

Down East Connect: New Food Delivery System Brings Rural Produce to Urban Settings

Creative Use of Internet Expands Local Food Buying Options

There's an exciting new way for Wilmington residents to buy fresh food directly from local farmers. Formerly, area residents either visited a local farmers' market or specialty grocery store, signed up for a CSA share (see sidebar), or drove to a farmer's roadside stand for their vegetables.

Buying Local: Some Direct Marketing Avenues

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)

Community Supported Agriculture is a way for the food-buying public to create a relationship with a farm and to receive a weekly basket of produce. By making a financial commitment to a farm, people become "members" (or "shareholders," or "subscribers") of the CSA. Most CSA farmers prefer that members pay for the season up-front, but some farmers will accept weekly or monthly payments. Some CSAs also require that members work a small number of hours on the farm during the growing season.

A CSA season typically runs from late spring through early fall, but there are winter CSAs, particularly in mild climates.

Farmers' Market

In a farmers' market, a group of farmers sell their products once or twice a week at a designated public place like a park or parking lot. Some farmers' markets have live entertainment. Shopping at a farmers' market is a great way to meet local farmers and get fresh, flavorful produce!

Farm Stand

A farm stand is a place where a single farm sells its produce, either from the back of a truck parked on Main Street, or from a roadside stand near or on their farm. Generally only open during warm weather, farm stands may be "self serve."

Food Cooperative (or Co-op)

Food cooperatives are worker- or customer-owned entities that provide grocery items of the highest quality and best value to their members. Co-ops can take the shape of retail stores or buying clubs. All food co-ops are committed to consumer education, product quality, and member control, and usually support their local communities by selling produce grown locally by family farms.

Source: www.LocalHarvest.org/descriptions.jsp

Now, thanks to a computer model imported from Rutherford County, individuals, chefs, and institutional buyers can go online to sign up for weekly delivery of produce, meat, eggs and other products. This new online ordering system matches small North Carolina farmers—primarily in Columbus County—with consumers in Wilmington. Called "Down East Connect," the program allows people to order and pay for food right from home.

Here's how it works: an area shopper sets up an account at the group's website and selects from a list of delivery points (called "Metropolitan Buying Clubs"). Once active, they can go online any time to see what food is currently available, and to read about the participating farmers. There's no fee to sign up, and the minimum order at one time is \$10 for individuals. Chefs and institutions such as hospitals and schools get free delivery for orders of \$200 or more; otherwise they can pay a \$25 delivery charge for a smaller order.

Cutoff time for each week's order is noon on Tuesday: that's when the participating farmers can log in to see what has been ordered. They have until 11 a.m. Wednesday morning to harvest, package and label, and deliver all orders to a Columbus County location in either Whiteville or Tabor City. Farmers use barcoding equipment to help track the orders. Down East Connect Project Manager Martha Campagna then picks up the food and delivers it to the various delivery locations. Once delivered, buyers can pick up their orders during set pick-up hours. The variety of offerings has expanded quickly to include not only produce but beef, pork, free-range poultry and eggs, juice and cider, grits and corn, and bread baked using fresh-milled flour.

Organizer Josh Heinberg's motivation for bringing this model to the Columbus County/Wilmington area was job creation. The state Department of Commerce ranks counties based on their economic well-being—Columbus County is designated a



John Russ of B+L Farms dishes up some of his own greens for an attendee of a "Farmer Meet & Greet" event at Progressive Gardens. John and his wife Linda Russ were two of the farmers showcasing foods available through Down East Connect.

"Tier 1," or the most economically distressed category, and small farmers there are struggling to survive. Yet right next door is New Hanover County, with the means and interest to buy local, fresh produce. And computer technology can help solve both problems. "We are connecting these small farms with a hungry public that they would not be able to reach if not for the internet," says Heinberg.

And farmers get more than just an Internet-based market for their goods. Campagna helps them develop online descriptions of their produce and of their farming methods, which helps build relationships with the local buyers. Buyers can even arrange to pay a visit to the farm from which they buy their food. Consumers like to know where their food comes from as well as knowing they're supporting local farmers.

Many consumers are getting uncomfortable with what passes for "food" today. Safety recalls, use of hormones and antibiotics, genetic engineering and increased knowledge of the way farm animals have

(continued on page 4)

“Eating Local,” Year-Round

Finding local produce through the winter can be a challenge as farmers’ markets close for the winter months; you may have to seek additional sources. First, learn what produce is available each season. In fall and winter, look for root vegetables (sweet potatoes, potatoes, beets), winter squashes, peanuts, pecans, leeks, cabbages, greens (kale, collards), and microgreens.* Apples are available from western North Carolina. We’re used to waiting until spring for strawberries, and summer for Silver Queen corn; tomatoes grown outdoors don’t mature until July.

