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Farm to Table: A look into who supports it and its significance in America today

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Farm to Table:

A look into who supports it and its significance in America today

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ABSTRACT

Farm to table is, like the phrase may suggest, is bringing food from the farm to your table, or in broader terms, the consumer. The consumer could be a family or any individual, restaurant, etc. Farm to table is a movement to support the local farms around you, whether it be a vegetable farmer to a cattle farmer, the same concept applies. Through this movement these goods are sourced locally.

This thesis provides a look into the farm to table movement. Farmers who source to local communities and those in restaurants who source foods locally to serve to customers have participated in this project. Using specific questions about the farm to table movement, participants were interviewed in person, over the phone and via email. The responses to these questions were used to determine what challenges these two groups face. Results of this thesis suggest that the farm to table movement has both strengths to it but also has weaknesses.

INTRODUCTION

In America today it appears that more and more people are becoming increasingly concerned in what they eat and where it comes from. Walking through the grocery store you see labels boasting “All Natural”, “Organic”, or “No Artificial Ingredients”. Stores may have signs on produce that it is locally grown. Factors like these can catch the eye and can turn consumer buying in a whole different direction. One movement that relates to this is “Farm to Table”. Domenech et al. (2007) noted that farm to table considers the phases of the production of food, from harvesting, storage, processing, packaging, sales, and consumption (as cited in Edelstein et al., 2009, p. 72).

All food has to start somewhere and the farm to table movement therefore focuses on sourcing food from where it is grown, that is locally. This process of local sourcing provides both benefits and challenges. For example, if you buy from a farm locally instead of going to your grocery store you help the economy of your local community by putting money into the hands of local farmers instead of chain retailers. The quality of the food you buy locally could easily out compete produce purchased at your grocery store from a vendor whose main goal is quantity not quality. Locally sourced foods can easily be found to be fresher. Also, the environment its positively affected due to the fact that the food has traveled less miles in order to be consumed, meaning less fossil fuels are being consumed. Purchasing food locally is not only an option just for the common household. Restaurants as well can benefit from farms in their area while also supporting their local economy. This provides their guests with a menu that will vary season to season. What is provided by your local farmer will depend on your location and the season. However, there are drawbacks to this movement. One issue could be money. Not every household has the resources to buy locally, since many times it may prove more affordable

to buy from the grocery store. Also, farms are not typical in urban settings, thus proving a challenge for those living in more built up areas. Another challenge is the fact that purchasing locally may not always give you all the produce you want at any given time. Many Americans today are accustomed to going to the grocery store to buy their food. Farm to table can essentially take us back in time a bit. While local farming has been around, decades and decades ago farming was a means to life and consuming locally produced goods was normal. Farm to table therefore is somewhat of a reverse in time when farming was of high importance to a means of living. To give a broad overview, farm to table focuses on the local production of foods, from produce to meats, to consume, rather than the method of buying produce or meat that could be from any mass produced farm either in the United States or another country (Coe, n.d.; Moulatsiotis, n.d.,). This thesis will attempt to understand the challenges confronting farms and restaurants in relation to the farm to table movement as well as the advantages of sourcing locally.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The farm to table movement requires both participation from farmers and participation from consumers to make it happen. Tiff Coe, an eHow contributor, defines a “locavore” as “one who makes a conscious effort to eat food produced in his surrounding area.” Though one does not need to be considered a “locavore” to support this movement, the consumer who decides to purchase locally and the farmer who sources locally both need to exist (Coe, n.d.).

Along with this relationship, other entities exist that contribute to this movement. One are CSAs, or community supported agriculture. Food hubs are another area that is important to note. According to Strollingoftheheifers.com, food hubs “are facilities that handle the aggregation, distribution and marketing of foods from a group of farms and food producers in a region.”

Farmers markets as well allow a combined contribution by bringing in multiple vendors to a specific area. Support of the movement varies from state-to-state and is later addressed in this paper (“Strolling of the Heifers,” n.d.).

This movement takes into account these factors and through these areas, people are able to support farm to table. This thesis further explores important features of this movement and gives a firsthand perspective through my own findings of those who support this movement.

