

Eat Up and Take Action for Local Food



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Kids enjoying CSA pickup at Brookfield Farm in Amherst, Zoe Elkin photo

Since 1993, Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture (CISA) www.buylocalfood.org has strengthened local agriculture by linking farmers and communities in the Pioneer Valley of western Massachusetts and statewide. CISA's work is made possible by government grants, private foundation support, businesses and over 1,000 [community members](#) and [donors](#), like you!

We invite you to join us. Learn more about CISA's work by receiving [our monthly electronic newsletter](#), "liking" us on [Facebook](#), or joining [our community membership program](#).

There are many ways to take action for local food in addition to those described here.

Let us know how you take action at info@buylocalfood.org.

Eat Up and Take Action for Local Food with live links is available online at:

www.buylocalfood.org/about/publications/

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Shopping at farmers' market, Jason Threlfall photo

Take Action for Local Food

Filling your family's table with food from local farms is a delicious way to support farm businesses in your community. But eating well is just one important way to create a strong local food system. There's more that we each can do to create a thriving web of local food businesses that support the health of the environment, the economy, and the community. This Action Guide challenges all of us to use the power of our food dollars and our strength as active, engaged citizens to create a better world.



CISA's *Be a Local Hero, Buy Locally Grown*[®] marketing and promotion campaign was launched in 1999. Long before the Local Hero campaign, however, residents of our region understood that buying products from local farm businesses was a valuable way to bolster the local economy. Response to the campaign was immediate and enthusiastic, and many Pioneer Valley residents now consider local farms—and the food, festivals, rural vistas, and economic activity they generate—to be essential to the culture and quality of life of the region. The number of farms in the region has increased¹, and a growing number of food businesses source locally grown farm products.

Yet despite the successes we celebrate with each year's harvest, farm businesses in our region struggle to succeed. Farmers face challenges related to land, labor, government regulation, and profitability. Modest but important shifts in federal funding that were intended to support local food systems are now threatened. Efforts to address food safety risks created by our industrial food system may instead hurt small and diverse farms serving local markets. And many residents of our region lack ready access to healthy, locally grown food.

Together, farmers and their customers have created a renaissance in our local food economy, one that promises long-term benefits to our health, our environment, and our communities. To fully achieve this promise, we need to maximize the power we wield as consumers, and take action for local food in arenas beyond the marketplace—as citizens, workers, volunteers, parents, and community members.

¹ 2007 Census of Agriculture, United States Department of Agriculture.



Making apple sauce at home, Peter Baskette photo



Cabbages at McKinstry's Farm Market Garden in Chicopee, CISA photo

Want to get involved? In this Guide, we'll help you take action at three different levels:

- ✓ **Take Action with Your Family:** It starts with bringing delicious, fresh food to your family's table. This key step can lead to an increase in the availability and diversity of local food options.
- ✓ **Take Action in Your Community:** How to prioritize local food in your professional and personal networks.
- ✓ **Take Action for Your Values:** How you can nurture a food system that benefits people, communities, and the environment.

What can you do?

Eating more locally grown food can mean changes in what you eat, where you buy it and how you prepare it. These are big changes! And yet having a significant, lasting impact on our food system will require that we make changes not only in our own households but in our communities and in the larger culture and economy in which our food system is embedded.

For example, if local food isn't available in your child's school, an individual solution—like sending lunch from home—benefits your child, but leaves the school community unchanged. Organizing the school community to support changes in the lunch menu, on the other hand, could lead to improved school food for everyone. Likewise, driving to a weekly community-supported agriculture (CSA)² pick-up site can bring local food to your table, but organizing a local food delivery at your workplace brings local food to more people while helping farm businesses grow. You may find, too, that you've jump-started a community of food-lovers at work! Perhaps you'll start with sharing recipes and tips over lunch, move on to choosing locally grown snacks for meetings, and later encourage your employer to provide support for a garden at a nearby school.

² Community-supported agriculture, or CSA, farms offer a share of the harvest to members, who pay up front for regular shares of vegetables, fruit, meat, or other farm products. CSAs, farmers' markets, and farm stands are all examples of direct sales from farms to consumers, which doubled in value in Franklin, Hampshire and Hampden Counties from \$4,467,000 to \$8,945,000 between 2002 and 2007 (2007 Census of Agriculture, United States Department of Agriculture).

