



MARIN AGRICULTURAL LAND TRUST

LAND TRUSTS and **LOCAL FOODS:**
a natural

BY Francesca Dalleo

“One of the best ways to tell people about protecting farmland is to have them taste it,” says Elisabeth Ptak, associate director and director of outreach at the Marin Agricultural Land Trust in California. Each August the organization collaborates with the Marin County Farmers Market and Marin Organic to produce the local food event “Taste of Marin.” The menu’s description of each delicious dish’s origins is a clear indication of the land trust’s support for food grown by area farmers. A patron will find many tantalizing offerings such as:

Tomato and fennel veloute soup with homemade olive croutons – Marin Roots Farm tomatoes and onions, McEvoy Ranch fennel, and Fresh Run Farm basil

As a land trust intimately involved in locally grown food for the last decade, the Marin Agricultural Land Trust is just one of an increasing number in the land conservation community who have joined in on the success of an exciting trend. The local food movement is gaining momentum across the country at break-neck speed, with growing consumer demand for healthy and sustainably produced food, and farmers’ markets and community supported agriculture farms (CSAs) becoming more popular than ever.

The movement traces its origins to the mid 1980s as a response to a food supply that had become increasingly spread out over the world. People became concerned about this global economy’s impact beyond just the quality and flavor of food; they also worried about its effect on local economies, the environment, the loss of unique regional cuisines, the marginalization of the personal connection between farmer and consumer, and more recently, health.

With recent food contamination scares—such as the recall of 143 million pounds of beef, the largest such recall in the Department of Agriculture’s history, and the tainted spinach from Salinas Valley, California—more people want to know where their



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ABOVE: In Questa, New Mexico, Berlinda Trujillo makes empanaditas de carne. “The Taos Land Trust works in a landscape where the culture is deeply connected to local food,” says Ernie Atencio, executive director.

FACING: A selection of fresh local produce grown on land protected by the Marin Agricultural Land Trust and used in the Taste of Marin dishes.

partnership



ABOVE: At the Taste of Marin, Jeanette Giacomini offers samples of the cheese made on the Robert Giacomini Ranch (RIGHT). Home of the Point Reyes Farmstead Cheese Company, Jeanette and her brother Robert make cheese from their cows' milk.

food comes from, and how fresh that food is from the time it is harvested to the time it appears at the grocers.

Slow Food USA, a nonprofit educational organization founded in 1986, was one of the first groups involved in this movement. It envisions a future food system based on the principles of high quality and taste, environmental sustainability and social justice. To put it more simply, they seek to help us all make “the connection between the plate and the planet.”

For land trusts involved in local food issues, it can be an incredibly rewarding experience. The local agricultural community can provide a natural partnering opportunity for land trusts whose mission may include shared interests, be it saving ranches in the West, community gardens in an inner city, or agricultural land closer to home. Many of those interviewed, however, caution that land trusts should remain true to their mission and not try to “do it all” by expanding into local food issues if it’s beyond their mission or strategic plan. But even if a group is not poised to take on a whole new

initiative, it can still create strategic partnerships with agricultural and food groups in community outreach, planning or even fundraising.

The local food movement has helped many land trusts demonstrate the value of conservation, diversify and increase support, increase funding opportunities and strengthen communities.

Demonstrate the Value of Conservation

Marin Agricultural Land Trust held its first Taste of Marin in 1999 to celebrate food and wine produced by area farmers, ranchers, cheesemakers and vintners. The event has grown tremendously from 75 attendees the first year to more than 600 people in 2007. The land trust currently uses local food in every event it holds, ranging from fundraising dinners and auctions to educational ones like its Food & Farming on the Urban Edge lecture series. Ptak explains that this type of outreach “puts a face on the food producer, which makes a more personal connection and heartfelt reason to help preserve the land they cultivate.”

Peconic Land Trust in New York also understands the importance of demonstrating the value of conservation efforts to the broader community, according to President John H. Halsey. Peconic’s Quail Hill Farm supports over 200 families as CSA members, as well as supplies vegetables, fruits, herbs and flowers to a farmers’ market and nearby schools. The land trust has



MARGOT DUANE, WWW.PLANETMARGOT.COM

MARIN AGRICULTURAL LAND TRUST

also been involved with promoting the local farm community, most notably with the Farmstand Heritage Celebration campaign launched last year. They pose the question, “You have a local dentist, a local doctor and a local hairdresser—why not have a local farmer?”

Halsey asserts that this educational effort for the general public has not only helped bring to light the nutritional value of locally grown produce, but also the issues farm families face in the wake of escalating real estate prices, and how conservation programs can help sustain local farms. “By connecting our donors and the public with working farms, we believe we are instilling a conservation ethic that will have a significant impact for generations to come,” he says.

