



ATTACK OF THE \$3 TOMATO

How Portland's snooty tastes are saving Oregon farms, luring kids back to the land and even-gasp!-teaching Republicans and Democrats to get along.

BY ZACH DUNDAS

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Last week, the meat counter at New Seasons Market on Southeast Division Street-as good a place as any to observe Portland's organic-shopping, local-arugula-worshipping foodies in their native habitat-offered juicy-looking steak...for \$13.99 a pound.

Why would anyone slap down more than a ten-spot for a pound of cow flesh when they could buy the same amount of the exact same cut for about \$7.50 at Safeway, just blocks away on Southeast Hawthorne?

Or, for that matter, who would pay New Seasons \$3.99 for a pint of blueberries when the same Safeway sells it for a buck less?

The answer, in both cases, has nothing to do with the way the American consumer is supposed to behave in the globalized, big-box, Chinese-made 21st century. Instead, it has everything to do with where that spendy meat and those blue-chip blueberries came from: Oregon.

Forget "organic," long the label coveted by that cross-section of hippies, yuppies, bourgeois bohemians and gourmets. Increasingly, "local" is the new buzzword chowhounds are chasing.

At the height of summer's bounty, signs of the trend are not hard to find. New Seasons, a Portland-owned chain that employs two full-time people to scout for local food, soon will open its sixth location since launching in 2000, and will surpass 1,000 employees. Portland's farmers markets, confined to a single obscure location little more than a decade ago, are everywhere-at least two dozen in the metro area. The largest, held Saturdays on Portland State's campus, boasts 140 vendors and a two-year waiting list for stalls. And local restaurants are engaged in something of a local-produce arms race to see who can trumpet the most eccentric, specific Oregon-grown specimens.

"Local' is much bigger than organic now," says Tanya Murray, a Sauvie Island farmer who supplies salad mix to Portland restaurants. "It started with white-tablecloth places. Now it's trickling down.

There's a place in St. Johns that has lottery machines but still wants to say it sells Sauvie Island salad. There's more demand than we can possibly keep up with."

Yet the best evidence that the buying habits of a small faction packs a real effect is not found in a gourmet grocery or hip bistro.

Buried in dry data spreadsheets cranked out by the U.S. Department of Agriculture lies a dramatic tale: At a time when small farmers are dying out across America, the number of farmers in Oregon is on the rise. The latest USDA "agriculture census" showed the number of full-time farmers in Oregon increasing more than 55 percent from 13,884 in 1974 to 21,580 in 2002, the last year the USDA surveyed. Part-time farming, where many growers who specialize in farmers markets and other buy-local niches begin, is up, too.

In contrast to farmers' plight nationwide-endless Willie Nelson benefits notwithstanding, about 300,000 farms have disappeared since 1980-Oregon's farming renaissance is stunning. In Illinois, for example, about 33,000 farms turned out the lights between 1974 and 2002.

Growers and industry analysts ascribe the increase in Oregon farmers to a growing number of small- and medium-sized operations designed to meet increasing demand for local grub.

"Farmers markets are growing by 10 percent a year," says Larry Lev, a marketing economist with Oregon State University's agriculture extension service. "The rest of agriculture isn't growing like that. The niche is serving a lot of good ends, and one of them is bringing bright, energetic people into agriculture who never would have dreamed of it otherwise."

To be sure, the "local" food industry represents just a spit in the ocean of Oregon's \$3.8 billion agricultural economy. Most food grown in Oregon gets shipped elsewhere and the majority of food consumed in the state gets trucked in, just as in the rest of the country. (According to a 2001 Iowa State University study, the average dinner travels 1,500 miles from farm to plate.) But some Portlanders' finicky insistence on eating local is changing things: luring a new generation of savvy sodbusters-many of them women-onto the land, keeping old farm families in business, even forging new bonds between ultra-liberal urbanites and the Republican hinterland beyond.

All this has some proclaiming Portland the bellwether of some not-yet-defined revolution. "It's in the food-savvy city of Portland that the new food economy has taken root," says a July 31 feature in the *Los Angeles Times*, "and where the future may be taking shape."

The future? That's a bold claim in the age of the Golden Arches. But something's happening down on the farm, and some think pricey blueberries mark just the beginning.

Once, the "organic" label appealed only to the crunchiest of the crunchy: the co-op member, the carb-chip eater, the composting zealot. Thanks to increasingly mainstream worries about pesticides, the environment and genetic engineering, Fred Meyer and Safeway now feature all-organic sections in their produce department.

While the "local tag often overlaps with "organic" (and both sometimes wear the additional tag "sustainable"), they're not synonymous.

Food sold as organic must be certified as such by a recognized accrediting organization, which checks on farmers to make sure they're not using pesticides or other forbidden techniques. The certification process is expensive and time-consuming, so some small farmers don't bother with it even if their crops would qualify. (See www.tilth.org for a list of certified growers.)