Community Supported Agriculture

Community Supported Agriculture, or CSA, is an organization that has been established for over 25 years. Both consumers and farmers benefit from CSA. The farmer is able to sell their products direct to the consumer. The consumer in turn has the opportunity to purchase locally sourced products.

CSA works off the basis of “shares”, which is like a subscription. Normally vegetables are included in the share. There can be other products from the farm as well. These items are distributed weekly during the season to those who have a share with the farm. “Market-style” is another option being used as well. Consumers have more freedom in choosing particular items that they want from the farm, instead of getting a standard basket.

There are also risks that are associated with this system. Unforeseen events, such as whether, could affect the harvest. Both consumers can be affected along with the farmers. Since payment is made typically upfront, farmers do not have to worry about the money aspect. They do have a commitment to provide what their consumers are expecting. The number of CSAs is estimated to be over 4,000, according to LocalHarvest.org (“LocalHarvest,” n.d.).

Small Farm Statistics

The 2007 Census of Agriculture by the USDA reports statistics for small farms, which they classify as those farms reporting agricultural commodity sales of \$250,000 or less. From the

2002 Census to the 2007 Census, there was determined to be an increase of 18,467 small farms. In 2007, small farms were counted to stand at 1,995,133. These small farms make up a large percentage of total farms. These just under 2 million small farms make up 91% of the total makeup of farms.

The total increase in small farms was stated to be 1% from 2002 to 2007. There were both decrease and increases in farms over this five year period, which is reason for the totaling of the percentage increase to be just 1%. The largest percentage decrease was 7%. These were for farms with larger revenues between \$100,000 and \$249,999. Those farms who made significantly less revenue (less than \$10,000) actually saw an increase. Those farms with revenues over \$10,000 did see a decrease though.

The 2007 includes percentages of what is “Direct to Consumer Sales” for farms. Farms with sales of less than \$10,000 comprises a total of 11% for all farms. Farms that have sales of \$100,000-\$249,999 make up a little higher percentage, standing at 15%. The greatest percentage of sales, 31%, comes from farms who fall into the \$10,000-\$99,999 range. Small farms in total make up 57% of these sales

Both the South as well as New England rank the highest in the percentage of small farms. Out of all the states though, in terms of small farms, West Virginia carries the highest percentage. In Delaware, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Iowa the percent of small farms is under 80%. You can find the small farm percentage to be 95% or even greater in 14 states though (“U.S. Department of Agriculture,” n.d.).

State Rankings

In the United States, local food production and consumption varies from state to state. The 2013 Strolling of the Heifers Locavore index is created by a local food advocacy group. This

index has put rankings on the 50 states, plus the District of Columbia. These rankings show local food commitment/availability of local foods, comparing states to one another. The data used to create the rankings takes into account farmers markets, CSAs (Consumer-supported agriculture), and food hubs, as well as population statistics for each state (“Stroll’s 2013,” n.d.).

State Rankings	
1) Vermont	27) New Mexico
2) Maine	28) Virginia
3) New Hampshire	29) Maryland
4) North Dakota	30) Delaware
5) Iowa	31) North Carolina
6) Montana	32) Pennsylvania
7) Oregon	33) Indiana
8) Wyoming	34) Missouri
9) Wisconsin	35) Alabama
10) Idaho	36) Ohio
11) Rhode Island	37) South Carolina
12) Massachusetts	38) Arkansas
13) Hawaii	39) Illinois
14) South Dakota	40) Tennessee
15) Connecticut	41) Mississippi
16) Minnesota	42) California
17) Alaska	43) Georgia
18) Kentucky	44) Utah
19) Colorado	45) Oklahoma
20) Nebraska	46) New Jersey
21) Washington	47) Nevada
22) Michigan	48) Arizona
23) West Virginia	49) Louisiana
24) District of Columbia	50) Florida
25) New York	51) Texas
26) Kansas	

(“Strolling of the Heifers,” n.d.)