Vendors you meet at farmers’ markets often have additional ways to distribute their produce. Several online sources are available to help you find farms, CSAs, online buying clubs, farmers’ markets, and farm stands near you all year long.

North Carolina:

Feast Down East serves eleven counties in Southeastern North Carolina
<http://www.FeastDownEast.org/>

North Carolina Farm Fresh
<http://www.ncfarmfresh.com/>

Carolina Farm Stewardship Association
<http://carolinafarmstewards.org/>

Nationwide:

Local Harvest
<http://www.localharvest.org/>

Tidal Creek Co-op sponsors an “Eat Local” Challenge every summer. Participants sign up online and commit to getting a percentage of their food from local sources. Even an increase of 5% can make a difference. www.tidalcreek.coop.

The Cape Fear Chapter of EarthSave, a national nonprofit that educates people about healthful food choices, hosts monthly meetings with a speaker and a vegetarian/vegan/raw food potluck emphasizing local produce. See <http://senc.earthsave.org> or call (910)200-6884.

Join the “NC 10% Campaign” and help The Center for Environmental Farming Systems support local food producers, businesses and communities. Register at www.nc10percent.com and pledge to spend 10 percent of your food dollars on foods produced or grown locally; or grow your own! The group monitors progress statewide so participants can see what effect the campaign is having.

* Microgreens are tiny edible greens grown from seeds of vegetables, herbs, or other plants. Only an inch or two long, including stem and leaves, they are tasty and nutritious.

routinely been treated—often confined and subjected to cruel living conditions—have not helped consumer confidence in the quality nor the ethics of what they eat. And using the “organic” label to choose when shopping doesn’t necessarily guarantee more healthful food. Federal guidelines, labeling inconsistencies and the fact that many smaller farmers just don’t have the resources to be “certified organic” means shoppers want and need to know more in order to make their buying decisions. The increased transparency of programs like Down East Connect lets the consumer have a much better idea of exactly what they are getting, and whether the way it is produced aligns with their food goals.

“The produce is extremely fresh, reasonably priced, and very convenient for pick-up and as a mid-week produce option.” says Elaine Jack, owner of Sapona Green Building Center and a regular Down East Connect customer. “I also like supporting farmers who can’t make the Wilmington Riverfront Farmers’ Market or other store-based markets that focus on local food.”

Heinberg points out another bonus: flexibility for the consumer. The program offers “all the freshness they would expect from a CSA share, but with the ability to order as much or as little as they like—or even none at all—in any week. Some love the challenge of the ‘pot luck’ nature of a CSA; this system works well for those who may not be interested in learning how to prepare kohlrabi.”



This pre-Thanksgiving order included kohlrabi from B & L Farms, China Rose radishes from Country Corners Farm, and organic collards from Greenlands Farm & Store, as well as a personal note with a hand-drawn turkey, wishing the customer a Happy Thanksgiving.

Photos this article by Valerie Robertson.

In the six months since the program started, the number of participating farmers has grown from 14 to 33, and new farmers are encouraged to sign up. Farmers don’t have to be in Columbus County but must be able to deliver their orders to a central Columbus County location each week by the deadline. And they are free to offer any product they make, including jams and jellies and soaps. Down East Connect staff visit every farm before signing them up, to verify their farming and product details. Howard Wallace, Agricultural Extension Agent for the Columbus County Center of the NC Cooperative Extension Service, also visits each farm to assess their farming practices.

Farmers are free to set their own prices; without the middleman markup nor the cost of traveling to and from staffing a stall at market, more of the food dollar goes directly to them. Normally when a consumer spends one dollar on food, the farm receives 16 cents of that dollar.* Down East Connect farmers receive 80 cents of the food purchase dollar.

Any individual can sign up to buy food if they’re willing to pick up the food from an existing Metropolitan Buyer’s Club location. If there’s not one convenient, Down East Connect encourages you to find enough individuals—usually about 20 families—to warrant a new Club close to your home, office or school.

The program is modeled after one introduced in Rutherford County in 2007 by Tim Will, then Executive Director of Foothills Connect Business & Technology Center. Once high-speed Internet became available in this rural part of the state, it became possible for small farmers to not only reach their buyers but to coordinate planting schedules to provide exactly what their local consumers wanted without waste. Ensuring a consistent supply of fresh produce helps larger customers like restaurants and schools to make use of local produce.