But the growing appeal of "local" is a little more complicated. (As is the definition. Some local-food proponents speak of a "foodshed" of about 150 miles in any direction. New Seasons, which recently unveiled a new promotional campaign to push "homegrown" foods, counts anything produced in the Northwest and Northern California.)

Check out one of Portland's bustling farmers markets, jammed with baby strollers and beautiful people, and it's clear that social cachet and class have something to do with the trend. But there's also green consciousness, a desire to cut fossil-fuel consumption by shortening supply lines. And social activism. And an interest in freshness, quality and uniqueness that ranges from the casual to fanatic. Farmers markets, in particular, attract growers whose crops are too small, too strange or too fragile for mass shipping. The enormous, 1 1/2-pound, Oregon-grown heirloom on our cover, for example, came from a basket of a couple dozen irregularly shaped, kaleidoscope-colored tomatoes that probably couldn't survive a long trip.

"I know my vendors," says Michael Zusman, a Portland lawyer (and no relation to this newspaper's editor) who shops religiously at farmers markets. "I know where their farms are, and I've visited a few of them. Virtually every vendor I know is passionate about quality food and proud of what they do.

"Not to gratuitously vilify corporate America, but I have no idea where the stuff they have at [mainstream grocery stores] comes from, or whether the people who grow it care about anything besides profit. The cashiers might be nice, but they don't know, either."

For consumers who share Zusman's interest, the price gap that separates local produce from big agribusiness' products is a leap worth making. Despite the cheaper transportation costs, small farms that provide food to niche venues can't take advantage of the vast economies of scale available to huge corporate farms. Their prices don't fluctuate according to the whim of centralized commodity markets. Nor are they usually connected to the federal government's massive ag-subsidy gravy train; in 2003 alone, the USDA gave \$11.4 billion to farmers of commodities like beef, pork, soybeans, corn and wheat. If every single one of the nation's roughly 2.1 million farms shared equally in that handout (just one of many federal farm subsidies), each would get about \$5,400.

When it comes to cost, the Oregon farmer faces trouble on more than one front, and it's getting worse. Why? "China, China, China," says Jeff Fairchild, a New Seasons produce buyer who works closely with local farms. Thanks to dirt-cheap labor, land, packing and shipping, it often costs Chinese producers less to sell a frozen or preserved strawberry thousands of miles away in Portland than it costs to get an Oregon berry to market.

But for local shoppers like Tamara Yunker, an electrical engineer, "The extra money is definitely worth it. For me and my friends, it's all a matter of opportunity-cost. By spending money on quality food, it just means we may not be able to buy the latest and greatest gadget."

This "local" economy is hard to quantify, but the annual revenue of farmers markets in Oregon is estimated to total \$22 million. And the growing interest in local farms and products has saved some old-line Oregon farmers smart enough to change like Jim Baggenstos, a third-generation potato farmer whose 100-acre spread lies right next to dense Tigard subdivisions. Baggenstos used to rely entirely on the mass market. But in recent years, he's opened a farm store, installed a playground and a pygmy-goat pen for kids, planted new crops and started hosting gourmet dinners on the farm—all to build local business.

"Wholesale is so commodity-driven," Baggenstos says. "Buyers are consolidated, and you just get beat down on price. We're getting the same price on some potatoes that we were getting 10 years ago, but of course the cost of production is way higher.

"It's more intense and in-depth now. We grow more things and do more things than my grandparents ever imagined. We're still making money off the wholesale potato business, but it's difficult. The retail business is something that wasn't really there until a few years ago."

If Baggenstos is an example of how the old-school is adapting, the crew at Sauvie Island Organics shows how the trend is changing the very face of Oregon's farms.

Located on 10 gently sloping acres on the Columbia River island just north of the city, SIO grows salad mix coveted by local restaurants. (The farm's lettuces sell for \$8 a pound; conventional suppliers charge just \$3.) It also provides food on a subscription basis to 200 "community-supported agriculture" (CSA) accounts: families and individuals who pay \$770 per growing season for weekly "shares" of whatever produce is ripe.

The farm, which started as a tiny farmers-market-oriented operation a decade ago, has all the business it can handle.

"There's been an explosion in the last couple of years," says Shari Raider, the 38-year-old Cornell University graduate who founded and runs the farm. "Every year, more and more chefs want local produce. And every year, we see more demand for our CSA shares. When we started, we had 30. Now we have 200."

If there's one thing a bright young American of the 21st century is *not* supposed to want to be, it's a farmer. (The industry's national average age hovers around 60.) But the gang that handles Sauvie Island's "explosion" is composed entirely of fresh-faced youngsters. Some are permanent employees, but a handful are enrolled in SIO's apprenticeship program.