What is a food system? The food system encompasses the sources of our food and all of the ways that it is packed, processed, prepared and transported to us, as well as what we do with our food waste. We're all part of a global food system that is most efficient at moving food from large producers through large processors to large retail or fast food outlets. We bear the costs of this system, although many of them are not included in the price of the food we buy. These include, for example, the medical costs associated with the routine use of antibiotics in large-scale animal production, and the food safety risks of large-scale processing and packing.

The Pioneer Valley's local food system is growing. To learn more about the strengths of our local food system and the challenges of scaling it up to meet our needs, read CISA's report, [Scaling Up Local Food: Investing in Farm & Food Infrastructure in the Pioneer Valley](#).

Local, Regional, and Global: As residents of the Pioneer Valley, we're especially invested in the success of local food businesses right here, but we are also interested in the creation of a robust regional food system in the northeastern United States. A local food economy with strong neighboring local food economies can fill gaps, make good use of varied land and climate resources, and feed both urban and rural residents. In some cases, it's appropriate for us to source our food from right down the road, in other cases it may come from neighboring regions, and in some cases from even further away. Here in New England, we are unlikely to produce all of our own food, but we could reap significant benefits from growing more of what we eat.

Changing national policy is harder than working with local businesses and institutions. Federal government programs, regulations, and subsidies have enormous influence on food and agriculture in our country and around the world.





Kids at Mapleline Farm in Amherst, Mapleline Farm photo

Changing national policy is harder than working with local businesses and institutions, but it's too important to ignore. Federal government programs, regulations, and subsidies have enormous influence on food and agriculture in our country and around the world, contributing to rapid changes in agriculture and our food system in the last 60 years. New coalitions of advocates for public health, environmental stewardship, and local economies are working to improve federal policy. It's an uphill battle, but one worth joining.

The Pioneer Valley enjoys great soils, a new generation of skilled farmers and a variety of microclimates supporting production of diverse farm products. Businesses also benefit from a high level of public enthusiasm for local food and farms. Our goal is to expand the impact of that community support! Together, let's take action, not only in our personal lives (as shoppers, cooks, or restaurant patrons), but in our schools, workplaces and communities and our lives as parents, citizens, volunteers, and advocates.

***The Pioneer Valley enjoys great soils, a new generation of skilled farmers
and a variety of microclimates supporting production of diverse
farm products—and a high level of public enthusiasm
for local food and farms!***

How CISA Takes Action

CISA is a local, community-based organization whose mission is to strengthen local agriculture by connecting farmers and communities. CISA began 20 years ago in 1993 when a group of people who cared about farms in the Pioneer Valley began meeting to identify and address challenges to local agriculture.

How can I take real action about big problems like climate change or the health of our children?

What if I don't know how to find or cook with seasonal ingredients?

What are the benefits of eating more local fruits and vegetables, grass-based meat, or naturally fermented foods?

The *Be a Local Hero, Buy Locally Grown®* campaign, launched in 1999, is now the nation's longest-running agricultural 'buy local' program. CISA's work educating the public about the importance of local agriculture and promoting locally grown farm products has helped create a culture that prizes local agriculture. Today we are joined by a host of organizations focused on agricultural education, hunger and food access, community farms, school food and healthy eating. These groups all work to build a

food system that serves the physical, economic, and environmental health of the Pioneer Valley and its residents.

At CISA, we believe that over the next 20 years we can double the amount of locally grown food we eat to 25% of our diet. We have identified priorities that will help us achieve this significant growth. In the next few years our work will be focused on:

1. **Increasing the purchase of local food** by inspiring growth in demand and making access more convenient for all residents, especially those in Hampden County.
2. **Increasing the supply of locally grown food** by training and supporting farmers, especially new farmers.
3. **Building the local food economy** by providing information and training to new businesses that help connect farms to tables in our region, such as processors, distributors, and retailers.

Increasing demand for local food is a fundamental part of CISA's work. We inspire and educate local residents, and make it easier for them to find locally grown food in all of the places where they shop and eat. Our job is to help Pioneer Valley residents answer questions like those on this page.

Could I start a local foods business?

How can I help my school or supermarket buy more local and serve more healthy meals?

Where can I use my SNAP card to buy local food?



Amherst Winter Fare, Jason Threlfall photo

Take Action with Your Family

Here are some ways your family can take action in support of local food.

Develop your own household strategies for buying and using locally grown food. Everyone cooks and eats differently, so you'll need to spend some time crafting a local food strategy that fits your life. Local farms offer more and more options for buying, selecting and picking up their products. Consider your day-to-day travel routes, schedule and food needs. Match those with [farmers' market schedules](#) (every day of the week, there's a market open in the Pioneer Valley!), CSA pick-up locations or farm stand locations. Remember home delivery is available in some areas. CISA's guide to local farms and businesses (including restaurants and retailers) selling locally grown food is available in [print](#) and [online](#); we also have an online [guide to choosing the CSA](#) that's right for you.