Diversify and Increase Public Support

By showing people the value of conservation in ways that directly affect them, a land trust not only solidifies the commitment of its current members, but will also diversify and increase its base of

You have a local dentist, a local doctor and a local hairdresser—why not have a local farmer?

supporters. This was certainly the case for the Southeast Michigan Land Conservancy, an organization that has been involved in protecting local farmland as part of its mission since its founding in 1988. More recently the group has emphasized that role and encouraged people in the community to take an interest in local food. Jack Smiley, founder and director of land protection for the conservancy, says this expansion came about from the realization that farmland cannot be protected in the long run if there



A diner with a discerning palate samples fresh local food at the Taste of Marin.

are no farmers willing and able to farm the property. “Promoting locally grown food helps develop a viable market to keep local farmers in business,” says Smiley.

Southeast Michigan Land Conservancy started the Community Organic Garden on a 99-acre farm it purchased near Ann Arbor in 2005. It moved its office to the farmhouse on the property, which is also adjacent to one of the conservancy’s 325-acre nature preserves. The garden has fifty 20’ x 20’ plots that are available for free, though gardeners are encouraged to make a donation to the conservancy. Gardeners get to keep everything they grow; however, many contribute some of their produce

to local food programs, including the national Plant A Row for the Hungry program, which is locally administered by both Growing Hope (which promotes community gardens and nutrition) and Food Gatherers (a food rescue program). Last year, 128 lbs. of healthy, fresh produce were donated.

Smiley describes the Community Garden as part of the conservancy’s strategy to use the farm as a demonstration site to promote organic practices, to show that farming and nature preserves can be compatible,

Quick Take

1,755	Number of farmers’ markets in America in 1994
4,385	Number of farmers’ markets in America in 2006
SOURCE: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE	
50	Estimated number of community supported agriculture farms in 1990; Current estimate: more than 1,000
SOURCE: WWW.LOCALHARVEST.ORG	

and to help people get in touch with the land, which he maintains is key to the group’s success. He also states that though they have seen some increased financial support, the most significant benefit has been getting more people involved in Southeast Michigan Land Conservancy’s work. “Our garden has brought together a diverse, enthusiastic group of people, many of whom had never even heard of the conservancy.” Further, Smiley offers that several people have been attracted by the garden, but then have gotten involved with other conservancy projects, such as invasive species removal and property cleanups. They even recruited a new board member from the garden!

Attract New Funding Sources

Several land trusts cited another great benefit from becoming involved in the local food movement—the opportunity to appeal to a broader range of funding sources. A series of articles in the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* last spring detail the “growing number of foundations... dedicating more and more attention and money to issues related to local-food systems.” One such national group is the Sustainable Agriculture & Food Systems Funders, whose number of grant makers in 2007 has nearly quadrupled since 2002 to 30 members.

One article featured the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which focuses on health and health care issues. The organization has recently



BILL DENSMORE

Protecting farms creates economies that are more localized, more durable, more secure and more rich in relationships.

ABOVE: Picking peas at Caretaker Farm in Williamstown, Massachusetts, is a fun activity for everyone.

RIGHT: A gardener at the Southeast Michigan Land Conservancy's Community Organic Garden.

joined with five other national foundations interested in health to explore how they can promote an agenda called Healthy Eating-Active Living. Karen K. Gerlach, senior program officer at Robert Wood Johnson, reveals that one of the first tasks for the group is to provide support for local farms and to improve their links to consumers. "Agriculture is not a typical health-funder issue," she says, "but the availability of nutritious and affordable food is. Farms are now on our radar."

The *Chronicle of Philanthropy* also cites the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, which helped support the first foundation collaboration to promote local food in 2002, called Roots of Change. Kellogg has also committed \$15 million to their Food and Society program. "Many of us are coming to the realization

that the ideas and issues around food are huge and complex," says Linda Jo Doctor, program director at Kellogg. "We'd all be better off if we could coordinate our resources, leverage investments, promote public and private partnerships, and look at the big picture together." She describes it as an issue that begs for collaborative work.

One land trust that has benefited from increased funding opportunities through its collaboration with local food groups is the Taos Land Trust in New Mexico. Its work with organizations such as Taos County Economic Development Corporation and Taos Valley Acequia Association has allowed it to apply to a wider range of foundation sources, according to Executive Director Ernie Atencio.