RESEARCH METHODS

For this project I decided it was best to get results from both the farmer and restaurant aspect, since both are major components of the farm to table movement. I created a series of questions that would be used to ask the farmers, and a series of questions used to ask the

restaurant. All questions in the survey were open-ended and could be answered as the participant wanted. The questions were reviewed by my thesis advisor and UNH IRB approval of my research was approved for human subjects study. There was no right or wrong answers. The questions asked would allow me to get a larger perspective on this topic and different viewpoints from people in similar fields of work or business. The restaurants questions included how much of their food was locally sourced, reasons they source locally, and hardest factors of sourcing locally. For the farmers, questions asked included the challenges and advantages of growing locally and their customers' most important factor when decided to buy from them. This is a sampling of the questions asked and all of the questions in the questionnaire can be found in Appendix A and B.

To create the sample of farms and restaurants, multiple sources were used. First I searched the internet for farms and restaurants that seemed to be growing/sourcing locally. The majority of reaching out was done by e-mailing. Recipients interesting in participating could either conduct an interview over the phone with me or they could fill out the questionnaire sent to them over e-mail and send it back to me. Second, I reached out to an individual who was able to give me two contacts that work in fields that relate to farm to table. I reached out to these individuals asking for their assistance. One individual gave me contact information for a person who would potentially be able to help me. I did contact them and received back a list of suggestions to contact. The other contact from the two originals also got back to me, and gave me suggestions as well. I also reached out to a faculty member in the hospitality department at the University of New Hampshire who gave me suggestions of who to contact. From the suggestions received, I contacted a large majority. One contact's suggestions came too late into

my research for me to continue reaching out and I was unable to further reach out to their suggestions.

Attached to the e-mail was a consent form as well as the questionnaire that pertained to the category I was e-mailing (Farm or restaurant). I asked for participation from only one person over the phone and then sent them the e-mail information. All others were first contacted via e-mail. I conducted two interviews over the phone and the rest of the questionnaires were done through e-mail. The participant answered the questions on their own time that they received in the e-mail and then sent them back to me. Due to feeling I had adequate information to put together my findings, I decided not to ask any follow-up questions to the initial responses that I had received. Finally, I took the responses that I had and began to compile my findings.

In total, 3 farms and 5 restaurants participated in this study. Various states in the U.S. were represented in this study and include New York, Texas, South Carolina, New Hampshire, Illinois, and Massachusetts.

Information obtained from the participants was analyzed qualitatively.

FINDINGS

For ease of clarification, I have broken down the farmers and restaurants into the state in which they are located in the U.S.:

Sample and related questions asked (initial)			
Type of respondent	State	Initial questions asked	Method
Farmer A:	New York	Appendix A	E-mail
Farmer B:	South Carolina	Appendix A	Phone
Farmer C:	Texas	Appendix A	Phone
Restaurant A:	New Hampshire	Appendix B	E-mail
Restaurant B:	New Hampshire	Appendix B	E-mail
Restaurant C:	New York	Appendix B	E-mail
Restaurant D:	Illinois	Appendix B	E-mail
Restaurant E:	Massachusetts	Appendix B	E-mail

After analyzing the information from the responses, the results of the interviews were separated into specific points worth noting. The following reflects these points most important to the objective of this study:

Restaurants:

Amount of local sourcing done in the restaurants:

- Seasonality affects complete total sourcing of produce items
- More staple items that do not rely on the seasons can be sourced year round. Such items may include dairy items, alcohol, and meats.

Reasons to source locally:

- Freshness of the products
- Supporting of the local agriculture
- Relationships formed with the purveyors
- Support of the local economy

Changes in the future:

- More customers wanting to know what is in their food/where it is sourced
- Greater selection of products to purchase

Hardest factors:

- Price/cost
- Weather
- Limited amount of product to purchase
- More distributors to go through to purchase your product

Guests' most important factors when consuming the restaurant's products:

- "They can taste the difference" – *Restaurant D*
- "My customers know that they are helping sustain local agriculture, small businesses, the local economy and unique local products"- *Restaurant A*
- Value
- Taste

Farms:

Challenges of growing locally:

- Supply of the product in limited quantity
- Price control

Advantages of growing locally:

- Control of product
- Get to know who is purchasing your product

Major changes in the future to adapt to the growing trends in farm to table:

- More markets
- More variety

Consumers' most important factor when deciding to buy from you:

- Reliability
- Good product
- Knowing what they are eating and where it comes from
- Support of the local agriculture

