ottawa Valley has a unique distribution system with an online market and a regional delivery system that relies on a network of volunteer drivers. The Ottawa Valley Food Co-op also hosts educational events for its members, from marketing and technical training for farmers to cheese-making and fermentation workshops for anyone who is interested.

Finally, in the Waterloo region, there is so much local food activity that it is hard to focus on one initiative. For this report, we visited the much-praised Elmira Produce Auction Co-op (EPAC) accompanied by Peter Katona, the Executive Director of Foodlink. EPAC has drawn interest from across North America; it features a full-scale produce auction complete with a fast-talking auctioneer. The auction is supplied almost entirely by the local Mennonite farming community; the farmers own and direct the auction.

The case studies offered here tell the story of just a few of Ontario's inventive and committed local food entrepreneurs. The cases are chosen to reflect regional diversity, different organizational and ownership structures, and a variety of marketing and distribution models.

These are just the tip of the iceberg for the local food sector in Ontario, which seems to generate new ideas every day and represents one of the fastest-growing sectors in the food industry today.

Ontario's food and agriculture assets are impressive: fertile and productive land, knowledgeable farmers with generations of experience, and customers who are increasingly savvy about local food. Ontario also faces food system challenges: environmental pollution and dwindling natural resources; a lack of young farmers to replace the previous generation; and food regulations that restrict certain forms of innovation. Decades of consolidation in the processing, distribution, and retail sectors have eliminated the links that would make a strong regional food system in Ontario. As one U.S. study has noted, "The mid-size farms are the most vulnerable in today's polarized markets, since they are too small to compete in the highly consolidated commodity markets, and too large and commoditized to sell in the direct markets."[1]

Ontario agriculture is full of promise, knowledge, and opportunity, but faces significant challenges in making the link between the luscious and sustainable crops in the fields and the plates of those who crave them. To build strong alternative food systems, the first step may be to relocalize the distribution system. As Michael Shuman, author of *The Small-Mart Revolution*, points out, "Even where global-scale production is cost-effective, global-scale distribution increasingly isn't."[2]

This report describes the astonishing innovations occurring in Ontario as farmers, co-operatives, and ordinary people take the food system into their own hands. The demand for local food is clearly established, but the way to get it from field to fork is not always clear. Distribution has become one of the conundrums of 21st century local food systems in North America, particularly in Canada. This report reviews the ideas, challenges, and enterprises of five groups that have committed to food distribution solutions that work.

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[1] Thomas A. Lyson, G.W. Stevenson, & Rick Welsh (2008), *Food and the Mid-Level Farm: Renewing an Agriculture of the Middl*e (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press), page 3.

[2] Michael Shuman (2006), *The Small-Mart Revolution: How Local Businesses are Beating the Global Competition*, (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler), page 71.

Approach

The research process that resulted in this report included:
- a literature review that explored the role of distribution in local food economies;
- a scan of local food distribution models across North America;
- the identification of a number of local food distribution initiatives across Ontario;
- the selection of five distribution initiatives that are the focus of this report.

In this report, “alternative food distribution” means any novel distribution enterprise that promises to rebuild a local food system. The focus is on infrastructure that is uniquely suited to deliver local and regional food to local and regional markets, with the efficiency, quality, and verifiability that characterize true alternatives.

In selecting the final case studies, we sought to represent the various regions of the province as well as a spectrum of innovation categories. Priority was given to entrepreneurs who were innovating in more than one way—not just through local food, but also through their business models. These innovation types include:
- Transportation methods;
- Ordering methods;
- Delivery systems;
- Type of product;
- Sourcing/ purchasing systems;
- Structure and ownership of the enterprise;
- Customer involvement (as volunteers or owners);
- Distribution methods.

The case studies in this report offer examples of people who have had the foresight and courage to seize emerging opportunities in the local food market, and the commitment to make their enterprises a success. They are among the many people changing the face of the food system in Ontario. The next section reviews the trends and opportunities these entrepreneurs are capturing.

Trends and Opportunities for Alternative Food Distribution in Ontario

Alison Blay-Palmer identifies alternative food distribution as a significant part of the new food economy in Toronto—a food economy focused on entrepreneurial, small-scale, flexible enterprises that reflect the growing demand for local and ethnic flavours.[3] The call for alternative distribution channels has been vociferous and frequent, including the World Wildlife Fund's 2007 paper, *Grow Local Organic*[4] and the Metcalf Foundation's 2008 report, *Food Connects Us All*. The problem is summed up by Maureen Carter-Whitney of the Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy in *Bringing Local Food Home* (2009): "The lack of local products in convenient locations and the related lack of local distribution channels inhibit farmers from gaining access to local customers."[5]

Much has been said and written about the reasons for the breakdown of distribution systems that once served local food farmers and markets in Ontario. Most analysis focuses on centralization and the consolidation of control by larger retailers.[6] These trends present challenges, but have also opened opportunities for small to medium-scale operators. Across the world people have begun to create (and study) "alternative food networks."[7]

Alternative food distribution offers many benefits. It retains more income in local communities by creating jobs, supporting the tendency of smaller companies to source supply locally, and keeping food dollars in locally owned businesses. The 2007 *Grow Local Organic* report estimated the value of alternative distribution channels in Ontario (particularly direct-to-consumer sales) at about $410 million, the same as supermarket sales.[8] A Kingston agricultural study reported that $210.8 million was spent on food in the City of Kingston annually—"a lot of money which, if a greater proportion of it were spent locally, would stay in the local economy as

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[3] Alison Blay-Palmer (2006), "A Tale of Three Tomatoes," *Economic Geography*, vol. 82, no. 4, page 389.

[4] Russ Christianson & M.L. Morgan (2007), *Grow Local Organic* (Toronto: World Wildlife Fund).

[5] Maureen Carter-Whitney (2008), *Bringing Local Food Home: Legal, Regulatory and Institutional Barriers to Local Food* (Toronto: Friends of the Greenbelt), page 7.

[6] See, for example, Nina-Marie Lister (2008), "Placing Food," in *Food*, John Knechtel, ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press), page 167.

[7] For an overview of this trend, see Caryn Abrahams (2006), "Globally useful conceptions of Alternative Food Networks in the developing south: The case of Johannesburg's urban food supply system," University of Edinburgh Institute of Geography Online Paper Series, GEO-031.

[8] Christianson & Morgan, *Grow Local Organic*, page 32.

farmers buy other services and goods in and around Kingston."[9] A 2006 study in the San Francisco area estimated that a shift towards local food has added $1.7 billion in agricultural activity annually.[10]

We have identified the following trends that support alternative distribution systems.

1. **Interest in local food is growing rapidly.**
   Interest in local food is significant and increasing.[11] The local food sector has become such an important area of market demand that nine Sobeys grocery stores left the parent company in 2009 in order to be able to purchase from local farmers (large chain stores have consolidated purchasing and distribution systems and are usually unable to buy "at the back door" from local suppliers). The group formed the Hometown Grocers' Co-op.[12] The reasons for the growing interest vary, from health and food safety concerns to a desire to support and to build a strong local economy that retains food-sector jobs.

2. **Interest in the origins of food is increasing.**
   People want to know where their food comes from, how it was grown, and if possible who grew it. The clamour from consumers to understand what they eat is increasing. Knowledge has become key to the new "*terroir*"[13]—the combination of sense of place, memory, and trust that is a foundation of an alternative food system. Consumers have begun to ask new questions: Does it have added chemicals? Have the ingredients been genetically modified? Where was it grown? Who grew it? How do you cook it? Meanwhile, farmers who focus on lucrative local markets are gaining new knowledge and wielding greater control over their farms.[14]

3. **Concerns over food safety and food-related health problems are rising.**
   Many mass-produced foods contain high levels of salt, fats, sugar (especially in the form of high-fructose corn syrup), genetically modified organisms (GMOs), or other chemicals or additives associated with increases in food allergies, food-related illnesses, and

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[9] Aric McBay & Holly Grinvalds (2007), *From the Ground Up: A Primer for Community Action on Kingston and Countryside's Food System* (Kingston: Food Down the Road), page 26.

[10] Shuman, *Small-Mart Revolution*, page 70.

[11] Ipsos-Reid (2006), "Canadians See Many Benefits of Locally Grown Food," Press release, December 1.

[12] Emily Mathieu (2009), "Meat Cleaves Grocer's Ties to Sobeys," *Toronto Star*, July 18.

[13] See, for example, Amy B. Trubek (2008), *The Taste of Place: A Cultural Journey into Terroir*, University of California Press.