Taos Land Trust received significant funding from The Christensen Fund, which supports projects that recognize the work to sustain the link between land and culture, or 'bio-cultural' diversity, in four distinct regions of the world, including the Southwest. Atencio explains how living in a region with centuries-old heirloom corn, fruit trees and other crops well-adapted to local conditions comprise important biodiversity. He goes on to say, "the connection to traditional farming and ranching with an ancient local irrigation system are all critical to local cultural identity and continuity. Those traditional land uses reinforce unique local

land-based culture and vice-versa. It's all deeply interconnected and interdependent."

Besides the financial benefits, Atencio stresses that one of the biggest benefits from being involved in this partnership is how "it's created a new sense of community, increasing the capacity and knowledge for us all, and has influenced public dialogue in the broader community about the connection between land and culture, and local agriculture and food security."

Strengthen Communities

In 2006 the Williamstown Rural Land Foundation worked with its community to protect a historic 35-acre farm in Massachusetts with one of the oldest CSAs in the country, which now supports more than 225 households. Samuel W. Smith and his wife Elizabeth started a roadside produce stand on Caretaker Farm in 1972. They later built on this success and established a membership CSA in the 1980s, at a time when the concept was unique. At 70 and 68 years old, respectively, they were ready to retire in 2006 and had been working on a land protection plan for Caretaker Farm over the previous seven years. Not wanting to see the farm subdivided like much of the surrounding landscape, local residents came together in the "Campaign for Caretaker: Standing on Common Ground" to raise \$239,000 as the community's share of the cost of the project.

Quick Take

The local food movement has helped many land trusts:

- Demonstrate the value of conservation
- Diversify and increase support
- Increase funding opportunities
- Strengthen communities



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Ramon Gorona working at the Española Valley Farm in New Mexico. "In a land-based culture, the ties to traditional farming are critical to cultural identity," says Ernie Atencio.

One vocal proponent for the farm is author and environmentalist Bill McKibben, who understands the significance of the farm to the community, especially the farm's apprentice program. Typically, apprentices are recent college graduates form a seasonal worker corps at Caretaker Farm.



SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN LAND CONSERVANCY

As described by McKibben in a fundraising letter for the campaign, they make up "the annual crew... who have sowed and harvested, learning in the process the rhythms of attention, the beauty of tired muscles, the pleasures of simple food." He goes on to remark that "the apprentices are probably

the most important crop grown over the years" because of the knowledge of sustainable, small-scale, bio-diverse agriculture they take out into the world with them. However, it's not only the apprentice program that caught McKibben's attention. He also points to another important reason for preserving the farm—to help "create economies that are more localized, and as a result more durable, more secure and more rich in relationships."

The project was an innovative arrangement involving many community members and organizations, including

the Williamstown Rural Land Foundation and Equity Trust, a nonprofit devoted to preserving small farms, affordable housing and alternative land tenure models. In 2000 the state purchased an agricultural preservation restriction on Caretaker Farm, and in 2006 the Smiths sold the property for \$427,000 to Equity Trust. Equity Trust sold all 35 acres to Williamstown Rural Land Foundation for \$50,000, sold the homestead and barn to the new farmers for \$177,000, and gave the Smiths a promissory note for \$200,000. Since the property was originally appraised at \$575,000, the rest of the difference of \$136,000 was in effect a donation by the Smiths to the farm's future.

Samuel Smith knows the real value of the farm goes well beyond just its soil and crops. He explains why he worked so hard for so long to protect it: "The real value here... is in the fact that the people in the community are connected to the farm, hundreds of kids come to it, parents pick up their food here. It just deepens the dimension of the world they live in. Every human being ought to have a connection to a place like Caretaker Farm." 🌱

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RESOURCES

Eat Well Guide:

www.eatwellguide.org

A free online directory of over 12,000 farms, grocery stores, restaurants and other outlets that offer local, fresh and sustainable food in the United States and Canada.

FoodRoutes:

www.foodroutes.org

National nonprofit dedicated to reintroducing Americans to their food—the seeds it grows from, the farmers who produce it, and the routes that carry it from the fields to our tables.

Heritage Foods USA:

www.heritagefoodsusa.com

Local Harvest:

www.localharvest.org

Maintains a public nationwide directory of small farms, farmers' markets, and other local food sources in the U.S.

The National CSA Database:

www.wilson.edu/csasearch/search.asp

Provides a complete listing of CSAs throughout the U.S. Punch in your ZIP code to find a CSA near you.

National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service:

www.attra.org/attra-pub/localfood_dir.php

Slow Food USA:

www.slowfoodusa.org

Sustainable Table:

www.sustainabletable.org/issues/buylocal

U.S. Department of Agriculture on Farmers' Markets:

www.ams.usda.gov/farmersmarkets

U.S. Department of Agriculture on CSAs:

www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/csa/csa.shtml

American Farmland Trust:

www.farmland.org