Cook! Influential writer Michael Pollan says cooking is the "most important thing an ordinary person can do to help reform the American food system." Pollan notes that it's also one way people "living in a highly specialized consumers economy [can] reduce their sense of dependence and achieve a greater degree of self-sufficiency."³ Need to learn? Watch [CISA's events page](#) for classes focused on seasonal eating.

Local farms offer more and more options for buying, selecting and picking up their products.



Neighborhood picnic dinner, CISA photo

³ These quotes are from the very first page of Pollan's book *Cooked* (New York: Penguin, 2013), in which he learns from experts about four fundamental kinds of cooking: meat on a fire, food in pots in home kitchens, baking, and fermentation. Although most of us are not able to make learning to cook our full-time job, Pollan's method is a good one: asking colleagues, friends, and relatives for recipes and suggestions is an effective way to expand your cooking skills and figure out how to make time for food preparation. As a nation, our interest in cooking has not waned; Pollan observes that with the advent of cooking as spectator sport, many people probably spend more time watching shows like *Top Chef* than they do preparing their own food.

Share your love of local food with friends and neighbors. Remember that one of the benefits of local eating is building local community, so foster those opportunities in your own life. Split a CSA farmshare with a friend or neighbor, host a seasonal neighborhood potluck, or share gardening or backyard chicken duties.



A seasonal lunch spread, CISA photo

Eat more seasonally. Think about ways to replace some of your regular “long distance” food with local edibles. Love salads with avocados and tomatoes, even in the dead of winter? Top your salad with your choice of creamy goat cheese, roasted beets, grated carrots, sliced pears, sweet turnips, maple-sweetened nuts or garlicky croutons made from local bread. Not sure what to do with the winter squash available at your local farm stand? Spend time browsing [recipes](#) and test a few you think your family might like. [CISA’s Valley Bounty page](#) provides weekly tips on seasonal eating, including recipes, preserving information, and guidance on techniques that may be unfamiliar, like cutting up a whole chicken.

Plan for winter. Locally grown food is available year-round, but preserving some fruits or vegetables will give you more variety and a taste of summer during the cold and snow. If preserving is new to you, start small and simple and look for friends, [classes](#), or print or [on-line resources](#) to help!



Making strawberry shortcake, CISA photo

Remember that one of the benefits of local eating is building local community, so foster those opportunities in your own life.

Identify and take achievable steps toward a food system that's in alignment with your values.

Think about how daily food choices impact your community and the communities where your food was grown. Can't face the morning without coffee? Look for coffee that's grown with concern for workers and the environment, and consider serving it with local milk or cream and maple syrup. Love the taste of citrus in the winter? Look for opportunities to source it from family-owned farms (sometimes available through local retailers and from schools as a fundraiser), and serve fruit salads of chopped citrus and frozen local fruit.



Northampton Winter Fare, Jason Threlfall photo

The changes you make in your family's shopping and eating habits may seem insignificant, yet if we all shift our diets toward more locally grown food, the impact on farm and food businesses—and on our regional economy—can be significant. [CISA's online Local Food Calculator](#) can help you see the impact of your food spending. Use it to set a goal for buying more local food and you'll see how your choices, if adopted by families region-wide, could lead to job creation and income generation. For example, if all households in our region shift \$5 per week to local fruits and vegetables, we'd create over 500 jobs and add \$24 million to the local economy.

Johnetta Baymon

Johnetta Baymon began buying more fruits and vegetables ten years ago, when her husband had a kidney transplant. She had three sons, and wanted her husband “to stick around to see them become independent! I knew we needed to change how we ate.” Baymon is the Health and Wellness Coordinator at [Springfield Partners for Community Action](#), providing resources, services and advocacy to alleviate health inequities and improve food access for area residents. “At work, we talk a lot about helping people understand how they can benefit from a particular service or activity—they need to know what's in it for them. I know what's in it for me when it comes to eating well. It's health.”