[14] For an excellent analysis of knowledge and control in the alternative food networks, see David Goodman (2009), "Place and Space in Alternative Food Networks: Connecting Production and Consumption," Environment, Politics and Development Working Paper Series, Department of Geography, King's College London.

obesity. The results are inevitable—not only increased health care costs, but an increase in people's suspicions about the safety and sustainability of the food system. The need to boost consumer trust, ensure traceability, and clarify food provenance are driving changes in all food sectors. In addition, public health authorities and others are beginning to make strong connections between food and health issues.[15]

4. **Consolidation and centralization have created opportunities for smaller producers.** Over the last several decades, as food stores have become ever larger, centralized warehouses and sourcing from the cheapest supplier have become the norm in the conventional food sector, while secondary processing has moved overseas. This trend has opened up opportunities for small to medium-scale operations that are flexible and responsive to rapidly changing market demands, and able to deliver products tailored to regional food habits and demands.

5. **There is a farm income crisis.** Farmers today make about the same incomes they did in the 1970s, while the cost of their supplies, taxes and labour have all increased. Around the Greater Toronto Area, almost 50% of farmers report that they supplement their income with off-farm work.[16] Farmers need sustainable market opportunities that leave more of the food dollar in their pockets, and that shorten the supply chain between land and plate.

   Alternative distribution supports small to medium-sized farms and represents a more stable market in which farmers need not face cut-throat competition from their neighbours. By comparison, in the Ontario Food Terminal, prices start high early in the morning and by mid-morning have reached unsustainably low levels as sellers seek to undercut each other in order to offload the products.

6. **Processing infrastructure of an appropriate scale for local producers has been lost.** Many local food processing facilities have closed across Ontario in recent years. For example, local abattoirs face new regulations that have increased their costs; as a result, many have closed. As consumer demand for local food rises, the ability to offer locally made products has decreased. This gap has created an opportunity for many local entrepreneurs. For example, Herman Brubacher in the Waterloo area recently launched a new processing facility on his 150-acre farm for his farm, neighbours, and relatives. A

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[15] See, for instance, the City of Toronto (2010), *Cultivating Food Connections: Towards a Healthy and Sustainable Food System for Toronto* (City of Toronto Public Health).

[16] Victoria Di Poce, Ellise Goarley, & Burkhard Mausberg (2009), *Greenbelt Grown: A Profile of Agriculture in Ontario's Greenbelt* (Toronto: Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation), page 20.

recent study conducted for the Metcalf Foundation identified farmer-owned processing as one of the most urgent needs in local agriculture.[17]

As distributors cut costs through economies of scale, farmers' choices for distribution have become very limited. Many farmers have turned to direct marketing, including Community Supported Agriculture,[18] farmers' markets, and farm stands. However, the costs of marketing, storage, and transportation put these solutions out of reach for many farmers.[19] Others have begun marketing their products collectively, in producer/ marketing co-operatives, either formally or informally structured.

7. **Local food is seen as a way to reduce dependency on fuel and reduce fuel costs in the food sector.**
   The need for a strong local food economy is common sense in an age of rising fuel costs and unstable economies. Alternative food distribution models offer environmental benefits including smaller, more diverse farms and lowered fuel consumption, as well as economic efficiencies and important social returns (such as local jobs). Local agriculture also has the ability to contribute a range of ecological goods and services through sustainable farming practices. Local food may also increase regional food security in the case of natural disasters or interruptions to long-distance transportation.

8. **Consumers are seeking a return to taste and pleasure in food.**
   For consumers, support for alternative food distribution stems from a range of motives, including a search for taste, freshness, and quality; a belief in the nutritional quality of local food; and the desire for a wider range of fruits and vegetables (including ones grown for particular ethnic tastes). Carlo Petrini, founder of the Slow Food movement, emphasizes the search for taste and the right to pleasure in our food. The Slow Food movement is not meant to celebrate artisan foods available only to the elite, but to resurrect our pleasure in food, and to make that pleasure available to all people, in every part of the world and at all economic levels.[20] Many chefs agree that taste and pleasure

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[17] Sally Miller and Maureen Carter-Whitney (2010), *Nurturing Fruit and Vegetable Processing in Ontario* (Toronto: Metcalf Foundation).

[18] Community Supported Agriculture initiatives (CSAs) are the programs many farmers rely on to jumpstart their season; consumers provide a sum upfront to receive a weekly box of the season's bounty. CSAs sometime involve work shifts by members as well, and members may pick up at the farms or at urban depots.

[19] See the report on direct marketing in the Perth-Waterloo-Wellington area, T. Schumilas (2009), *Taking Back the Middle: Local and Organic Producer-Controlled Distribution Systems* (St. Agatha, Ontario: Canadian Organic Growers).

[20] Carlo Petrini (2009), *terra madre: Forging a New Global Network of Sustainable Food Communities* (Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing), page 51.

in food are the main reasons they seek out local farmers, and spend time dealing with many suppliers.

9. **Food can help build strong local economies.**
   Alternative food distribution systems can boost local economies, a rationale that should resonate with governments and policy-makers. Although there are no accurate forecasts, some evidence indicates that the demand for local, sustainably produced foods is growing rapidly and is likely to continue to do so.[21]

The innovators in this report have created enterprises designed not only to capture a market opportunity, but also to reconnect farmers with consumers, processors, distributors, and chefs. They face numerous challenges in rebuilding lost local food infrastructure, but they represent a hope for a better, healthier, more sustainable food system based on food grown close to home. These initiatives fill an important niche, and provide an opportunity to understand how food systems might be reorganized regionally.

Introduction to Case Studies

"Call them go-betweens. Call them brokers. They are the new foragers, and they are not alone. They are a brotherhood dedicated to collecting the wares of farmers and artisanal producers—and creating a one-stop shop for locavores."[22] Among this "brotherhood" (and sisterhood), innovation occurs at several points of the food system.

1. **Innovation around product**
   In each case study, products are defined and distinguished in a variety of ways. Some use distance (products grown within 100 miles or 100 km of the point of sale); some focus on farming methods (organic or sustainably grown products).

2. **Innovation around process**
   All the entrepreneurs in this report have reduced the number of middlemen in the supply chain. In general, each case study involves the creation of a more direct chain between farmers and consumers, either connecting them through a central depot or through a limited distribution radius.

3. **Innovation around ownership**

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[21] Organic Agriculture Centre of Canada (2007), *Retail Sales of Certified Organic Food Products in Canada in 2006*, http://www.organicagcentre.ca/Docs/RetailSalesOrganic_Canada2006.pdf.

[22] Sampson, Susan (2009), "Foraging for Foodies," *Toronto Star*, November 25.

Many local food purveyors also are innovators in the structure of their business. Some are creating new co-op forms by combining ownership between diverse stakeholders (consumers and producers). Many of them are non-profits. The latter structure does not preclude profit-making, but any surplus is either re-invested or returned to the member-owners.

4. **Innovation in transportation**
   The entrepreneurs show a willingness to consider new forms of transportation, including vegetable oil fuel, and short unscheduled trips to meet the needs of valued customers and build trust. In all cases, they seek to drastically reduce the distance food has to travel before it reaches the consumer.

5. **Innovation around pricing**
   Most successful local food markets substitute other values for the focus on low prices typical of conventional markets. These values include not only social and environmental goods (building the local economy, protecting the environment through reduced fuel consumption), but also trust, health, dependability and traceability.

The most powerful models examined, and the ones that have instituted the most lasting changes, combine elements of many different kinds of innovation.

A Co-operative Approach to Food in the Ontario's North: **Eat Local Sudbury**

Photo credit: Eat Local Sudbury

Key characteristics

- Joint ownership by producers and consumers
- Emphasis on local food education (for the whole community)
- Sourcing within 150 miles of Sudbury
- Volunteers and board active in enterprise
- Transparency and willingness to share the model with others
- Unusual capitalization for a store

The Canadian Co-operative Association has identified 227 food co-operatives across Canada that focus on local food, the bulk of them in Quebec or the Maritimes. Eat Local Sudbury stands out in this field of local food stars; it is a retail store owned by producers and consumers (most food co-ops are owned by consumers only); it sells products grown in a 150-mile radius around Sudbury, except for a few things like milk, which are not available there; and it is largely volunteer-driven, with a very active board, dedicated producers and staff, and a brand new storefront opposite the city's provincial and municipal offices.

The project was the brainchild of several people who are now on the board—they wanted to see more local food available in Sudbury. At first, they formed a buying club for local farmers—consumer members of the co-op placed an order with the farmers and then picked it up at the farm. The co-op was first housed in a location with subsidized rent, an arrangement that allowed it to get off the ground. The organization incorporated in 2007 and in 2008 ran a three-day per week farmers' market and opened a small store. A flood at the store in 2008 appeared to be a disaster for the fledgling co-op, but resulted in a move to larger premises (2,200 square feet) in a more prominent location. This store opened in April 2010.

