

Local victory

A decade later, it looks like local food has more staying power than anyone imagined

By Helen Lammers-Helps

It wasn't exactly launched by a book, although Alisa Smith and J.B. MacKinnon's best-seller *THE 100-MILE DIET: A YEAR OF LOCAL EATING* did give a major boost to the local food market in 2007 by shining their spotlight on the long distances travelled by food in our modern distribution system.

In truth, though, other writers and food activists across the continent had been working on local food since about 2004.

That makes local food 10 years old, and it prompts the question, what's in store for the next 10?

For the answer, we contacted local food suppliers across the country and got the same "Business is booming!" response from all of them.

In Alberta, Krista Miller, secretary for the Alberta Farm Fresh Producers Association, says their online database of local producers gets 1,000 hits per day through the summer months.

"There is more demand than supply of local food, especially around Calgary," Miller says. Fruits and vegetables, especially strawberries, are in highest demand.

Many farmers complained that Smith and MacKinnon's book did a better job counting the miles than explaining why shipping our food such distances might make sense. Even so, the Vancouver couple captured the public's attention when, after discovering that the food on their plates was travelling an average 1,500 miles from the farm (the statistic came from a 2001 report by the Leopold Centre for Sustainable Agriculture in Iowa), they challenged themselves to eat only local food.

Today, their book is on a very crowded shelf, and the local food movement has spawned its own vocabulary with new words such as "locavore" (someone who committed to eating local food), "food mile" (the distance travelled by food) and "foodshed" (the area where a food is produced and consumed.)

Those aren't the only changes, however. An entire infrastructure has grown up around local food.

When Saskatoon food writer Amy Jo Ehman, author of *PRAIRIE FEAST: A WRITER'S JOURNEY HOME FOR DINNER*, first set her goal to eat 95 per cent local food back in 2005, it was really hard, she says. "This was before publication of the 100-MILE DIET book and even farmers weren't thinking about it then," Ehman says.



"I could get staples like meat and pulses but it was hard to source a lot of other foods," Ehman recalls. "Information on local foods wasn't readily available."

Interest in local food still varies across the country. In Ontario, awareness of food miles was high even before Smith and MacKinnon's book came out, with Local Food Plus launched in 2005 as a certification system for growers that ensures food is both local and sustainable.

The Local Food Plus website provides a database of certified growers to make it easier for buyers to locate sources of local produce, says president and organic farmer Don Mills. The organization also reaches out to restaurants, independent stores and institutions to encourage them to pledge to buy local food. So far about 100 restaurants, mostly in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), as well as institutions such as the University of Toronto, are buying more local food as a result of the work of Local Food Plus.

Local Food Plus has also worked hard to raise awareness of the benefits of buying local food by

participating in the Toronto Green Living Show, answering media requests for information, and operating a vibrant social media campaign.

The Kitchener-Waterloo area is another slice of Ontario where local food is thriving. Foodlink, a grassroots organization, began as an outgrowth of a public health initiative there in 2002. For 13 years, Foodlink has been connecting local producers with consumers in search of local food.

Some 30,000 copies of its Buy Local! Buy Fresh! map listing 70 area farms and the type of produce they have for sale are printed each year and handed out at tourism offices, libraries and farm markets, says Foodlink's executive director Anna Contini. The map is also available on their website in a searchable Local Food Finder database.

To showcase local foods, Foodlink also hosts the Taste Local! Taste Fresh! event which pairs about 20 local farmers with local chefs. The sold-out event is both a fundraiser and a networking event, explains Contini.

Now such tactics are catching on across the country.

With such tools, it's getting easier for consumers to access local food, and the momentum behind local food keeps growing.

Many farmers are also making it more convenient for their customers to buy local by selling produce from other farms in addition to their own at their on-farm stores. For example, in the Kitchener-

Waterloo area, farms like Martin's Family Fruit Farm, Barrie's Asparagus Farm & Country Market and Oakridge Acres Country Meat Store, sell a range of local products including meats, cheese, eggs, maple syrup and honey from other producers in addition to their own products.

More farmers are also selling their produce through a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) model which provides a guaranteed outlet for produce as well as helping with cash flow. Customers buy a share of the farmer's crop at the beginning of the season and in return receive a box of veggies — whatever the farmer is harvesting — each week.

Buying clubs are also making it easier for consumers to purchase a range of local food. For example, Bailey's Local Foods, a buying club in Waterloo, Ont., procures produce from several farmers based on orders from its members. Online ordering is available from May to October, with monthly online ordering from November to April.

When it comes to local foods, the old saw applies that where there's a will there's a way. Entrepreneurs are getting increasingly creative at finding ways to connect growers and consumers. In Grey County, northwest of Toronto, the Chef's Forum was formed in 2011 as a match-making service for local chefs and farmers. Now, the group has even contracted a Toronto local food distribution company to pick up local food orders from the Chef's Forum farmer members for distribution to Toronto chefs and buyers.

