

A Growing Movement

By: Emma Robertson

The inside of the United Farmers Market of Maine, in Belfast, is a happening place. The building is a maze of stalls and stands. Farmers are lined up, smiling, speaking, and *selling*.

Most are bundled up in jackets; there's a draft in the converted building. As customers approach the stalls, the farmer perks up. They offer a warm greeting and a smile crosses their weathered face. They offer the customer a sample, sometimes a piece of cheese or a sausage, other times a piece of bread, a cup jelly, or a vegetable.

And then they launch into their well-rehearsed speech. They talk about their process, their facilities, about how organic they are. Sometimes it seems like a competition, the farmers try to "out-organic" each other.

But they do what they have to because it's their job and their livelihood. It's how they support their families. But most importantly, they're trying to spread and support a healthy lifestyle, and they're trying to improve their community through food.

To understand the beginnings of the farm-to-table movement, it's important to first understand the thrive of processed foods. Canned and processed foods came into popularity during World War II. Armies and soldiers needed food that would last longer and maintain its "freshness." In fact, the military often initiated the creation and invention of many non-perishable foods that we know and love today.¹

Canned and processed foods continued to flourish throughout the 1950s and the 1960s. But with the arrival of the 1970s and the counterculture movement, hippy ideologies began to take over. Many hippies supported and encouraged the use of local and organic food. This preference for healthy, homegrown food gradually began to appear on restaurant menus as well.²

In 1971, chef and food activist Alice Waters founded Chez Panisse, a neighborhood bistro in Berkeley, California, that is still in operation today. Waters' menu changes with the season, and often features fresh, local and organic ingredients including vegetables, fruits, meat, fish and poultry. Her restaurant was one of the first well-known of its kind to bring the farm straight into the kitchen.³

The movement slowly spread east, with restaurants opening all across the country. The roots of farm-to-table in Maine are not simply black and white. In 1952, homesteaders Helen and Scott Nearing moved from Vermont to Maine, where they established Forest Farm. In 1972, the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association, or MOFGA, was established to support farmers and educate about organic agriculture. In 1977, the first Common Ground Fair was held, which

began a long tradition of an essentially giant farmers market, frequented by thousands of Mainers.⁴

And in 1981, acclaimed chef Sam Hayward opened his first restaurant, 22 Lincoln, which served local produce from farmer Frank Gross.⁴ Within the following decade, the local food movement in Maine began to sky rocket.

According to John Bott from the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, the farm-to-table movement is “driven by local restaurants seeking to serve locally sourced Maine agricultural products to consumers.” In more basic terms, farmers can sell their goods to local restaurants. These goods can be nearly anything, but are most commonly vegetables and meats. The restaurants will then use these ingredients in their cooking to serve fresh and healthy meals to their customers. The movement has been on the rise in Maine with more and more local farms selling their goods and products to local restaurants.

Farmers do not live easy lives. It is not a glamorous job. It involves countless unpredictable hours. There are good seasons, and then there are devastating, uncontrollable seasons. And yet, no matter the hardships, no matter the stress, Maine farmers never fail to put on a friendly face and a smile.

Kelby Young, 37, rises before the sun. He is a full-time farmer and the owner of Old Haven Farm in Chelsea. Young's farm dabbles in three areas of business. They create value-added foods including jams, jellies and sauces. They have about three acres of gardens on which they grow vegetables. They also have about 75 pigs, 30 sheep, and also keep poultry, ducks and chickens.

Young doesn't farm just to support himself. He has three children, who also help out and complete chores every morning. One even travels with him to the farmers market to help sell their goods.

Beyond the farmers market, Young also sells to roughly four or five restaurants in his local area. But that number can fluctuate depending on how busy the restaurant is. When selling to restaurants, Young emphasizes forming human relationships with the restaurant owners.

"They're buying your farm as much as they're buying your product," he said. "So you have to build and maintain that relationship, just like you would a friendship or any other consumer relationship."

In fact, Young prefers this way of sales over nearly everything else, especially farmers markets.

"[Selling to local restaurants] is a heck of a lot easier than packing up and wondering what you're going to sell at a farmer's market," he paused as he contemplated the best way to explain his thought process. "If I know that this restaurant is going to buy one sack of carrots, then I can

focus on that one sack of carrots and make sure that I hit targets and I can put more effort into that one thing instead of spreading [that effort] around.”

Kate Hall, 38, started her business by selling her product to restaurants. Hall is a microgreen farmer with a focus in sustainable agriculture. Her business, GRAZE, has only been operating for one year, but yet, has been very successful.

At GRAZE, which is based out of Northport, Hall grows over 40 different kinds of microgreens and shoots that she sells to local restaurants. Microgreens are usually harvested when they are only 1.5–2 inches tall. At that point in their growth, cell division has yet to occur and the energy within the plant stays centralized.

“So you’re ingesting a living cell from a plant,” Hall explained. “You’re actually just transferring that energy into your body and ... it helps you regenerate tissues and oxygenate blood.”