As of 2010 the co-op has 400 consumer members and 10 producer members, although the board hopes to increase the latter number. One producer is also the local FarmON Alliance[23] representative, who deals with local farmer issues and education. The group shares office space with Rethink Green, an environmental organization, and some storage space with the local Good Food Box program. The board is currently looking for further partners.

Funders have been enthusiastic about Eat Local Sudbury. The store is planning ahead for ways to operate self-sufficiently. The co-op has received a Trillium grant, funding for a feasibility study from the Co-operatives Secretariat, funding from the Northern Heritage Fund, FedNor and from the Greater Sudbury Development Corporation. These grants, as well as programs such as Canada Summer Jobs, have helped cover staffing costs.

Emily Trottier, the project coordinator, reports that the co-op's customers are quite diverse, and come from a range of income levels. They tend to be quite knowledgeable—and they ask, she says, difficult questions about food issues. The producers tend to benefit from several distribution approaches that include Eat Local Sudbury: for example, Dalew Farms provides produce and meat to Eat Local Sudbury in addition to handling 70 CSA memberships.

Eat Local Sudbury has created an excellent space for distribution to consumers, both at the store and at the farmers' market, but it is still struggling with transportation of products from farmers. One producer combines deliveries to the store with CSA deliveries, but it is harder to arrange deliveries from other producers. The co-op has even resorted to shipping product (from Ward's Honey Farm) by Greyhound bus. In another case, a member used a private car to pick up asparagus.

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[23] "The FarmON Alliance is a provincially coordinated alliance of organizations with a mandate to encourage the development of local food systems through the support of emerging, ecologically-oriented farmers." From the FarmON Alliance website http://www.farmlink.net/farmon/. Retrieved October 20, 2010.

Trottier reports that the greatest challenges are related to turnover and succession planning. Because Eat Local Sudbury is often able to hire interns or short-term coordinators through employment programs, there is considerable staff turnover and often no overlap between one trained staff member leaving and a new one arriving. The co-op also relies heavily on volunteers, who are dedicated, but require at least one seven-hour shift to be trained. Volunteer coordinators have been hired through the short-term employment programs described above, but the co-op needs more continuity in staffing.

Eat Local Sudbury stands out from conventional retail stores in a number of ways. It emphasizes education as part of its co-operative mandate. It has hosted Meet Your Farmer events, sampling events, and an evening forum for restaurateurs. It has explored delivery to cafés interested in local food; for example, the café at the local college (Collège Boréal) is looking for a source for local food. The co-op has received a great deal of media attention, including an invitation from the local CBC station to do an ongoing segment about a vegetable of the week.

Eat Local Sudbury is happy to share its model with other communities, and members have already made a presentation to an interested group in Parry Sound. The board members have been deeply involved at every step of the development, including helping to paint the store and to conduct the inventory count. However, this type of involvement was not unusual across the case studies. Most of the case study organizations do not have access to conventional capital or the loans available for small businesses. This means that they are built from community capital —the investment of time and labour by local people.

Eat Local Sudbury changes participants' relation to food distribution in a number of ways. The ownership structure is unusual; co-operatives owned by more than one stakeholder are rare outside Quebec (where they are called solidarity co-ops, and have considerable support from a sympathetic government). Eat Local Sudbury also incorporates a mandate for education which clearly goes beyond marketing and includes an enthusiastic willingness to share its model and knowledge with other communities. Transparency is a hallmark of co-operatives and often of small-scale community organizations, and can be a strength in the current climate of suspicion about large-scale and impersonal purveyors of food.

Similar enterprises exist around Ontario. Bailey's Local Foods in Waterloo provides online ordering through a buying club. Bailey's adheres to the principles of the 100-mile diet, and purchases from about 25 local farmers and processors for a range of fresh and processed products. It also provides information to encourage consumers to shift towards a locally based diet. A father and daughter with a farming background own the private company. In Meaford, the 100 Mile Market store operates on consignment, and currently has 60 producers on its list. Warkworth boasts the 100 Mile Diner (which includes a pizzeria). In Arthur, Ontario, Lynda Sauve and Carol Sampson run the Shepherd's Watch 100 Mile Market.

Eat Local Sudbury is changing people's access to local food in Ontario. But it still struggles with the link between regional producers and their retail outlet. Eat Local Sudbury shares space with Rethink Green (an environmental organization), and is looking for other partners to offset the increased rent in their new space. They are also seeking wholesale customers (for instance, a local café) to increase their orders from suppliers, and are considering purchasing a van to facilitate pick up from farms. The Board is also working to ensure overlap during staff transitions, documentation and better job security for the staff. The next few case studies look at novel ways of solving that part of a regional food network.

Photo credit: Eat Local Sudbury

A Positive Way to Help Farmers Survive: **The Ottawa Valley Food Co-operative**

Photo credit: Ottawa Valley Food Co-op

Key Characteristics

- Online ordering system
- Very involved team of volunteers
- Joint producer/consumer ownership
- Strong environmental commitment
- Workshops for producers and consumers
- Promotion of local food in general through a local food buying guide
- Willingness to share model
- Unusual capitalization for a store
- $150,000/ year in sales; once-a-month deliveries

In the upper Ottawa valley, some consumers are getting their local products in a whole new way, thanks to the Ottawa Valley Food Co-operative (OVFC). Inspired by the Oklahoma Food Co-op, which generously shared its excellent software, the OVFC has been able to launch an on-line ordering system that allows producers to post their goods, and consumers to order them. The orders are delivered once per month by teams of volunteers.

The project started in 2007, when the Ottawa River Institute, an environmental organization dedicated to building sustainable communities, arranged for Robert Waldrop, the founder of the Oklahoma Food Co-op (OFC), to do a workshop in Pembroke. It was the dead of winter, but the event was well attended, and area residents started to get excited about the model. Waldrop is a committed local food entrepreneur; on the OFC's website, he describes the co-op's work:

> This is a wonderful adventure that we have called together here. We have brought together producers and customers into the same organization. Among our producer and customer members we find a diversity of lifestyles, beliefs, cultures and religions. Even so, we find common ground based on our mutual need for a marketplace where we can find good, healthy, nutritious local foods. We are focused on meeting local needs with local resources. We will discover new ways to participate in neighbourhood and community.
>
> A journey of one thousand miles begins with one step. Who knows where this adventure will lead us, but we will certainly get there, one step at a time. The day may yet come when a small neighbourhood Oklahoma Food Cooperative store is within bicycle-riding distance of most households in the state.[24]

In the Ottawa Valley Food Co-operative, eight of the 25 founding members were producers and the rest were consumers. The organizers met for a year over potluck meals before deciding to go ahead. The group received some support from the Co-operative Development Initiative for a feasibility study, and was able to get a Trillium grant to cover its early operations, as well as a Carrot Cache[25] grant. The current board is half producers and half consumers, which the members consider a good mix, given the greater stake producers have in the organization, and the deeper knowledge they have of food production challenges. The co-op now includes 25 to 30 producers and about 80 consumers, with sales approaching $10,000 a month— an impressive amount, considering that the cycle of orders and depot drop-offs happens only once a month.

The OVFC has invested considerably in educational programming—such as "meet the producer" events and 100-mile meals. It has organized workshops on topics ranging from fermenting to

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[24] Oklahoma Food Cooperative, http://www.oklahomafood.coop/welcome.php

[25] Carrot Cache is an innovative community and co-operative development fund focused on worker co-ops and local and organic food and agriculture initiatives. The fund is supported through a percentage of annual profits from the stores at Carrot Common in Toronto; these stores include the Big Carrot food co-op. For more information go to http://www.carrotcache.com/index.html.

cheese-making, and supported producers in producing preserves, opening a root cellar, and moving away from the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). The OVFC has also hosted agricultural workshops on agricultural methods and on direct marketing through the Ecological Farmers of Ontario. These workshops were so successful that the organizers had to turn people away. The co-op received additional support for these initiatives from the National Farmers Union Renfrew County Local and the Renfrew County Stewardship Council.

OVFC has produced a local food buying guide, which indicates an important difference between this style of entrepreneur and conventional entrepreneurs; the co-op is willing to promote any local food organization whether or not it participates in the co-op. The project coordinator explained that the OVFC members do not want to feel they are competing with other producers. OVFC also allows consumers to arrange pick-your-own trips as part of their order.

Aside from grants, which are winding down, how does the OVFC sustain the organization on its slim margins (only 15% of sales goes to the co-op: 10% from the producer and 5% from the consumer)? The answer is twofold— excellent software, which makes packing orders and invoicing easy, and dedicated volunteers. Deliveries are made to pick-up depots in eleven different towns with five or six routes covered by volunteers, who also handle phone reminders and financial transactions. The expansion of the co-op depends on access to training for volunteers; people are encouraging the co-op to expand to the City of Ottawa, but members feel that the volunteer capacity may not be ready yet, despite the enticing allure of a large urban market.