Collectively, the Sauvie Island apprentices boast an academic pedigree that many grad schools would envy: Stanford, Macalester College, University of Portland. And the 9-year-old program is tougher to get into than many colleges; between 50 and 60 hopefuls typically apply for the three positions hired every spring.

In exchange for two seasons of labor, apprentices get room (a trailer in the shade), board (daily vegetarian smorgasbord) and a small stipend. They also get a boot-camp introduction to a potential career far from the beaten path of high achievement.

"I was looking at my alumni newsletter," says Molly Bloom, a 24-year-old Eastern Oregon native who nabbed a degree in international studies from Minnesota's Macalester College. "And I thought, 'Hmm, all these people are doing what I *thought* I was going to be doing.' People are always questioning just what the hell I'm doing with my life, but I've gotten to the point where I forget that it's not normal. This is what's sustainable for me, and it's not a summer getaway."

There are far too many non profit organizations and alliances dedicated to promoting local food to list. For a primer on various issues and initiatives, see the following:

Chefs Collaborative (www.chefscollaborative.org) is a national pro-local chefs group with strong Portland roots.

Food Alliance (www.foodalliance.org) is a Portland-based organization that certifies "sustainable" foods.

A number of Portland mini-farms offer similar programs, and interest is running high. At Zenger Farm—an unlikely patch of green in Southeast Portland's Lents neighborhood, just blocks from a strip club that advertises \$2 rum-and-Cokes-apprentices work six acres to supply a 300-member-plus CSA program.

"The CSA operations are really the new American farmer," says Kris DeMaria, Zenger's 30-year-old field manager. "That's who's growing, who's actually starting new farms."

By all accounts, most of the new blood angling to break into Portland's local-foods industry is truly new: The niche tends to attract people who aren't steeped in farm backgrounds, which helps explain the marked prevalence of women.

Can all-or any-of these aspiring back-to-the-landers make a living? And, at the same time, stay true to a demanding set of ideals? These questions are much on the minds of the apprentices on Sauvie Island—they worry about mounting land costs, changes in Oregon land-use law, simple viability.

Some farm-watchers, though, think it's not only possible to make a go of it in the growing local-foods arena, it's potentially lucrative.

"We've seen people gross hundreds of thousands a year at farmers markets," says Rich Hines, a marketing specialist at Washington State University's small-farms program. "You need to have a sense of branding and marketing, because with the rise of specialty local foods, farming is becoming a storytellers' business."

And Hines, who keeps an eye on local-foods marketing throughout the Northwest, thinks Portland is the ideal market to crack.

"Seattle is a bigger market in terms of numbers," he says. "But Portland seems to have more consciousness about local food, more opportunities. You have pizza places making a point of buying all their produce locally. It's a different sensibility than you see most places."

For a demonstration of how far a good story, savvy branding and a product that drives food mavens to slobber can take you, go no further than Doc and Connie Hatfield.

Two decades ago, the Eastern Oregon ranchers were in deep trouble.

"We were going broke, and that's about the nicest thing you can say about it," says Connie Hatfield, 65. "We sold calves, took whatever the price was that day, and drove away complaining about it."

Their solution: get out of the mainstream cattle game, and start their own. They persuaded a handful of other ranchers to start a co-op that would emphasize meat's Oregon origins and purist, hormone-free upbringing.

Country Natural Beef started out selling 10 head of cattle a week; now the group sells 900. At grocers like New Seasons and Whole Foods, Country Natural products like the \$14-a-pound steak cited at the beginning of this story command prices far higher than conventional beef.

"We set our price based on return on investment, cost of production and fair profit, and that's it," Doc Hatfield says. "The commodity price goes up, our price stays the same. It goes down, our price stays the same."

That system has created an amazing success story. More than 70 ranch families now belong to Country Natural, taking part in the co-op's all-consensus decision-making and sharing in its \$40 million in annual wholesale gross revenues. Those sales fund more than just barbed wire-the group's administrative HQ provides much-needed jobs in tiny Antelope, a town once known only as the epicenter of the '80s Rajneesh cult.

With restaurants and grocers clamoring for Country Natural meat-the co-op supplies all of the Burgerville fast-food chain's meat and owes more than half its sales to Whole Foods-the Hatfields' once-radical move now looks like genius.

"When we started, our customers were almost all either earth-muffin hippies or urban yuppie gourmets," says Doc Hatfield, 67. "I don't mean any insults by either of those descriptions, but that's how it was. It's getting more mainstream now. I don't think Burgerville customers really fit into either of those categories."

Country Natural's success likely owes more to quality than to the kind of local-food fanaticism that inspires consumers to pay more for Mount Hood strawberries than the California variety. But the Eastern Oregon cowpunchers have created a surprising cultural byproduct: a bridge across the political chasm between deep-blue Portland and the red state that surrounds it.