Increasingly businesses specializing in local food are starting up, adds Contini. For example, Frabert's Fresh Foods in Fergus, Ont. specializes in local produce and meats, while restaurants such as the Borealis Grille with locations in Guelph and Kitchener, bills itself as "Obsessively Local."

Contini says demand for local food is still growing. There is a distinct part of the population that is becoming aware of where their food comes from and wants to support local food, she says.

Normand Bourgault, a marketing professor at the University of Quebec says "buying local is more than a trend. It is here to stay," driven by concerns about the environment, global warming and food scandals around the world, he says.

Studies generally show that consumers are willing to pay up to 10 to 15 per cent more for local produce as long as the product quality is also there, Bourgault says. Those who prefer to buy local have a sense of belonging to their local community and want to support the farmers in their area.

Foodlink has licensed their map template and brand to 15 other regions including one in the Okanagan Valley in British Columbia. Shayne Wright, founder and co-ordinator of the Buy Local BC Initiative in Lake Country, near Kelowna, is producing the area's first Buy Local! Buy Fresh! map.

Already, 27 growers have signed up

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and Wright expects to print about 8,000 maps. Wright says, too, that the area's wine industry and farmers markets are flourishing, and more restaurants are offering local menu items.

Farmers markets are also booming, thanks in part to the local fever. The Saskatoon Farmers Market is doing well, says Debby Claude, manager of operations. Farmers who used to come once a week are now coming two to three times a week, she says. And many farmers are extending their season using greenhouses, she adds.

The Saskatchewan Liquor and Gaming Authority (SLGA,) relaxed its rules for cottage wineries, distilleries and brewers to sell their products at farmers markets, which has also helped local vendors, says Claude.

Each year in February, the Alberta Farm Fresh Producers Association offers a two-day workshop called Alberta Farm Fresh School to provide information on production and marketing. Alberta Agriculture also offers grower support.

In some provinces, governments are also taking a leadership role with legislation to promote the local food movement. According to the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food, the purposes of the Local Food Act of 2013 are to foster successful and resilient local food economies and systems in Ontario, help increase awareness of local food in Ontario and develop new markets for local food.

Specifically, the act sets targets for institutions such as hospitals and daycares to procure local food. It also provides for teaching food literacy in schools so students learn how to use fresh whole Ontario food. Plus, the act supports innovative local food projects through the Local Food Fund, says

However you define it, Canadian chefs say local will be the biggest food trend again in 2014

Carolyn Young, acting director of Sustain Ontario, a province-wide, cross-sectoral alliance that promotes healthy food and farming.

In Nova Scotia, the Environmental Goals and Sustainable Prosperity Act (EGSPA) aims to support and encourage local food consumption and production. By 2020, the goal is for 20 per cent of the food purchased by Nova Scotians to be locally produced, along with a five per cent increase in local farms.

Local food initiatives are also emerging in Manitoba, says Stefan Epp-Koop, program director at Food Matters Manitoba, a registered charity that helps newcomers, northerners, farmers and families to grow, share and prepare good food. He points out that groups including the Harvest Moon Local Food Initiative in Winnipeg are co-ordinating networks of buying clubs, making it easier for individuals to buy from local farmers.



More Manitoba farmers markets are also starting up each summer, Epp-Koop says, and the number of CSA farms in the province has quadrupled over the last 10 years. Institutions such as the University of Winnipeg have also taken the lead in purchasing local food. The province of Manitoba has supported local food too through its Buy Manitoba initiative, which labels Manitoba foods in grocery stores.

Not everyone uses the same definition of local. Local Food Plus, for example, defines local using provincial boundaries. Bailey's Local Food Buying Club sets a 100-mile limit. And Theresa Schumilas who operates a buying club from her Waterloo-area farm, defines it as only 50 km.

Another problem with defining "local" is that some products leave the region for processing. A case in point is oats from Saskatchewan, says Ehman.

There's also a problem of scale. To access the larger chain stores which require high volumes of products, it will be necessary to aggregate produce from several farmers, says Mills.

Consumers, however, seem to be in a mood to reward farmers and retailers for making the effort to source locally, rather than strictly adhering to any one number of kilometres.

With so many challenges already overcome, it appears demand for local food is on an upswing, especially since there's no sign of a let-up in the number of consumers who are concerned about where their food comes from and what's in it.

Certainly Canadian chefs think the trend is still hot. A recent survey of 350 chefs by the Canadian Restaurant and Foodservice Association has found that the chefs believe locally produced and inspired dishes will be the No. 1 menu trend for the coming year. **CG**