A cautious attitude towards growth tends to characterize these alternative distribution businesses; their business decisions may be based on criteria such as volunteer capacity or the need to maintain high service levels. Also, they are more focused on building a regional food system than on expanding markets. For example, OVFC coordinator Christina Anderman notes that OVFC would like to provide eggs, chicken, milk, and turkeys, but only if these products can be obtained from eastern Ontario farmers. This is difficult, because these products are under supply management and strict quota systems, restricting entry into the market for regional suppliers.

The co-op also faces challenges with its monthly delivery schedule and the need to become self-sufficient as the grants end. A once-a-month schedule fits well with the need to recruit volunteers, but the cycle does not work as well for farmers, who have to estimate three weeks in advance what they will have for delivery.

OVFC seeks to manage the food system by addressing production methods as well; Anderman explains that the co-op wanted to finalize criteria for producers that everyone would accept before they launched the co-op, but the negotiation over whether to allow GMOs took a long time. The members reached a compromise that is a testament to the democratic quality of the organization; producers may use GMOs, but the co-op actively encourages them to stop and will not promote GMOs in any way in their material.

Anderman reports a great deal of interest in their model. For example, a group from the lower Ottawa Valley came to spend a packing day with the OVFC to learn about the co-op and to exchange ideas.

The Niagara Local Food Co-op, which runs on similar principles, started at about the same time. This co-op combines the online ordering system with a geographic restriction similar to Eat Local Sudbury—the product must come from a 100-mile radius of the Niagara region. The co-op had 35 members within the first month of recruitment.[26] Similar co-ops have been started in Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, Prince Edward Island, and on Manitoulin Island.

The Vancouver Island Heritage Food Co-operative (VIHFC) is another multi-stakeholder co-operative; its members are mostly organizations. It was established "to rebuild local food systems on Vancouver Island."[27] The VIHFC's businesses market and distribute local products to serve the local food service industry. Relocalizing distribution to food services is one of the essential aspects of a good regional food system, although it presents unique challenges to entrepreneurs. Food service customers often require special packing and bulk packaging; they are often locked into long-term contracts with large-scale distributors who focus on food services, giving chefs and managers little discretion in purchasing. Yet they represent a significant portion of food provision in any area, which must be captured for a truly sustainable and resilient regional food system.

OVFC's work bears some resemblance to Canada's many organic or local food box programs. One of the first in Canada was Small Potatoes Urban Delivery in British Columbia, which still thrives and has expanded to many new areas in that province. By the Bushel Co-op in Peterborough, Ontario has approximately 15 producer members as well as numerous consumer members. They provide a box program CSA with home delivery and depot drop-off. Toronto's Wanigan Fruits and Vegetables offers a local-only food box option. FoodShare in Toronto sources as locally as possible for their Good Food Box program; this was the first Good Food Box scheme that inspired many others.[28]

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[26] Canadian Co-operative Association (2009), *The Lay of the Land: Local Food Initiatives in Canada* (Ottawa: CCA), page 33.

[27] Canadian Co-operative Association, *The Lay of the Land*, page 34.

[28] See Kathryn Scharf (1999). "The Good Food Box: A Case Study of an Alternative Non-Profit System for Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Distribution," in *For Hungerproof Cities*, Mustafa Koc, Rod MacRae, Luc J.A. Mougeot, & Jennifer Welsh, editors (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre).

Similar programs often come from the producer co-operative model. Producer co-operatives are usually formed to help producers gain better control of the distribution and marketing of a product. For example, Organic Meadow, based in Guelph, Ontario, was formed to help organic dairy producers market their specialty product, while many fisheries co-ops formed in the Maritimes in the early part of the century to ensure fair prices for their catch. In Ontario, both Quinte Organic Farmers Co-operative and Kawartha Ecological Growers (not a co-op, but a producer-driven venture) have provided organic and natural produce to various urban centres and local communities. Food Roots Distributors' Co-operative on Vancouver Island connects producers, processors and consumers through alternative distribution, including their "Pocket Markets"—small market booths set up in various locations in Victoria.[29]

[29] For other examples, see Canadian Co-operative Association, *The Lay of the Land.*

Otherwise It's Just Another Delivery System: **100 Mile Market**

Photo credit: 100 Mile Market

Key Characteristics

- Emphasis on building trust throughout supply chain
- Focus on chefs initially
- Ownership through joint partnership that includes a farmer partner
- Unusual regional hub development model
- Sourcing within 100 miles of each urban centre
- Staff capacity to support farmers to develop new products for evolving urban markets
- Little access to conventional funding
- Growth rate of more than 100% every year

Paul Knechtel reports that the important thing in alternative food distribution is that customers can trust what he says—otherwise "it's just another delivery system." The difference shines in every corner of 100 Mile Market's operations. Knechtel, with Chris McKittrick and Albert Knab, the latter a farmer and business professor, founded the business in 2008 as a for-profit venture. They are setting up regional depots—the first in Kitchener—to source food from a 100 mile radius and deliver it to local customers, particularly restaurant chefs. They plan to have 100 Mile Markets that centre on major Ontario cities, including Toronto, London, and Ottawa. Chefs will purchase as much as possible from their local 100 Mile Market, but, as the founders point out, if an Ottawa chef can't get a particular product from 100 Mile Ottawa, he or she would probably prefer 100 Mile Kingston over California.

Another less tangible rationale was provided by Paul Knechtel at the end of an interview about 100 Mile Market. "There's a lot of satisfaction on a grander scale," he finds, compared to working in the food industry (as he did for years in a small chain of independent grocery stores owned by his family). "This is bigger," he says, and it has "the potential to make real and meaningful change to agricultural sustainability."

Today, 100 Mile Market offers a full range of locally sourced products, including dairy, meat, grains, and produce. The staff work with farmers to build a good product source and to help the group access the markets effectively, discussing price points and letting the farmers name their price while offering realistic expectations of sales at the given price. The organizers would eventually like to put more effort into extension-style services to connect production to markets more effectively.

The founders have developed a good grasp of what grows well in the various Ontario climates—Algoma is perfect for apples, while stone fruit grows best in the Niagara region. The farmers who supply the company tend to be producers who are underserved by the current division between industrial agriculture and direct marketing. Albert Knab, a co-founder, farms 100 acres. His operation is too big to depend on farmers' markets, and too small to supply Sobeys. As he says, 100 Mile Market lets the farmers get back to what they do best—farming. Some 100 Mile Market customers have tried to go direct to the producers, but the farmers tell them to purchase their product through 100 Mile Market; the project gives them a chance to stay in the fields rather than taking the time to drive to urban markets. Also, 100 Mile Market offers traceability and food safety, providing origin information directly on the invoice.

The founders of 100 Mile Market see the future of local food in nutritious food—"We think local is the first baby step—the huge opportunity is in nutritious food." They see the model as delivering food with its full nutritious value, as it was 25 years ago before the focus on long-distance shipping changed the varieties of produce grown and the maturity of harvested product. Long-distance shipping requires fruits and vegetables to be picked under-ripe so that they survive the trip; many people argue that this reduces the nutritional value, and it certainly reduces the flavour.

100 Mile Market is a lean organization with very little inventory. Staff order from farmers when a customer orders, then ship the product as soon as it arrives (just-in-time inventory). The business offers a three-day ordering and shipping cycle with deliveries on Wednesdays and Fridays. The focus is on service and a sustainable living for farmers. Knechtel notes, "We have a relentless commitment to customer care." He remembers one order that fell through the cracks; a staff member went in a car to pick up the product and get it to the customer. This style of commitment means that the chefs know that 100 Mile Market will move heaven and earth to

get the product to them. Unlike retail, chefs have to have the ingredients they ordered—they cannot put something else on the shelf to cover the gap.

These service goals mean the organization already has 19 people working in staff and management, although the pilot was launched in 2008. The organization grew 240% over 2009. The average growth per month in 2010 was 15%. The company not only employs salespeople, but also has Producer Relations Teams. The teams consist of people with agricultural backgrounds who can garner respect from the farmers, and who can recognize a good farm operation and exceptional product when they see it. Now the company also has a cheese specialist, and chefs are asking the company to provide training sessions as artisanal cheese becomes a higher priority in high-end restaurants.

The lack of inventory, which is an efficient way to handle food, and protects the business from tying up money in unsold product, creates unforeseen problems in financing—100 Mile Market has no assets to back a loan application. As a for-profit organization with an urban market base, it is also ineligible for most grant funding meant to stimulate local food production, either because it is a for-profit enterprise or because it is not a rural organization. Then there is the unusual problem of having multiple distribution centres. While logistically it makes perfect sense to locate depots close to the producers and consumers, 100 Mile Market is growing the way an octopus grows—in many directions at once.