According to industry studies, a piece of fruit usually travels hundreds of miles to reach the average U.S. consumer. Food items ordered through Down East Connect
(continued on page 5)

* U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. See <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Data/FoodDollar/app/>

local food

New Food Delivery System – continued

will travel an average of 42 miles. “People want to feel more food secure,” says Tony Kleese, Associate of Earthwise Company and former Executive Director of the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association. “If our ideal in North Carolina is to grow our own food, have our own food come from less than 500 miles, this is possible because we have microclimates,” he explains. Because the state contains so many different microclimates, foods such

as broccoli, cabbage, kale—all the greens and mustards—can be grown somewhere within the state almost any month of the year. When weather is too cold for lettuce in the mountains, the crop grows well at the coast. “We have the opportunity to be a relatively food-secure state.”

Down East Connect currently delivers to four locations in Wilmington, but has plans to expand elsewhere in New Hanover County and eventually to Myrtle Beach,

South Carolina. The program’s sales goal for the first year of operation was \$10,000, a goal they have achieved in only six months. Heinberg hopes the program will ultimately help create more jobs in such supporting areas as custom slaughterhouses, feed and seed stores, organic suppliers, small farm machinery, and seed savers.

For more information on Down East Connect or to visit its online Farmers Fresh Market site, go to www.DownEastConnect.com.

New Website Puts Access to Local Food on Silver Platter for Southeastern N.C.

The local food movement continues to grow with the launch of www.FeastDownEast.org, a community website resource to help build the food economy of Southeastern North Carolina. Developed by the local non-profit group Feast Down East, the site makes it easier for consumers, restaurants, schools, universities, hospitals and other food service operations to put local foods on their plates or in their facilities. Site visitors can:

- Connect with local farmers and foodies via live video interviews
- Find restaurants serving local food sourced from Southeastern N.C. farmers
- Join the 10% Campaign statewide local food initiative
- Get to “Know Your Farmer” through insightful personal profiles
- Learn how to start a community garden



Encouraging one-on-one interactions between farmers, fishermen and chefs was the purpose of the Brunswick County Farmer-Chef Partnership Meeting held in June at Fishy Fishy Restaurant in Southport. Feast Down East hosts such meetings to foster business relationships that will cater to growing diner demand for locally sourced food, or food that is obtained from local sources. Here, Kea Meachum talks with Jon Haag of Brunswick Catch.

Farmers can access many marketing, business and farming resources to help build and sustain their farm businesses. Chefs can market their local food cuisine while learning more about buying from local farmers through the SENC FOODS cooperative distribution center in Burgaw, NC.

The University of North Carolina Wilmington is the “lead agent” for Feast Down East, meaning that the program is grant-funded through UNCW. Feast Down East works to unite public and private agencies to create a local and regional food system that supports local farmers, increases the sales of local farm products, educates the public about the importance of “buying local” and sustains and expands farm employment, profit and ownership.

Learn more about Feast Down East projects, including their February 3, 2012 conference, at www.FeastDownEast.org.

Help keep North Carolina farms growing strong by buying local and encouraging area businesses to put locally produced foods on their plates.
IT'S ABOUT OUR FUTURE.

For information on how to get involved or find a Farmers' Market, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) or restaurant serving local foods visit www.FeastDownEast.org

7 Reasons to Keep It Local When You Buy Locally-Produced Foods, You...

Buy Fresher, More Nutritious Foods

Locally grown fruits and vegetables are usually purchased by the consumer within 24 hours of harvest. Produce picked at the height of freshness tastes better and retains more nutritional value.

Reduce Energy Consumption

Locally produced and distributed foods take less effort to store and ship, both of which can be energy-intensive, which in turn pollutes air and water.

Increase Regional Economic Health

Buying locally grown foods keeps money within the community. This contributes to the health of all sectors of the local economy, from farmer to vendor to consumer, helping make a more sustainable local economy.

Encourage a Self-Sufficient Community

A community that produces its own food has more control over how its food is grown. In addition, it reduces reliance on far-off food producers, thus stabilizing its own food supply.

Help Preserve Biodiversity

Farmers selling locally are not limited to the few varieties that are bred specifically for long distance shipping, high yields, and long shelf life. Often they raise and sell delicious heirloom varieties that may be hard to find in supermarkets.

Preserve the Rural Character of the Land

Supporting local farmers means maintaining local farmland. Direct-to-consumer distribution of farm products allows smaller farmers to thrive and encourages long-term husbandry of farmland.

Avoid Post-harvest Contamination

Foods that require extensive storage or transportation are routinely waxed, sprayed and irradiated. Locally-distributed food requires little or none of these measures.

Adapted from www.carolinafarmstewards.org.