

Locally Grown Food Feeding Asheville Economy

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Asheville's burgeoning local food movement soon will be known throughout the Appalachians. After that, who knows?

The Appalachian Regional Commission, which covers an area reaching from Mississippi to New York state, held a two-day Growing the Appalachian Food Economy forum in Asheville this week.

And why not? At latest count Western North Carolina had 77 tailgate markets and 70 Community Supported Agriculture farms offering boxes of food to people who sign up for the season. Farmers grow ingredients for area microbreweries. And that's just the start.

"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, which helps entrepreneurs bring food products such as jams, jellies and sauces to market.

The Chop Shop is a good example. "They saw enough local growers of meat and enough local customers willing to buy it, so they decided to open a local butchery," said Charlie Jackson of the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project.

"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."

Food is not always the end point. Blue Ridge Biofuels has a Farm to Fryer to Fuel program under which farmers grow canola seed that can be turned into cooking oils and then recycled into biodiesel.

As important as the number of local food producers is the number of local food customers.

More and more people are eschewing corporate-grown food when they can for the products made locally. There are a lot of good reasons to do so, according to ASAP:

“Locally grown and raised foods allow you to eat fresher, better-tasting and healthier food; help your farming neighbors stay in business; sustain our rural heritage; protect the natural beauty of the mountains by preserving farmland; encourage sustainable, environmentally friendly agricultural practices; and strengthen the local economy.

And local food is not available just at tailgate or specialty markets or CSA farms. Look for the Appalachian Grown label on produce in Ingles Markets and other grocers. Appalachian Grown sales totaled \$62 million in 2010, according to ASAP.

If you don't know where to shop near you, get a copy of ASAP's Local Food Guide, “a free ... directory to family farms, tailgate markets, wineries, grocers, restaurants, caterers and bakers, farm stores and stands, farms to visit, B&Bs and farm lodging, apple farms, u-pick farms, CSAs, and distributors in the Southern Appalachians.”

It is available at more than 400 area locations or at the ASAP office, 306 W. Haywood St., Asheville. It also is available online www.buyappalachian.org.

Local food is frequently more expensive than corporation-farm products due to the economies of scale. But it's worth the difference. Besides the advantages cited by ASAP, there is less chance of contamination as local food passes through fewer hands.

The area's abundance of small farms serving the local market is in part the result of mountain topography, which is not suited to large corporate farms. But that is not the entire story. There also is the entrepreneurial spirit. “We believe that farmers and businesses are real innovators who will be the leaders,” Jackson said.

“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,” he added. “Asheville is the place to really lead the nation.”

The way things are going, the nation soon will know.