Knechtel is honest about the challenges. "We haven't got this whole thing figured out—it keeps changing—the one thing we do is listen to our customers and find out what they want." Nevertheless, the future looks bright for 100 Mile Market. The group recently started a hub in the Niagara area with a crack team of chef and farmer specialists. Customers have begun to ask for home and office deliveries. They feel like they are delivering "what you can't buy in the store," not just local food, but exotic cuts and other specialty items.

The founders of 100 Mile Market see lots of possible routes for expansion, including a 100 Mile Market store, and possible "store within a store" concepts. The organization struggles with access to funding, and the tricky problem of when to bring in additional trucks; although additional sales and customers have been identified, staff know they cannot add a truck unless it can be filled.

Similar projects include the distribution options listed above that market with geographic restrictions—other 100 Mile stores, Bailey's Local, the Ottawa Valley Food Co-op, and Eat Local Sudbury. In Toronto, 100 km Foods Inc. offers chefs in the Toronto area access to foods brought from a 100-kilometre radius. To some extent, 100 Mile Market operates like a standard wholesaler—sourcing from a number of suppliers, and offering a price list to customers across Ontario. However, the careful attention to geographic designation and the use of regional hubs—something many organizations have pondered but no one has yet brought it to fruition—sets 100 Mile Market apart.

The company represents a “market of the middle,” providing services for mid-scale farmers who have been left out of the market split between industrial agriculture/corporate retail, and small-scale agriculture/direct marketing.[30] Among these case studies, it is a larger and more ambitious enterprise, raising the question of the best scale for different solutions. Are some alternative distribution solutions too small to remain sustainable? Are some so big that they will need to make compromises to stay afloat, such as reduced service, and an inability to work with small producers? Entrepreneurs must balance these challenges.

[30] For an excellent overview and analysis of this situation in the U.S. context, see Rick Welsh (1997), *Reorganizing U.S. Agriculture: The Rise of Industrial Agriculture and Direct Marketing* (Greenbelt, Maryland: Henry A. Wallace Institute for Alternative Agriculture).

This Couldn't Happen Anywhere Else: **The Elmira Produce Auction**

Photo credit: Carole Topalian

Key characteristics

- Producer owned and managed
- Producers from within a 75 km radius only
- Goal to retain family farms in the region through new markets
- Mostly Old Order Mennonite producers
- Participation in the regional development of a local food cluster
- Marketing mostly by word of mouth
- Buyers must arrange transport from the wholesale auction, limiting the access of buyers
- Reduced marketing and promotional costs (no price lists, advertisements, etc.)
- Buyers include independent supermarkets, other retailers, restaurants, University of Guelph food services.

From the huge warehouse, lit only by natural light, comes the rapid fire of the auctioneer's patter. The Elmira Produce Auction in June is lined with bins of huge cauliflowers, crates and crates of garlic, and many other freshly harvested products from the surrounding countryside. This is just the beginning of the season and the warehouse is relatively empty. A small crowd has formed around the first lot; the bidding seems imperceptible to an outsider's eyes, but an agreement is reached after only a few minutes of patter and rapid signals among buyers. The auction moves on to the next lot.

The Elmira Produce Auction Co-operative, founded in 2004, is the brainchild of the local Old Order Mennonite community. Of the growers, 90% to 95% are Old Order Mennonites, and the co-op board is made up of 20 to 30 people. The Auction currently has 250 registered growers, all within a 75-kilometre radius of the auction,[31] and 300 registered buyers.

The BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy) scare was a trigger for the auction. The community needed a new agricultural direction to ensure the survival of the Mennonite family farms, and turned to local produce. The community was facing the same challenges as any mid-scale farmer community; the farmers couldn't supply large stores on their own, because they were not big enough, but direct sales (farmers' market and farm-gate sales) were not large enough markets to sustain their farms. They needed to work together and consolidate their product to be able to reach mid-sized buyers. The auction gives mid-sized customers a convenient place to source high-quality, fresh local produce. Now customers include local independent grocery stores, as well as institutional buyers such as the University of Guelph. Produce auctions are not new, particularly to the Mennonite community. There are several in the Midwestern United States, but Elmira represents the first Canadian auction.

The project is inserted into local food distribution at a slightly different point compared to the other cases reviewed here: the buyers are all institutions, retailers, chefs, and other distributors. Mark Kenny, the Purchasing Coordinator for Hospitality Services at the University of Guelph, attends the auction frequently. Kenney, who remarks that "local is the new organic," comes all three days that the auction is open, buying product for seven retail or foodservice locations across the university. During the season he purchases about 40% of the university's fresh produce from the auction. Kenny is a champion of local food. He recognizes its superior quality, and knows all the local restaurants that focus on local food (there are quite a few). He also participates in a local food blog called Food Revolution.[32]

For Kenny, although he "does save money buying here, before that is quality." It is also a benefit that the prices do not fluctuate that much. The auction tends to try to reach a fair price, rather than following the seasonal volatility of produce. And finally, he doesn't have to arrange orders and pickups at 10 different farms, as the produce is consolidated at the market. The market provides grading and some packaging for the farmers, and will even occasionally store a large lot for Kenny. The market also provides traceability—the grower number is on the boxes—a bonus for large-scale customers who may feel they aren't getting enough information at a

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[31] Canadian Co-operative Association, *The Lay of the Land*, page 35.

[32] http://goodfoodrev.com

standard farmers’ market where the seller may be reselling products purchased from other farmers or even from distributors (depending on the market’s policy).

The Elmira Produce Auction is embedded in a broader community of those who are working to change the conventional food system. Foodlink in Waterloo has been a pioneer in the shift towards local food. Peter Katona of Foodlink explains that his organization decided from the beginning not to start initiatives, but to provide connections among entrepreneurs and to help cut the red tape that impeded initiatives like the Produce Auction. Foodlink helped a local processor get the nutritional labels it needed; the organization has also solicited new buyers for the auction and supports local food branding through the “Buy Local! Buy Fresh!” campaign.

Beyond the market, the Kitchener-Waterloo-Guelph region shows a high commitment to local food and easy access throughout the surrounding countryside to accomplished and experienced growers. Herman Brubacher, one of the founders of the auction, recently opened a processing facility for his own farm and other neighbouring farms. It processes fruits into preserves, jams, and jellies which are sold at a store on the farm and through retailers across the province.

The absence of local mid-scale processing capacity has challenged many Ontario farmers—the last tender fruit processor in Ontario closed in 2006, leaving fruit farmers across the province in a quandary. The government has initiated a program that pays for them to remove their fruit trees, in order presumably to move into more lucrative forms of farming. In the Elmira area, however, the Old Order Mennonites are clearly not ready to give up on local fruit and jam.[33]

Katona emphasizes the unique qualities of the local context for the auction, reiterating that it is not a model that is easily transferable. There are many advantages to the Mennonite base of the project; Mennonites are highly experienced market gardeners—they eat local food themselves almost exclusively—and they have access to a large labour pool. They are also able to mobilize quickly a large and committed group once there is agreement on a new initiative. Their cultural homogeneity makes decision-making more rapid, and they can quickly seize a market opportunity, if it fits their goals and values. There have been challenges along the way; Mennonites are not in the habit of marketing or doing outreach, so the growth of the auction has been by word of mouth or through Foodlink. Some buyers also do not want to spend all morning shopping; although the auction has a certain glamour, they would rather receive a list and place an order.

The situation has presented an opportunity for a new company. Jay West is a wholesale produce company started by Nelson Wideman, one of the suppliers to the auction who saw a need for something different. Wideman sees Jay West as a complement to the auction, providing services to those who don’t want to purchase through the auction. Jay West customers tend to

[33] See Miller & Carter-Whitney, *Nurturing Fruit and Vegetable Processing in Ontario*, for a detailed analysis of the opportunities and barriers to reviving local food processing in Ontario.

be a bit too large for the auction, so the company fills the next step in the market. The sources are the same—local Mennonite and non-Mennonite farms, where fresh produce is respectfully handled. Jay West is brand new, but has a promising future as a new distributor of locally grown produce.

Despite the challenges of replicating an initiative so clearly linked to a distinctive local culture, many others are interested in the model. Peter Katona reports that the auction has received much research attention already. Spirit Nova Scotia is exploring an auction for Nova Scotia. In Niagara, the Local Food Action Plan[34] calls for investigation of a regional distribution hub, and research to explore the potential for such a hub was conducted by the George Morris Centre and Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation.