Johnetta Baymon, Springfield Partners for Community Action photo

Since bringing a new focus on local fruits and vegetables to her family's diet, Baymon has brought her experience from home to her work. She now staffs the [Springfield Food Policy Council](#), which brings together residents and professionals with an interest in food, health, and wellness. They've networked Springfield residents concerned about gaps in the city's food system, championing such initiatives as a new city ordinance that supports gardening in the city. Baymon shares her family's experience shifting from a diet high in processed snacks to one focused on healthy fresh food, but she says she also continues to gain tips and ideas from friends, neighbors, and other participants in the Food Policy Council. Baymon's grown children are now regulars at the [Concerned Citizens of Mason Square Farmers' Market](#), founded by neighborhood residents in cooperation with [The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts](#) in 2006 to serve downtown residents who had few nearby options for fresh food. Market president Synthia Scott-Mitchell notes that the market, known as “the friendly market on the hill,” provides healthy food—and a place to chat with friends and neighbors—to Springfield neighborhoods that lack a full-service grocery store.

The Mason Square market that Baymon's children frequent is one of 47 Pioneer Valley farmers' markets, five of them open all year long. Our region also boasts nearly 50 CSAs (supplying shares for an estimated 40,000 people) and a growing number of options for home and workplace delivery. Many Valley residents make occasional use of these resources, but the long-term success of farmers' markets, CSAs, and farm businesses requires an increase in the number of people who make seasonal eating a key part of family routine and diet.

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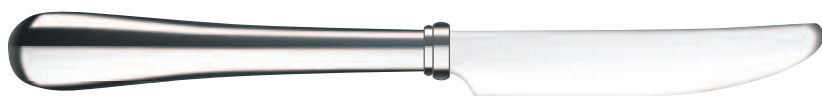
Take Action in Your Community

It may seem that the areas we can most easily influence are limited to the personal; however, we all play many roles in our communities. In addition to our roles as cooks, shoppers, and consumers of food, we can support local food as volunteers, neighbors, business patrons, parents, and citizens.

At work, for example, we eat lunch, we order food for meetings or events, and we have relationships with colleagues, partners, and vendors. In some workplaces, employees may choose to volunteer or participate in decisions about corporate contributions. In many of these roles we can take action to strengthen the local food system.

Mobile markets, healthy corner store initiatives, and farm to school programs are other ways to help connect local food to all communities.

that provide incentives for purchase of healthy food and provide support for farms and markets in accepting these programs and doing effective outreach to diverse audiences. Tell food businesses (restaurants, groceries, cafeterias) that you are looking for local. Patronize businesses that prioritize local sourcing, and let them know that's why you're there. Make suggestions about additional products you would like to see sourced from growers in the region.



In addition to prioritizing local food in family purchases, here are some ways you can take action in your community:

Support local food access for low-income residents.

If your farmers' market or CSA has programs that support access for low-income shoppers, contribute time, money, or ideas to these efforts. [CISA's resource page](#) for farms and markets that want to accept SNAP benefits can help you understand existing challenges.

[Mobile markets](#), [healthy corner store initiatives](#), and [farm to school programs](#) are other ways to help connect local food to all communities. Advocate improvements to federal food assistance programs, such as SNAP and WIC (Women, Infants, and Children),



River Valley Market in Northampton, Zoe Elkin photo

Cooley Dickinson Hospital

In the last several years, a team of staff members at Cooley Dickinson Hospital, in Northampton, has worked together to connect employees, patients, visitors, and cafeteria staff with locally grown food. Bill Norwood, Gary Weiss, and Ruth O'Connor perform different roles at the hospital, but each saw ways that locally grown food could help them meet important goals.

The hospital's connection to local farms began in the kitchen, when former Director of Food Services, Daniel English, began sourcing from Hadley farmer Joe Czajkowski. English had successfully transitioned the hospital kitchen away from prepared, heat-and-serve meals to cooking from scratch, and saw fresh, local ingredients as a natural next step. His successors, Ruth O'Connor and Executive Chef Gary Weiss, have continued to move towards healthier food—getting rid of the fry-o-later, for example, and expanding the range of food items sourced regionally to include grass-fed meat.

The system for reimbursing health care providers is going to change, and we'll be reimbursed for keeping the community healthy.

In addition, the hospital's Manager of Benefits and Compensation, Bill Norwood, in conjunction with the organization's wellness committee, recognized that fresh vegetables and fruits should be part of the hospital's efforts to strengthen employee wellness. Like many mid-size businesses, Cooley Dickinson funds its own employee health insurance plan.⁴ That means that the healthier the employees and their families are, the lower the costs of health insurance, sick leave and disability pay. "We're also looking to the future," Norwood notes. "The system for reimbursing health care providers is going to change, and we'll be reimbursed for keeping the community healthy, not treating people when they are sick. Our goal is to develop wellness programs that can be rolled out in the community."