"One of my drivers said once, 'Y'know, it's funny,'" Doc says. "Most of your ranchers are rural, conservative, heterosexual Christians and most of your customers are urban Democrat liberals."

Each Country Natural family must head into the city once a year for a weekend of glad-handing. The face-to-face marketing leads to some interesting *frissons* for ranchers who-according to Connie herself-in some cases have never seen a working parking meter before, let alone a practicing homosexual.

"One of the guys was saying, 'I was talking to these four women about the meat, and pretty soon I noticed they all had beards,'" Doc says. "It's different than what we're usually exposed to. But our shared interest in the land and in the quality of our food doesn't fit into this divide that we're supposed to be in."

"We go to the city, and we come back a little different," Connie Hatfield says. "And by having this business, we're bringing more of a home feeling back to these rural towns, because now we're all helping each other. Plus, we can pay for our kids' braces."

On a blazing Sunday evening two weeks ago, tables with white tablecloths occupied the grassy lane between fields at Sauvie Island Organics. The farm took a break from harvesting Red Cross lettuce and Orient Express eggplant to host an installment of Plate & Pitchfork, a series of summertime *al fresco* dinners designed to showcase Portland food, farms and chefs.

When Plate & Pitchfork started three years ago, its two founders begged friends to buy tickets to three dinners with a total of about 200 seats. Now, there's a two-year waiting list for the 900 or so seats at dinners throughout the summer. For Sauvie Island's Sunday dinner, about 100 diners plunked down \$125 apiece for an Asian Indian-style feast cooked up with local flavor by David Machado and Vitaly Paley, two of the city's most acclaimed chefs. The proceeds went to the "scholarship" fund that pays for a few Sauvie Island community-supported agriculture accounts for low-income families.

And as the Oregon wine flows, Oregon pork sizzles and birds from the island's wildlife sanctuary circle above, it would be easy to overestimate the whole eat-local thing.

Right now, seeking out and shelling out for micro-grown Oregon produce is very much a boutique affair. As it stands, total sales at farmers markets amount to about as much money as a single year's Oregon blueberry crop. Does it matter if high-desert ranchers make nice with lefty Portlanders? If a few liberal-arts refugees go back to the land? If gourmets drop C-notes for nice nights in the country every summer or experience tomato Zen at farmers markets?

The collapse of small farming is driving down the population in much of Middle America. In Kansas, for example, two-thirds of the counties lost population over the past 20 years.

Will this local-food thing ever change the lives of any of the many Oregonians who actually *need* more and better food? Or, failing that, can it ever become a full-fledged economic force, rather than a marginal phenomenon enjoyed by a committed few?

For more on local farmers markets, see page 29 and orgegonfarmersmarkets.org

Hard to say. But when pondering the fate of the sometimes-expensive, often-delectable produce a growing number of Portlanders love and a few insist on, it's worth taking a detour down the beer aisle.

Twenty years ago, the Oregon microbrew industry didn't exist. The idea that anyone would voluntarily pay \$8 for a six-pack instead of grabbing the Budweiser half-rack next to it seemed faintly ridiculous to some, repulsively pretentious to others.

And yet today, the state's microbreweries churn out 600,000 barrels of beer a year, to the tune of \$375 million in wholesale revenues, more than Oregon's \$350 million-a-year grass-seed industry.

The mini-farms, niche products and lifestyle marketing that characterize Portland's affair with homegrown eats could lead down the same path. Even if not, the emerging ethic that insists you should know where your food comes from seems to be gathering speed.

"I saw that McDonald's is running ads saying, 'Hey, we buy Oregon onions,'" says Oregon State's Larry Lev. "That's something."

Building THE Homegrown Burger

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Eat local-sounds great, but what's the price tag? A lot of local produce doesn't benefit from federal subsidies or mass-market price breaks, so it can cost a bit more than grabbing a buck burger at Wendy's. Below, a look at the components (and costs) of assembling a sloppy, beautiful burger from all-local ingredients. Prices come from New Seasons; food porn comes from Higgins Restaurant.

Organic Walla Walla Sweet Onion-\$1.29 per pound, or about 10 cents per burger.

Organic Tomatoes from Denison Farm in Corvallis-\$2.99 per pound, or about 30 cents a slice.

Organic Romaine, Green or Red lettuce-99 cents per bunch, from Siri & Son Farm in Clackamas. Per burger: a cool dime.

Tillamook sliced cheddar-\$4.49 for 12 slices, or 37 cents per one-ounce slice.

Rogue Creamery Oregon Blue Cheese-\$15.99 per pound, or about \$1 an ounce.

Hefe Hamburger Buns-62 cents each (nearly all organic).

Organic Pacific Village ground beef, 10 percent FAT-\$1.67 per 1/3 pound.

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