There are many similar examples of producers organizing to market and distribute product co-operatively. A few organizations have tried to link many aspects of the regional food system, as Foodlink does, including the Heartland Quality Foods Co-operative in Kamloops, B.C. and the Simcoe County Farm Fresh Marketing Association in Ontario.[35] Foodlink has branded the Buy Local! Buy Fresh! logo across the province.

The produce auction could also be seen as a response to the failure of the food terminal model to provide the local food the changing market requires in a way that is sustainable for producers. The strength of the Elmira Produce Auction lies in its integration with other solutions such as Jay West, farm gate sales, and new processors like Brubacher's Country Flavour line. The project promises to be part of a regional shift in access and awareness of local food and its social, environmental, and economic benefits.

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[34] Niagara Region (n.d.), *Local Food Action Plan: Setting a Course for the Future of Food in Niagara*.

[35] Canadian Co-operative Association, *The Lay of the Land*, page 22.

We Need to have Food We Can Trust: **Wendy's Mobile Market**

Key characteristics

- Farmer-owned
- Growth of about 200% per year
- Alternative fuel use in transportation (vegetable oil fuel for truck)
- Some educational outreach

The work of Wendy's Mobile Market starts at dawn. The day starts early and ends late, seven days a week during the harvest season. Wendy's enterprises include a seven-day-a-week farm store and an extensive price list and delivery system for the surrounding area. The venture has opened people's eyes about the possibilities for regional and alternative food in the Frontenac County region.[36]

Wendy Banks, farmer, retailer, wholesaler, and shipper, started the venture when she was suffering from an immune system disorder and started to think about what she was putting in her body. In the course of sourcing food for herself, she established a network of local suppliers, which grew into a full-blown business when she realized the farmers and restaurants were not connecting as they wanted to, and represented an untapped demand and a supply in search of a market.

Wendy's Mobile Market started in 2008, and has grown 400% since its inception. It links supply to demand by picking up as well as delivering products. Wendy's uses a truck run on vegetable oil and offers an extensive range of local products, with each supplier carefully designated.

Wendy's deals with many of the common challenges for new wholesalers; how to consolidate product from many small farmers; the lack of uniform packaging; coordinating pick-up and drop-off times; and chasing down payments. The paperwork eats up a lot of time, and Wendy's relies on volunteers to make it work as the margins are so small.

Banks sees her work as restoring trust to the food system, just as Paul Knechtel does. In the future, she says, "we will need to have food we can trust to survive." The organization is starting to build an educational component into the work, holding "Meet the Farmer" days and trying to link chefs with the producers at these events. Wendy's Mobile Market is happy to share the model with others.

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[36] Wendy's Mobile Market puts into practice some of the recommendations for the creation of a sustainable foodshed from Alison Blay-Palmer, Mike Dwyer & Jennifer Miller (2006), *Sustainable Communities: Building Local Foodshed Capacity in Frontenac and Lennox-Addington Counties Through Improved Farm to Fork Links* (Frontenac Community Futures Development Corporation and Prince Edward, Lennox Addington CFDC).

In this case, a farmer has taken the distribution problem into her own hands; farmers for many decades have received little help in market development, especially for food that is not oriented for export, and are showing great inventiveness in creating their own solutions.

Other Forms of Alternative Distribution

Several other innovative models deserve mention here. They address different broken links in the food chain, and, together with the models described above, should all be part of a sustainable regional food system.

Pfenning's Organic Vegetables is located in Baden, Ontario, west of Kitchener. Their 500 acre farm with 200 acres of mixed vegetables forms the foundation of an innovative distribution system that aggregates the products of over 50 local farms. With over 80 employees and 20-30 customers, Pfenning's is Ontario's primary supplier of Certified Organic and Local Food Plus Certified vegetables. Owner Jennifer Pfenning states that their business is not hampered by a shortage of supply, trucks or producer flexibility. Instead, they are only limited by the rising cost of production, the growing conditions, and purchasing habits.

Mountain Path near Ottawa is a distributor of bulk and packaged dried goods and groceries; it is located on a 138-acre farm which committed to organic in 1975. It has a wide distribution area (Ontario and Quebec) and since 1983 has also operated a stone ground flour mill on the property. Similar to Wendy's Mobile Market, this is a grower who has taken parts of the distribution system into his own hands.

In another part of Ontario, Niagara Presents provides processing and marketing services for home-based processors in combination with online ordering and delivery. The model is interesting in that it has created a regionally based brand to market the products, and has achieved a fairly wide and successful distribution. It does not limit distribution geographically, only production, which is branded by a region ("Niagara") rather than a geographic distance from a central point (as in "100 mile" or "100 kilometre" models).

Some strong models of producer-driven processing, marketing, and distribution have gained prominence lately. One of the only farmer-owned federally certified meat-processing plants in Canada, Field Gate Organics, based in Zurich, Ontario, provides marketing, processing, and distribution for over 50 organic meat producers. Founded in 2003, Field Gate sells to wholesalers, retailers, restaurants, and distributors.[37] Similar projects include the Northwest Premium Meat Co-op in Telkwa, B.C., and the Speerville Flour Mill Co-op in New Brunswick.[38] The latter is part of a network of co-op farm suppliers and retailers linked through the large Co-op Atlantic system.

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[37] The Central Kentucky Hog Marketing Co-op provides similar consolidation, processing, and marketing for some of Kentucky's hog farmers. See Rick Costin (2002), "Small Farmers Combining to Stay Profitable and Compete with Large Scale Agriculture," paper prepared for the 13th International Farm Management Congress, The Netherlands.

[38] Canadian Co-operative Association, *The Lay of the Land*, page 35.

The focus in this report is on alternative distribution that addresses the needs of mid-scale farms and processors, a portion of the food chain that has been sorely neglected recently and is essential to a regional food system. However, alternative distribution can include the burgeoning number and variety of direct marketing schemes as well, from farmers' markets to community and backyard gardens. Equiterre in Quebec can boast of spectacular success in this approach; the organization started in 2002 with a pilot project to provide local food to 44 daycares.[39] It is now a very large Community Supported Agriculture organization. "Seventy-nine organic farms compose Equiterre's CSA network and feed about 8,600 families (about 25,000 individuals). The economic impact of this network is $3 to $3.5 million dollars spread in 13 regions of the province."[40] Equiterre has always combined food politics and food justice education with its work as a non-profit, and is an important element in the development of Quebec's local food movement. These are just a few of the examples of foresightedness and dedication to regional food; there are many others and new ones are launched every week.

Variability in the definition of "alternative" is not really a challenge to strong and diverse regional food systems, just as the reasons that people engage in building alternative distribution channels may differ. As Carlos Petrini, the founder of the Slow Food movement writes, "If you consider the plurality of identities and the diversity that surround us, you'll realize that it is practically impossible not to contradict yourself every once in a awhile—and there's nothing wrong with that."[41] One of the keys to understanding the examples in this report is the fact that diversity in food system initiatives and solutions is not just acceptable: it is essential. Rick Welsh compares it to the need for diversity in a well-functioning ecosystem.

> Among alternative agriculture's basic tenets is the notion that the long-term health of our food and fibre system depends upon maintaining sufficient diversity in production, processing and marketing. Such diversity ensures open access, competition, and innovation. The rationale is similar to that for maintaining adequate diversity in natural biological communities—reductions in species diversity (and competition) hamper our ability to adapt to social, physical and biological shocks through time.[42]

It is also important to consider the local social, historical, and economic contexts when assessing the projects described here. For example, in both Prince Edward County and the Waterloo region, there are many specific circumstances that make regional food ventures

[39] Canadian Co-operative Association, *The Lay of the Land*, page 20.

[40] Christianson & Morgan, *Grow Local Organic*.

[41] Petrini, *terra madre*, page 55.

[42] Welsh, *Reorganizing U.S. Agriculture*, page 1.

possible. As food is relocalized, the individual context for revivification of a regional food system becomes much more important; cookie-cutter solutions should be suspect.

Other Considerations for New Alternative Food Distribution Models

The consideration of alternative food networks raises the important problem of efficiencies of scale. The case studies cited range from enterprises seeking multi-million dollar investments to ones that work from donated space funded largely by a grant of less than $100,000. Many questions remain. What size is appropriate for markets that research has not even assessed yet? How big does an enterprise need to be to achieve success? How sustainable is an operation if key components of most budgets—labour and space to operate—are provided by volunteers or friendly neighbours?

Every innovator in regional food development has had to struggle with the problem of growth. Paul Knechtel, of 100 Mile Market, for instance, pondered the timing of getting a new truck—when would the market's growth potential warrant the investment? Eat Local Sudbury weighed the possibility of expanding operations or acquiring more partners to cover the higher rent in its new main street space. Ottawa Valley Food Co-op has calls to expand to Ottawa, but wants to make sure its volunteer team is fully trained and ready before moving into this market. In a largely untested and unmeasured market, these are difficult questions to answer.