Cooley Dickinson encourages employees to eat more fresh food from local farms in several ways. First, employees can pay for a CSA share from Stone Soup Farm through payroll deduction, allowing them to spread out the costs of their share throughout the year. Second, shares are delivered directly to the hospital all year long. Third, employees can earn

⁴ Pear, Robert, "Some Employers Could Opt Out of Insurance Market, Raising Others' Costs," www.nytimes.com/2013/02/18/us/allure-of-self-insurance-draws-concern-over-costs.html New York Times, February 17, 2013.



Cooley Dickinson employees pick up their Winter CSA shares, delivered by Stone Soup Farm to the hospital cafeteria, CISA photo

wellness credits by engaging in a variety of healthy activities, including joining a CSA, exercise, or health monitoring. Wellness credits can be redeemed for benefits at different levels, including a Kitchen Garden Farm "market share" card for use at farmers' markets.

Implementing these programs in a hospital has additional complications that might not be present in all workplaces, and Weiss and Norwood both emphasize the importance of commitment from hospital leadership and buy-in from many different departments. Changing the patient menu requires careful review by dietitians, for example, and distributing farm-fresh produce in the building raised logistical challenges. "Once we made a commitment to do this," Norwood explains, "we had to figure out how to make it work, but the conversation was about how to do it, not whether to do it."

Cooley Dickinson Executive Chef Gary Weiss (left) and Manager of Benefits and Compensation Bill Norwood (right), CISA photo



Work with others to accomplish local-food-related goals. Build a school or community garden. Expand local sourcing in your school or work cafeteria or through workplace or volunteer group meetings. Create community events to increase traffic at a farmers' market, or start a CSA distribution at your workplace. Some health insurance plans cover part of the cost of a gym membership—could your business extend this benefit to include CSA membership, or allow employees to pay for a CSA share through a payroll deduction?

Advocate for farming on locally owned community lands. In urban, rural, and suburban neighborhoods, land suitable for agricultural production is held by many parties: individuals, developers, businesses, churches and land trusts, as well as the local, state, and federal government. Resources exist to help these entities consider options for making this land available to farmers or communities for food production⁵. Participating in this effort in your community can help build the supply of local food, make new land available to farmers, expand access to healthy food, and help children and adults understand what it takes to grow food.

Help your town be more supportive of local food businesses. Consider ways that the governance of your town or city may impact farm and food business, and speak up to urge support for policies that recognize the value of these businesses. While Zoning Boards, Planning Boards, and Boards of Health all take action that can impact farm businesses, other town business may impact farmers in unexpected ways. In Whately, for example, farmers opposed a petition for a road closure, arguing that the unpaved road provides a safe route for travelling between fields on slow-moving farm equipment. **Town Agricultural Commissions** in our region have played a proactive role in many towns, taking on activities such as the creation of farm brochures or the clarification of policies for farmers' markets.

Invest in your local food system! Local investors, both small and large, have been important to several local food businesses, including River Valley Market, Hungry Ghost bakery, and Real Pickles (see page 13 sidebar). Several **local investment opportunities** allow you to invest \$1,000 or more into local farm and food businesses.

⁵ See, for example, CISA's information on access to farmland www.buylocalfood.org/resources-for-farmers/tipsheets/land/ and our list of community farms in our region www.buylocalfood.org/get-involved/community-farms-gardens/.



Michael Docter of Winter Moon Farm in Hadley, Zoe Elkin photo

How Local Businesses Take Action for Communities

Nonprofit and community groups, foundations, and government agencies have all had important roles to play in the growth of local and regional food systems, and these organizations will remain important as that growth continues. But for the most part, it is businesses that grow our food and get it to us, whether fresh, processed, or prepared in a restaurant or cafeteria. In addition, businesses provide the materials and services that local food system businesses need to succeed, ranging from the installation of irrigation systems to distribution and delivery, laundry, or payroll services. Communities that support the growth of local food businesses are engaging in traditional economic development that aligns with community values, prioritizing businesses that contribute to the long-term health of residents, land, and the local economy.

What's the value of a local food business ...

... to your family?

Local food businesses like farmers' markets, food cooperatives, neighborhood groceries, CSAs and farm stands offer more than a place to buy food. These local marketplaces provide a setting for neighborly conversation and civic engagement that enriches community life. In addition, knowing the farmer gives residents the opportunity to ask questions about how their food was grown, to increase their knowledge of food production, and to express their opinions about and desires for particular crops, varieties, or production practices. "A supermarket is about finding and purchasing foods as quickly and efficiently as possible. A farmers' market is about consumers chatting among, learning from, and developing relationships with local food producers, and about neighbors interacting with one another."⁶ Buying your food from local businesses offers transparency and accountability based on community ties and short supply chains, rather than on high-tech tracking systems or government oversight.

