

Asheville's Food Economy More Than Farms, Tailgate Markets

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Written by Dale Neal, Asheville Citizen Times



Anna Long, far left, and Havelly Carsky hand Hannah Stampe crates of fingerling potatoes at Flying Cloud Farm. / Erin Brethauer (ebrethau@citizen-times.com)

With the warm weather, I couldn't resist planting some leaf lettuce and seeding arugula in my garden. I've been a steady customer at the winter tailgate market over at the Woodfin YMCA branch on Saturdays. Of course, I'm already looking forward to the first CSA box at the Fresh Quarter produce stand in the Grove Arcade, come May.

Piling those tasty greens on my plate helps put greenbacks in the pockets of area farmers and other families in Asheville's growing food economy.

Now other communities are looking to Asheville as a model how to support small farms and local businesses. The Appalachian Regional Commission, which serves states and counties reaching from Mississippi to New

York, is holding a forum “Growing the Appalachian Food Economy” on Tuesday and Wednesday at the Renaissance Asheville Hotel.

“The economic impact of local food movement is a lot more than farmers and tailgate markets. There are a lot of spinoffs along the supply chain of getting food on our tables,” said Mary Lou Surgi of the Blue Ridge Food Ventures.

Surgi should know. With the Food Ventures commercial kitchens, she helps entrepreneurs launch new food products such as jams, jellies, hot sauces and other items into the market.

That’s the same message that Charlie Jackson of the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project in Asheville wants to deliver as a featured speaker at the forum.

“In some ways, we live in a bubble in Asheville. We sometimes forget how good we have it since the access we have to local food is just remarkable,” Jackson said. “Asheville is the place to really lead the nation.”

That’s not just a local bias. Jackson has numbers to show that local food has boomed here. ASAP’s Local Food Guide listed 32 tailgate markets in 2002. Last year, there were 77 tailgate markets across the region, an increase of 140 percent.

CSAs — community supported agriculture boxes — grew from 12 farms offering boxes of produce in 2002 to 70 last year, an increase of 483 percent.

Appalachian Grown — that label you see on local produce in Ingles Markets and other grocers — tallied \$62 million in sales in 2010, according to ASAP’s research.

Not every community has the same assets as Asheville, which has a growing reputation for innovation. But both Jackson and Surgi see ways that small towns up and down the Appalachians can grow new jobs, promoting local food.

“We believe that farmers and businesses are real innovators who will be the leaders,” Jackson said.

The supply chain is more than fresh produce, but the fuel we need to run our cars or heat our homes. Blue Ridge Biofuels, for instance, is promoting a Farm to Fryer to Fuel program, encouraging farmers to grow canola seed that could be turned into cooking oils for restaurants, then recycled into biodiesel.

The boom in Asheville’s craft beer scene makes up another supply chain as local farmers grow the hops and flavorings for special ales made by local breweries.

Jackson pointed to startup The Chop Shop on Charlotte Street as another step for the local food movement.

“They saw enough local growers of meat and enough local customers willing to buy it, so they decided to open a local butchery,” he said. “That’s ASAP’s belief — that the challenges in our infrastructure, particularly in processing, will be met by the businesspeople who are going to step up and make the changes we need.”

Surgi would like to see more emphasis in local food movements to tackle the persistent problem of hunger in Appalachia. While you have to take some recent studies that ranked Asheville as the third-worst metro in the country with a grain of salt, experts agree that too many people, children especially, are going without food in our mountain.

“Local food is not just for people with high economic status,” Surgi said. “We need to think about how do we not forget the hungry in our region.”

We sometimes forget that money is only an abstraction in our economy. We trade legal tender — little pieces of paper — or swipe our debit cards with the faith we’re exchanging items of real value.

A real local economy rests on our daily bread — what we eat three times a day, every week of every month of every year.

So, eat your vegetables, as your mother used to say. Just make sure they’re local veggies. It’s not only good for you, it’s good for your neighbors.