Hall sells her microgreens and shoots to about 10 local restaurants. She often sits down with the chefs and helps them design their menus around the four seasons. She helps them understand how they can incorporate the flavor of microgreens into their dishes. But she also shows them how microgreens can be used in plating design.

Hall had a different introduction to farming. She used to live the glamorous life as a fashion designer for J. Crew. But she left that fast paced life because all she truly wanted to do was make a difference in the world.

When looking back on her past, she vividly remembered why she left the fashion industry and opted for farming.

“I actually want to do something that’s going to help people,” Hall recalled saying.

Now a single mother who is trying to support her son, Hall gets something different out of selling to restaurants. She appreciates local chefs for the human connection.

“They know the families that they’re working with and they know that they’re actually helping the children, and the people behind the scenes too,” Hall said. “It’s a very touching and personal experience.”

But at the end of the day, the biggest benefit of farm-to-table is nutrition. The shelf life of local food is long; it’s not packaged on a truck for days on end, it’s fresh. Chefs are able to serve their customers ingredients that are local, ingredients they know are healthy.

“We know that this is our community,” Hall said. “So we want our community to be strong and well fed.”

Farm-to-table restaurants don't make business easy for themselves. They could buy from one supplier. Food would be easy to order, easy to have delivered, and the accounting and bookkeeping would be spot-on accurate.

But farm-to-table restaurants don't operate for ease. They use local ingredients to create healthy food that connects their local communities.

Matt Chappell, owner at Gather Maine in Yarmouth, operates his restaurant out of an old, 1860s masonic hall with soaring ceilings. Gather Maine uses local ingredients like beef, pork, fish, and vegetables to create recipes that its customers can enjoy in a casual, neighborhood atmosphere.

Chappell appreciates using local food, but his reasoning goes beyond health benefits.

“Obviously the food is fresher and typically tastes better, but I'm very much about supporting the local economy, which is why our support of local suppliers and service people doesn't stop at just the food,” he said.

At Gather Maine, everyone hired, even for mundane jobs, is local. The person who cleans their carpet to whoever is servicing their equipment, they're all local. Chappell's restaurant avoids big corporations at all costs.

“We do it that way because that's the food that we want and that's how we want to run the business,” Chappell said.

As popular as farm-to-table has been in the state, in Chappell's local area of Southern Maine, that element alone isn't enough to make his restaurant stand out. So he focuses on another element that makes Gather Maine attractive to locals.

He tries to create a restaurant for the neighborhood. A place for them to gather, as he puts it. His goal is to create an environment that can encompass his town. At Gather Maine, anyone can be involved with the restaurant with the garden barter program that Chappell initiated.

Essentially, any home gardener with a surplus of goods can bring the goods to the restaurant. Gather Maine can use these ingredients in its dishes. In turn, that home gardener will receive a gift card with the value of their goods, which they can use at the restaurant at a later date.

It's a business that allows the locals to participate in their dining experience. It goes beyond the conventional farm-to-table.

For restaurants up north, however, the phrase farm-to-table is enough to draw in plenty of guests.

The Miller's Table at Maine Grains is located in the small town of Skowhegan. With a population of only 8,000 people, most restaurants in the local area are fast food restaurants. So in Skowhegan, The Miller's Table is a big deal.

The company initially began as Maine Grains. Maine Grains is a gristmill, which uses locally grown grains to produce various flours and oats. They sell these flours and oats to local baking and brewery markets. In June of 2017, Maine Grains opened a restaurant, the Miller's Table, to feature their own grain products, but also other local ingredients and goods.

Their central dish is pizza, using dough made from their grains. They use local vegetables and pasture-raised meat as toppings. They also serve grass-fed beef burgers and beer that uses locally grown grains.

Amber Lambke, president and CEO of Maine Grains, recognizes the benefits of using local products in her food.

“I think there are lots of benefits from ... freshness of the ingredients, to educating the public about what our region grows and what's in season,” she said. “And if we can do that through restaurants, then I believe that enhances local food purchasing overall among the families and people that live in our community.”

Like Chappell, Lambke also takes the local economy into consideration. By using local ingredients, she believes her restaurant can give back to the community.

“I also think that it has the multiplier effect of spending our dollars locally,” Lambke said. “So when our restaurant spends its food purchasing dollars locally, more of that money circulates in

our community in a way that strengthens the local economy and I think that's ultimately very, very important."

Overall, the farm-to-table movement has a way of bringing local communities together. It has created a system that everyone can be a part of. Locals can sell their products to restaurants, and the restaurants can serve those products back to the locals. It's one large cycle that results in happy, healthy and educated consumers.

"I think that people really want to do the right thing, for health, for the economy, and for supporting farms," Lambke said. "I think folks are beginning to make the connection between eating farm-to-table food and patronizing farm-to-table establishments, and the immediate impact that has on the ability for farms in Maine to thrive."

Citations:

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4. "Timeline: Maine's Farm-to-Table Movement, 1952 to Today." *Press Herald*, 6 Apr. 2014, www.pressherald.com/2014/04/06/timeline-maines-farm-to-table-movement-1952-to-today/.

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