Increased food self-reliance can also buffer communities from supply disruptions caused by food safety issues related to industrial food aggregation and distribution, war or other unrest, or acts of terrorism. Cooley Dickinson Hospital's Executive Chef Gary Weiss notes that in a hospital setting, he is particularly careful about the safe handling and

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production practices of all his vendors, including farmers. At the same time, he takes pleasure in the knowledge that buying from local farmers means that most large-scale food recalls do not affect the hospital.

... to your community?

Studies demonstrate that money spent in locally owned businesses has a greater positive impact on the local economy than money spent at businesses whose owners live elsewhere. Michael Shuman explains, "Every job in a locally owned business generates two to four times as much economic-development benefit as a job in an equivalent non-local business. Local businesses spend more money locally, which helps to pump up what is known as the local economic multiplier. The more times a given dollar circulates in a community and the faster it circulates without leaking out, the more income, wealth, and jobs are created in that community."

In addition, Shuman points out that small businesses (including both firms with fewer than 500 employees and those with under 100) have retained their share of jobs in the U.S. economy since 1990, despite economic development programs and infrastructure subsidies that tend to favor global businesses.⁷

... to your values?

Sourcing your food locally allows you to choose farms and businesses that represent your values. Such values may be reflected in a business's production practices, such as its use of organic techniques or Integrated Pest Management. It may be important to you to support a farm that's been in business in your town for generations—or to patronize a brand-new one that you want to help succeed. Or, if you are concerned about increased consolidation in the global food industry, you might prioritize local or cooperative ownership.



Jake Mazar sets up CSA distribution at Brookfield Farm in Amherst, Zoe Elkin photo

⁶ Michael H. Shuman, *The 25% Shift: The Economic Benefits of Food Localization For The Pioneer Valley & the Capital Required to Realize Them*, www.pvgrows.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/The-25%25-Shift-by-Michael-Shuman-for-PVGrows.pdf (Pioneer Valley Grows Loan Fund, 2012), 3.

⁷ Michael H. Shuman, *Local Dollars, Local Sense: How to Shift Your Money from Wall Street to Main Street and Achieve Real Prosperity* (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green, 2012), 18.

Take Action for Your Values: Advocacy and Planning for a Better Food System

Eating well isn't the only reason to choose local food! Most of us have additional reasons. We're eager to ensure that farmland remains available for food production, to improve public health through better diets, or to support small, independent food businesses. Our interest in local food and farms is connected to our values and our vision for the future.

Recognizing that our passion for local food is related to our world view and values doesn't mean that all local food supporters share "cookie cutter" beliefs. On the contrary, many different concerns bring us to local food. You might feel passionate about the food served in schools, because you believe that diet is directly related to your child's health. Or you might be doing everything you can to reduce your use of fossil fuels, including those used to transport your food.

Many people are choosing to buy local food—or working to make it more accessible in their communities—because they recognize that good food, grown locally, can be part of the solution to a whole range of ills. Local food, local farms, and a vibrant web of businesses that connect farms and food to residents can help to reverse or buffer us from such damaging trends as diet-related disease, environmental degradation and climate change, a fragile global economy, a weakened civic culture, and a food system that prioritizes corporate profits over the health of workers, animals, and consumers. Local food is not a panacea, but eating more seasonally is a specific, achievable way to respond to often intractable problems.

Our local food system, however, remains embedded in a larger cultural and economic system that favors the largest of businesses to the detriment of small family farms or food businesses. By 2007, fewer than 2% of farms accounted for 50% of total sales of farm products.⁸ The availability of

inexpensive, processed food makes the price of fresh, local food high compared to much of what can be bought at a supermarket. Government policies subsidize certain kinds of production, often ignoring the environmental and health costs of our food production system. Ironically, many of the healthy crops we grow here, such as blueberries, peaches, asparagus, and broccoli, are referred to as "specialty crops" by the USDA.⁹



Amherst Farmers' Market,
Jason Threlfall photo



⁸ Government Accounting Office, Agricultural Concentration Agricultural Commodity and Retail Food Prices www.gao.gov/assets/100/96258.pdf, 2009.