Inadequate investment or economic analysis in local or organic food have meant that small and mid-sized farmers focusing on these markets are on their own in figuring out how to make their businesses work. They must be highly skilled and knowledgeable about their land, the interaction of soil and plants, the climate and varieties that work in their environment. They must also be aware of marketing strategies and opportunities, since many of them rely on farmers' markets and Community Supported Agriculture for at least some of their income. As Shuman points out, "In principle, a global-scale producer can wield vast resources to produce many different products for many different local tastes. But in practice a local producer is better situated to intuit, design, manufacture flexibly, and deliver just-on-time appropriate products."[43]

The centralized food system struggles with food-related illnesses and food safety crises as well as unpredictable leaps in grain and other food prices (which have led to food riots in some countries). The evidence is increasing that the current system is simply not equipped to meet the demands of a local food-conscious populace. The small and medium-sized enterprises described here are clearly benefiting from certain market advantages. Shuman notes, "Global

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[43] Shuman, *The Small-Mart Revolution*, page 69.

reach is weighing down [large-scale corporations] with dramatic new inefficiencies in both production and distribution, and the rising price of oil will intensify both."[44]

Small to mid-scale producers and distributors are able to move quickly to provide customers with what they want; they are more flexible, better able to respond to market changes, less bureaucratic. They benefit from various operational efficiencies. Shorter distances reduce the cost of deliveries as well as the delivery time. These distributors are able to function easily with just-in-time inventory, so they are not encumbered with large inventories to manage and track and that shrink over time due to expiration or other causes.

Each of these advantages must be scrutinized. For example, tractor-trailers delivering food from thousands of miles away are not energy-efficient (in addition to the huge fuel costs for a 3,000-mile trip, an additional local delivery from a warehouse is usually required). However, very small deliveries may also not be energy-efficient, as in the case of small vans that go to few customers. "Decentralization beyond a certain point may also result in a decrease in efficiency, as economies of scale are lost and unnecessary energy is spent moving a larger number of smaller vehicles."[45]

The answer seems to lie somewhere in between; the new distributors need to find the right scale for their particular enterprise.[46] Entrepreneurs are hampered by the lack of information on the local food markets, energy costs, and other crucial factors. Research has been done in the United States on relocalization, and many studies have assessed the positive economic impact of import substitution of local foods for key imported products.[47] But agriculture, markets and consumer trends are different in Ontario, so these pioneers must grope forward on their own.

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[44] Shuman, *The Small-Mart Revolution*, pages 64-65.

[45] McBay & Grinvalds, *From the Ground Up*, page 54.

[46] For more on this topic, see Rich Pirog, Timothy Van Pelt, Kamyar Enshayan, & Ellen Cook (2001), *Food, Fuel and Freeways* (Ames, Iowa: Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture).

[47] See Ference Weicker & Company Ltd. No date; MacRae et al. 2006; Stopes et al. 2002; Swenson 2009.

The Challenges to Alternative Distribution in Ontario

"Regionalism must be taken seriously in these explorations as the opportunities and constraints will differ among various regions of the country."[48]

Key Challenges

- Lack of access to start-up capital
- Widely distributed and sparse population, few urban centres
- Short growing season, climate and soil challenges in northern Ontario
- Legislation, regulations, and tax regime challenges due to industrialization of the food sector
- Uneven growth in new sectors
- Lack of appropriate economic analysis

Alternative distribution tends to be by nature place-specific, with particular attributes that solve problems for that particular region. This was highlighted in the case of the Elmira Produce Auction Co-operative, but applies as well to other innovations. Ontario has some of the most fertile farmland in Canada in its southern regions, as well as a denser population. In general, compared to other venues such as the United States or Northern Ireland (where interesting work on relocalizing food has been done), Ontario's new distribution businesses must contend with a fairly sparse and widely distributed population, considerable distances between population centres, a relatively short growing season, and a narrow band of highly fertile soil as a percentage of the province.

In addition, entrepreneurs face well-established legislative and tax regimes that are geared towards export-oriented projects. Maureen Carter-Whitney identifies the industrialization of food and agriculture as the main barrier to alternative food distribution. "One of the most commonly identified barriers…is institutional—the highly centralized purchasing and distribution systems of a concentrated corporate structure and globalized food system."[49]

Access to start-up capital is limited for small to medium-sized companies; farmers face higher taxes if they engage in on-farm processing; and if the enterprise involves meat, eggs or dairy, the entrepreneur faces additional challenges from inspection (meat) and quota (poultry, eggs and milk) requirements.[50]

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[48] Lyson, Stevenson & Welsh, *Food and the Mid-Level Farm*, page 15.

[49] Carter-Whitney, *Bringing Local Food Home*, page 2.

[50] See Carter-Whitney, *Bringing Local Food Home*, for more detail on the legislative and regulatory barriers to community development through food enterprises.

“When a farmer grows, prepares, processes, and delivers a food product, there is a severe limit on the amount of acres they can manage.”[51] Unfortunately, the food system does not shift evenly or predictably. Farmers or entrepreneurs who launch alternative food distribution systems often find themselves doing everything themselves (as in the case of Wendy’s Mobile Market), struggling with inconsistent capacity and staff turnover (as with Eat Local Sudbury), or being unable to access markets with demonstrated demand (as with 100 Mile Market and OVFC).

[51] Lyson, Stevenson & Welsh, *Food and the Mid-Level Farm*, page 8.

Indicators of Success for Alternative Distribution

Key Indicators

- Strong community capital, resources, and networks
- Access to subsidized space
- Support from local economic development institutions
- Strong staff and founder mix
- Regional networks of actors and supporters
- Willingness to share the model
- Place-based
- Formal and informal co-operation

Among the examples of alternative distribution, what might be the best indicators of future success and sustainability? These indicators may be different from the classic benchmarks of high growth and excellent profit margins, given the particular challenges these organizations face. From the cases cited here, an important factor seems to be a wealth of community resources beyond the internal staff and capital; a large pool of dedicated volunteers; access to subsidized space; support from local economic development institutions; and a useful mix of expertise in staff and founders—for instance, although Albert Knab, co-founder of 100 Mile Market, is a farmer, he also happens to be a business professor.

Many of these organizations are also either completely or partially producer-driven; the Elmira Produce Auction Co-operative is founded, owned, and managed by a group of 20 to 30 local growers. Although farmers are beleaguered now, since prices are as low in actual dollars as they were in the 1970s (so that after adjusting for inflation, farmers are making much less today), and much processing and market capacity has been lost, they nonetheless have access to several things that make these enterprises work: a depth of expertise not found elsewhere, a strong interest in long-term success, and access to land and equipment.

Another key to success, which parallels the access to community resources, is the fact that most of these enterprises are embedded in a regional network of processors, growers, policy and government representatives, suppliers, and informal distribution and exchange (shared trucks, land, etc.). Success depends partly on other initiatives, innovations and commitments in the region, and cannot succeed solely through the actions of a few lone entrepreneurs. This may be reflected, as in the case of Foodlink, in a regional development policy and program. “First, it is essential to boost the sector’s profile through multiscalar and multidimensional strategies of regional development.”[52]

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[52] Blay-Palmer, “A Tale of Three Tomatoes,” page 394.

Often innovation is a matter of formalizing existing networks, creating firm links where there have been only informal connections. Thus, the Ottawa Valley Food Co-op connects existing growers with existing consumers, taps into the local commitment to community development through volunteerism, and draws on local resources, from environmental organizations to the local chapter of the National Farmers Union. The regional networks it creates are “value chains”—chains of action and exchange based on relationships of trust, mutual dependence, and mutual benefit. The organizations examined here are often already embedded in a regional network of supply and depots and thereby achieve an advantage in creating new local supply chains (or strengthening existing ones).

An indication of an enterprise’s regional integration is its willingness, prominent in the cases reviewed here, to share the model with other regions. Because these organizations see themselves as place-based, they do not see other regions as competitive, unlike a conventional distributor, which is always hoping to expand. OVFC went as far as hosting a group from a nearby region (the Lower Ottawa Valley as opposed to the Upper Ottawa Valley). The visitors went through a packing and sorting day with the co-op’s crew to learn how the system worked.

When asked about competition, the representatives of each organization were characteristically relaxed—Paul Knechtel said that if 100 Mile Market’s farmers decided to sell direct to chefs, then his blessings went with them. He had no desire to be the chefs’ only supplier, or to control the supply completely. Likewise, both Eat Local Sudbury and OVFC promote local food in general, helping people to find suppliers in their area, whether or not they purchase through the co-op. OVFC even facilitates local pick-your-own arrangements, recognizing that a successful diverse farm needs diverse market outlets as well, and that OVFC cannot solve the problem alone.