Common themes are apparent between the restaurants viewpoints on the farm to table movement and the farmers view points on the farm to table movement. Similarities worth noting are as follows:

- Positive support of the local agriculture
- Limited quantity of product grown/produced effects both sides
- Relationships are built with farmer/purchaser by growing/purchasing locally
- Price factors affect both sides
- Benefits on both ends (Farmers and purchasers)

CONCLUSION

This research project has allowed me to look deeper into the farm to table movement. I was able to receive first hand responses to questions regarding this topic by reaching out to those who are appropriate contacts in this field of study. By being able to do this I was able to obtain more information to help me further my knowledge on this subject.

This project helps clarify the importance the farm to table movement is at the moment as well as the where it may be heading into the future. Not every restaurant sources locally and not all farms provide mostly for their local communities.

While I did not have a diverse selection of participation from a large amount of states, I was still able to get viewpoints from farmers and restaurants in different locations. Since many of the replies to the questions asked shared similarities, it does not seem that location of the farm is going to significantly impact their viewpoints on farm to table. This theory applies as well to the restaurants and their location. One common theme that I noted previously was seasonality of produce for restaurants. This issue may vary from location to location. Since those that participated in the restaurant questionnaire were all from states in which seasonality is present, I cannot determine whether this is an issue with restaurants in locations with warmer temperatures year-round. Overall though, common and shared viewpoints on the farm to table significance can be seen no matter the location.

Another important theme worth point out is the relationship aspect of the farm to table movement. Small, local farms and the consumers, whether they are a family or a chef, can form relationships. This is something important to note. There are two supporting sides, the grower and the consumer. The support for the farm to table movement would not be there if consumers were not purchasing, and consumers could not support local sourcing if farmers weren't growing. Forming a relationship enhances this connection. Farmers could easily grow or raise what they wanted and sell it for the money aspect. They are not required to get to know who they are selling too. This is something though that seems to be a distinguishing factor of the farm to table movement. Knowing who is enjoying the fruits of your labor and on the reverse side knowing who is growing or producing what you are eating, is an enhancing factor to the farm to

table movement. When asked what their favorite part of what they do is, *Farmer A* wrote, “Favorite part is meeting with my customers and have them thank me for my great locally grown poultry.”

Price factors are another common theme that is apparent in this movement. It makes sense that prices for items produced on a much smaller scale will cost more. When demand is high, it is common that prices will increase. This could be an issue for the future as well. Through doing my research it seems that in the future farm to table will grow. This will create greater demand. Thus with greater demand, prices should be seen to rise. It appears though that more farms being established in the future can be expected to happen. This may help with heavy demand. I believe demand will vary from location to location though. While some areas may see a rise in farms sourcing to local communities, other areas may be slower to catch up. Therefore, I believe the price factor for local goods and the prices farmers must keep their products at will depend in the future on the demand and the supply in their area.

I had also inquired about how long farmers how been in the business of sourcing locally as well as how long the restaurant has been using farm to table. This area was varied from participant to participant. There is no direct correlation that I can see where amount of time in the field influences varied answers. The responses I received from participants had many similarities regardless of how long they have been participating in this movement.

By already being familiar with this topic before beginning this thesis, and by doing background research in conjunction with my questionnaires, I was able to broaden my knowledge on this subject. Through reading this thesis, one can obtain more information on what the farm to table movement entails and read about first-hand perspectives of the movement by those who provide it and those who utilize it in their business.

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APPENDIX A

Questionnaire-Farms

How long have you been in the farming business?

What are the challenges/advantages of growing/farming locally?

Do you see any major changes in the future to adapt to the growing trends in farm to table?

What is your favorite part of what you do? What is the least favorite part?

What do you view as your consumers' most important factor when deciding to buy from you?

APPENDIX B

Questionnaire-Restaurants

How long have you been using farm to table?

Is all of your food locally sourced, or just some?

What was the major reason, or reasons, to start sourcing locally?

What changes do you see in the future?

What are the hardest factors when buying locally?

How do you deal with the trends in local sourcing, and how is the competition?

What would you consider to be your guests' most important factor when consuming your products?