⁹ Reports exploring the economic, environmental, and health-related costs of our food system include Food and Water Watch's The Economic Cost of Food Monopolies www.foodandwaterwatch.org/reports/the-economic-cost-of-food-monopolies/, The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy's Food Without Thought: How U.S. Farm Policy Contributes to Obesity www.nffc.net/Learn/Fact%20Sheets/Obesity%20and%20Ag.pdf, and the Union of Concerned Scientists' summary of hidden environmental costs www.ucsusa.org/food_and_agriculture/our-failing-food-system/industrial-agriculture/hidden-costs-of-industrial.html, 2008.

Furthermore, increasing income inequality and wage stagnation¹⁰ mean that many of us are working more hours for lower real dollars, giving us less flexibility in how we spend our food dollars and less time for shopping and cooking. Three generations of the persistent promotion and consumption of processed foods have led to our losing skills related to cooking and food preservation. Our children are confronted daily with advertising promoting salty, sugary and processed foods. In many neighborhoods, both urban and rural, there are few **outlets for fresh food**, making it difficult to purchase fruits and vegetables. As a society, we're all paying the costs of poor health and lost productivity resulting from poor diets. If we don't strive to change these larger systems, the impact of our local success will be limited.

Help your neighbors, friends, and colleagues understand that not only are your family's food choices about delicious food, but they also reflect your hopes for the future.

Food writer Nathanael Johnson urges us to dream big when we're working for change. Recent policies have resulted in inexpensive food and underpaid workers; instead of limiting our list of solutions to those that fit within a cheap food system, Johnson suggests that we "campaign for a different way of life: One where we don't need to eat on the run; one where we can all afford to pay farmers the full cost of good healthy food."¹¹

Advocating changes in policy is one way to influence these big forces that affect our communities, but there are other ways as well. Many states and regions, including Massachusetts and New England, are undertaking formal planning processes for food and agriculture. These provide a venue for agreeing on common values and priorities. In addition, it's important to articulate the connections between your eating and shopping habits and your values. Help your neighbors, friends, and colleagues understand that not only are your family's food choices about delicious food, but they also reflect your hopes for the future.

Real Pickles

Community investments of \$500,000 allowed one local food company to grow while retaining a strong commitment to local ownership and regional sourcing. "We're rewriting the standard storyline for a successful organic food business," says Dan Rosenberg, founder of the 12 year-old Greenfield company **Real Pickles**, which makes naturally fermented and raw pickles from regionally grown vegetables in a 100% solar-powered facility. Instead of selling their growing company to a large industrial food corporation, as happens so often with successful natural products businesses (think: Odwalla, Naked Juice, Tom's of Maine, Stonyfield, and so on), Rosenberg and partner Addie Rose Holland wanted to keep Real Pickles small, locally owned, and mission driven. In late 2012, Rosenberg and Holland formed a worker-owned cooperative with other staff members and funded the co-op's purchase of the business through a highly successful community investment campaign that raised half a million dollars. [Read the full case study.](#)



The five worker-owners on the day Real Pickles converted to a cooperative, Real Pickles photo

¹⁰ Steven Greenhouse, "Our Economic Pickle," www.nytimes.com/2013/01/13/sunday-review/americas-productivity-climbs-but-wages-stagnate.html, *New York Times*, January 12, 2013.

¹¹ Nathanael Johnson, "Sketchy Food Policy: Exploring our Broken Food System in Cartoons," <http://grist.org/food/sketchy-food-policy-exploring-our-broken-food-system-in-cartoons/>, Grist.org, September 17, 2013.



Ryan Karb of Many Hands Farm Corps, a training farm and labor pool based in Amherst, Zoe Elkin photo

If we hope to create region-wide changes in cooking and eating habits we will need to plan at a large-scale.

Planning for a Robust Local Food System

Springfield resident Johnetta Baymon notes that planning her weekly menu was the key step in shifting her family's diet. "Like most people, I don't have a lot of time for cooking on weeknights. I used to do a lot of frying, because it's quick. Now I plan out my meals on Sunday and make sure I have healthy food available." Almost everyone does some planning related to what and how they'll eat each day. Similarly, if we hope to create region-wide changes in cooking and eating habits—as well as in trucking routes, fast food menus, and ordering systems for large buyers—we will need to plan at a large scale.