What is the impact of *not* having alternative food distribution networks, which admittedly have many challenges and often require tremendous personal commitment on the part of the founders? Rick Welsh points out that many advocates of alternative food distribution may be seeking better distribution of the economic benefits of the agricultural system. “Ultimately, policy-makers, researchers and other interested parties must understand that the structure of agriculture can greatly influence the relative benefits that farm household members, hired labourers, the natural environment, rural communities and consumers of agricultural products receive.”[53] He points out that the current distribution system is a result of decisions made by people and can easily be altered by new decisions by people with the will and commitment to do things differently. The entrepreneurs described in this report are a few of the people across Ontario who have that will and commitment.

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[53] Welsh, *Reorganizing U.S. Agriculture*, page 8.

Conclusion: New Distribution for New Regional Food Systems

Without a wider vision of a regional food system, or a relocalized food system, these innovations may fall by the wayside as energy and resources falter. Luckily, these alternative food distribution models are part of an exciting wave of innovation that includes new processors like Brubacher's Country Flavour company, support for new farmers through places like FarmStart, and provincial government support for local food.

These cases teach us that there are two keys to building alternative food distribution networks. One is to create the full regional infrastructure required to connect local producers to local markets, and the other is to create an awareness and knowledge of a regional foodshed among consumers, growers, policy-makers, and county and municipal agents. The former requires more than just a new truck on the road; it requires agencies like Foodlink that can connect the various links in a regional food chain, make local chefs aware that three times a week they can purchase fresh local produce at the auction, alert county officials to the importance of the project to help with bureaucratic red tape, and provide the information that farmers need to develop the next market opportunity.

The grander vision of the future described here is echoed in Petrini's concept of food communities:

> Food communities are … highly structured entities, made up of sub-systems that, though limited, may be complex. They are firmly rooted in and look after the area in which their members live. There are no limits to the type of people who can be members, so long as they are concerned—at whatever level they represent—with the idea of good, clean and fair food.[54]

The vision is captured in the notion of value chains. "Regional value chains are established to create new or alternative marketing relationships among farmers, processors, distributors and retailers to add value to their products."[55] "The new task," Lyson writes in *Food and the Mid-Level Farm*, "will be to develop value chains that create a partnership among farmers, processors, distributors, and retailers, based on a set of values that are tied to the products that the value chains produce."[56] The notion of trust-based networks is not unusual for farmers, who share techniques, equipment, and labour as a matter of course. The power of the model of

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[54] Petrini, *terra madre*, page 29.

[55] Canadian Co-operative Association, *The Lay of the Land*, page 21.

[56] Lyson, Stevenson & Welsh, *Food and the Mid-Level Farm*, pages 14-15.

regional networks (also know as "foodsheds") comes from the idea of placing these trust networks front and centre, and formalizing them as an essential part of a sustainable food system, rather than a necessity for farmers who do not have sufficient resources to succeed alone.

What does a successful value chain look like, and what distinguishes it from a conventional food chain? Kenneth Dahlberg recommends modelling alternative systems after natural systems, an ecological structure model that is gaining ground: "The overall strategy is to change control over food flows; change the built infrastructure so that flows are more widely distributed; and design new infrastructures and conservation measures that fit into and help re-establish the natural flows of the underlying ecological and social systems."[57] This concept can be seen to underlie the 100 Mile Market model, where local production is consolidated in nearby regional depots and sent out to local markets through local trucks. In this case, the regional network is part of the formal structure of the entire enterprise.

Emily Trottier of Eat Local Sudbury commented that she thought local food would continue to be a niche market for the next 10 years; what might happen to make these solutions mainstream? How can they begin to feed everyone, not just those with enough to pay for local food that lacks the subsidies and artificial price supports of conventional food? How can these solutions make farming a reasonable choice of profession, without the need to resort to secondary employment or honourable penury?

David Goodman wonders what will happen when alternative food networks (AFNs) become larger and more accepted. "This raises the question of how AFNs/SFSCs [short food supply chains] will be 'folded' into the conventional food system. Will there be co-habitation and complementary yet relatively autonomous growth or will these networks be selectively co-opted and 'mainstreamed' and increasingly subjected to the practices and downward cost-price pressures of the conventional system?"[58] He argues that the concept of domestic fair trade (proposed by the U.K. Sustainable Development Commission in 2008) might cement the new relations of value chains or regional foodsheds.[59]

Carlo Petrini promotes the importance of co-operation and collaboration. "If we are to start changing this state of affairs, and restoring our proper relationship to food, what we have got to do is forge an alliance, an agreement, between the people who produce food and the people

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[57] Dahlberg quoted in Lyson, Stevenson & Welsh, *Food and the Mid-Level Farm*, page 29; see also Welsh, *Reorganizing U.S. Agriculture*, page 1.

[58] David Goodman (2009), *Place and Space in Alternative Food Networks: Connecting Production and Consumption* (London: King's College), page 13.

[59] Goodman, *Place and Space in Alternative Food Networks*, page 17.

who consume it."[60] The entrepreneurs we spoke to return over and over again to the importance of the trust that glues regional networks together, ensuring knowledge and interdependence in alternative food networks.

The loss of trust in nearly every part of the food system suggests that rebuilding trust will require concerted and concentrated effort. Consumers have lost much of their trust in the safety of the food system or its ability to deliver healthy food and be transparent about ingredients and their effects. Farmers have been so disenfranchised by recent developments in food and agriculture that they are understandably suspicious of new models, even ones that seem familiar. Eat Local Sudbury and OVFC both cited the tendency of producers to adopt a wait-and-see attitude about the project development. At first, Anderman told me, the OVFC consumers seemed to have a lot more optimism about the chances of success; they also, of course, have less at stake.

Trust requires patient labour and a long-term commitment. Rebuilding trust through alternative food networks has the reward of stronger and more resilient communities, able to turn their skills to other community development tasks in the future. Each of the innovators described here has ignited a small fire of change that can help to return our food system to a more sustainable, relocalized system. They have provided a glimpse of a future where the benefits of food and agriculture are broadly distributed and our knowledge of where our food comes from and where it goes is rich and assured.

[60] Petrini *terra madre*, page 83.

Next steps

The cases described above inspire us, as they are about people who for the most part have forged ahead against the grain to create the next round of food innovation and solutions. To allow others to act on their leadership, and to stimulate a more rapid uptake of enterprise models that bring such important benefits to community and land, policy-makers and advocates can take the following actions.

What can be done to support the development of alternative distribution? This research suggests the following priorities and action.

1. **Focus economic development programs on the opportunities in regional food enterprises.**
   Take a more targeted approach to small to medium-sized food enterprises in the economic development sector to stimulate new enterprises (as is the case in Quebec's co-op movement, where start-up capital and expertise for training and mentorship is much more readily available).

2. **Develop appropriate-scale policies and regulations for small to medium-sized food enterprises.**
   Develop policies and regulations at an appropriate scale for small and medium-sized enterprises; these can be developed while maintaining the effectiveness of food safety and other regulations.

3. **Create an association for small to medium-sized enterprises.**
   Create an association of these organizations to share knowledge and speak for the interests of this sector, and to build on their readiness to share information with other communities.

4. **Support and promote producer-ownership models (co-operatives and others).**
   Provide education and mentorship for the development of producer-ownership models (co-operative as well as joint venture models), since a significant number of successful new food enterprises are producer owned and operated.

5. **Develop trust networks through networking and communication opportunities.**
   Offer networking and online communication opportunities to build trust, the importance of which has been emphasized by the entrepreneurs interviewed.

6. **Support development of regional and local food networks.**
   Provide stimulus for alternative food distribution in regions that already have a demonstrated awareness in the issues and an interest in solutions, since in general

alternative distribution enterprises thrive in regions where local food interest is developed through numerous enterprises, networks, and programs.

7. **Promote the benefits and qualities of local food to buyers of all scales - from individuals to institutions.**
   As demonstrated through the cases studies developed in this report, distribution systems for local food exist. Buyers need to be encouraged to purchase local food. The local marketing dollars invested toward this end are crucial for expanding sales. So too is a deeper understanding of how consumers make choices, where they shop, and how they use local food.

Appendix 1: Statistics for distribution case studies

Case study Statistics	Eat Local Sudbury	Ottawa valley Food Co-op	100 Mile Market	Elmira Produce Auction Co-op	Wendy's Mobile Market
# of employees	2-5 (seasonal)	2	19	8	4
# of volunteers	15	25	0	0	2
# of delivery vehicles	none	6 routes/ 6 volunteer vehicles	3 trucks	None	2
# of farmer suppliers	10 producer-members; 30 non-member suppliers	30	135	250 registered	50
# in purchasing network/ customers	600 eater-members; unknown non-member shoppers	80	100	300 registered	180

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