Planning is often undertaken by government agencies or organizations with a particular interest. Recent [food-related planning efforts](#) in our region have focused on geography, job creation, food access, and farmland protection. It's important to note, however, that successful planning can be catalyzed by individuals who work together as a group, as well as by planning professionals. In 2010, a group of Northampton residents reacted to a city plan to buy farmland and convert it to much-needed playing fields. By articulating a vision for food production and agricultural education, [Grow Food Northampton](#) generated enough support from individual residents, nonprofit partners and the city to support the purchase of additional land, allowing the community to realize multiple goals.

Another example of informal but effective planning comes from local grain growers and their customers. In recent years, Pioneer Valley farmers and businesses that use grain, such as bakers and malters, began working together to increase grain production and processing options. These crops were unfamiliar to most farmers and required both knowledge and infrastructure that were lacking in the region. Likewise, these grains have different characteristics than the standardized, commodity products that bakers and brewers were accustomed to, so they too needed new information and skills. Informally organized networking meetings provided an opportunity for sharing information but also for planning joint endeavors, such as shared equipment and new market relationships. Without these meetings, growth in local grain production and use would have proceeded much more slowly.

Even these few examples demonstrate how different priorities may emerge from different communities, sectors or planning processes. Residents of neighborhoods lacking a full-service supermarket may care more about gaining ready access to healthy food than about whether or not that food is grown locally. Plans need not be seen as a blueprint for future action but can be used simply to identify choices, priorities, and areas of conflict or common ground.

Just because the food system is the way it is now does not mean that it has to remain that way. It took decades to create our current system and it will take good work by many hands to change it.

Here are ways you can take action on your values:

- **Contribute your skills.** Valley residents have started and maintained food coops, community farms, bicycle waste haulers, school gardens, and businesses that grow and produce a cornucopia of products. To succeed, they needed people who could crunch numbers, speak in public, recruit their friends, pick up rocks, cook dinner, make schedules, raise money, and mediate disputes. What can you do to create the community you want to live in?

- **Become a local foods entrepreneur.** Take advantage of the Pioneer Valley's network of support for local foods businesses: technical assistance providers, marketing experts, finance professionals, business peers, and enthusiastic customers. Be your own boss and help to create the new food economy!

- **Broaden your viewpoint.** Find opportunities to understand other perspectives on the food system. In the Pioneer Valley, the [Pioneer Valley Grows Network](#) is one good place to do that. This network focuses on the areas of shared values between local food production and healthy food access for all.

- **Be informed and be active.** [CISA's monthly newsletter](#) provides updates on issues impacting local food and agriculture, links for further reading, and action alerts. Speak out on issues that matter to you—talk to your friends, write letters to the editor or posts on Facebook, and tell your legislators what you think.



Judy Gillan (left) and Iris Broudy (right) at the 2013 PVGrows Forum, Will Szal photo



GoBerry owners Alex and Molly Feinstein meeting the cows that provide milk to their business, High Pass Pictures photo

Take Action Together

By many measures, Americans' sense of security and faith in a positive future have been shaken.¹² As individuals, it's easy to feel that there is little we can do to reverse the trends that threaten us.

Nonetheless, we recognize the power of food to cure much of what ails us, and, perhaps more important, we've retained our faith in the value of eating together. In fact, family dinners are considered influential enough to improve our children's grades and reduce their risk of teen pregnancy and substance abuse.¹³ This faith is perhaps due to the fundamental role of cooking in human culture; more than tools or language, our transformation of food—and the time together, sitting around a fire, that cooking and eating provides—may define us as a species.¹⁴

Food provides us with one route to recapturing our role as creators of our own communities, stewards of our land, and protectors of our children's health and well-being. Each of us may use different tools in our effort to achieve these goals—a trowel, a tractor, a dinner invitation, business plan, or town zoning bylaw—but we urge you to take up your own tools and join your community in taking action for local food.



Farmer and farmers' market manager Glenroy Buchanan of Pioneer Valley Growers Coop, Ben Barnhart photo

¹² Real Clear Politics (www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/direction_of_country-902.html) averages October 2013 national surveys to estimate that nearly 72% of Americans think the country is on the wrong track. About half of Americans doubt that today's youth will have a better life than their parents, according to a January 2013 Gallup Poll (www.gallup.com/poll/159737/americans-divided-outlook-next-generation.aspx).

¹³ See, for example, the Family Dinner Project (<http://thefamilydinnerproject.org/resources/faq/>).

¹⁴ This research is summarized by Michael Pollan in *Cooked*, pages 5–7.



Greenfield's annual [Free Harvest Supper](#) celebrates the harvest and supports the Farmers' Market Coupon program of the Center for Self-Reliance Food Pantry, Recorder (Trish Crapo) photo



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