



Building Community Food Webs

By Ken Meter
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Reviewed by Dana Jackson

My friend Ann was helping me look for a window air conditioner on the seventh, consecutive, unprecedented, blistering hot day in June, and every department store in the town where I live — Stillwater, Minn. — was sold out. We were close to an Aldi grocery store, so we went there to look too, because, Ann said, “You never know what you’ll find there.” She’s right — I wouldn’t know because I never shop at Aldi. It’s a German-owned supermarket chain operating 10,000 stores worldwide, including all the Trader Joe’s in the U. S., and it does not pretend to care about the geographical origin of products on its shelves. That matters to me, so I choose to shop for groceries at River Market Community Food Co-op in Stillwater. The receipt for my last shopping trip stated: “45% of your purchases today were local items.” Although “local” is not easy to define, I’m fairly confident my food dollars didn’t end up in Germany.

Aldi is not that different from American owned-supermarkets as they are all part of the prevailing food supply structure, which “systematically extracts wealth from rural and urban communities alike,” according to Ken Meter, author of *Building Community Food Webs*. He explains that most of today’s farms do not grow food for their neighbors, but produce raw commodities such as corn and soybeans, cattle, pigs, or milk for industrial processing. The farmers’ income — some from government subsidies — flows out of the farm community to pay for equipment and chemical inputs to achieve high productivity. In 2017, farmers earned less cash income than at the onset of the Great Depression. In the same year, the U. S. government paid out \$60 billion in food stamps to prevent malnutrition, and Americans became increasingly obese, while the dollars they spent for food left their communities to

be dispersed nationally — and increasingly, internationally.

Building Community Food Webs is about networks of people and organizations that have challenged the prevailing food supply structure by working to reintegrate the growing and eating of food into local economies through community food systems. Eight chapters describe these successful collaborations in eight different places. But before he dives into these fascinating profiles, Meter prefaces things with a must-read first chapter: “The Extractive U.S. Economy.” It’s a history, with extensive economic data, of how the American food system became what it is today. He explains that “potent economic structures” created through public policy to draw money away from rural America pushed farmers into commodity production. Public policy could reverse this extractive economy, but likely won’t. No one is better credentialed to write this instructive chapter than Meter, who has performed food system assessments in 15 states and provinces and is well known for consulting, speaking, and writing on food system economics.

The first food web profiled in the book was initiated in Montana during the farm credit crisis of the 1980s, when some very discouraged farmers, aided by AERO (Alternative Energy Resources Organization), based in Helena, began meeting in small groups to explore new crop systems involving edible legumes and grains — alternatives to the major commodity crop, wheat. The groups

evolved into Farm and Ranch Improvement Clubs for diverse crop and livestock farmers. Growers’ cooperatives opened new marketing avenues, and the Mission Mountain Food Enterprise Center was built in Ronan, Mont., to convert raw crops into value-added foods, such as lentil burgers, frozen cherries, and herbal tea. Over several decades, AERO staff helped farmers acquire grant funds for research, connected them to university advisers and legislative agencies, and promoted new food products to consumers. Meter calls it “an effort to create a social movement centered on collaboration.”

“Invoking Traditional Wisdom to Recover from Plantation Agriculture” is a memorable chapter about the building of community food webs in Hawaii. The island people there were once food self-sufficient,

reliant upon traditional foods harvested without destroying natural resources. But the imposition of a plantation system to produce sugar and pineapple for export ended their food self-sufficiency and forced islanders to import what they ate. A high level of poverty, hunger, and homelessness became the burdens of this legacy. Meter describes how Hawaiian leaders found that reviving old customs and traditional foods led to healthier life patterns.

A food agency called the Food Basket began to purchase and distribute fresh food from farms instead of just surplus foods donated by retail markets. It helped farmers form a cooperative to raise breadfruit, a traditional and nutritious tree food, and garnered the finances to process it for longer shelf life. Chapters that follow describe community food webs in other regions, where, after years of collaborator meetings involving farmers, local governments, food banks, economic development agencies, and food distribution companies, farmers again produced and sold food that regional people purchased.

In chapter 10, Meter tackles the most important obstacle to creating community food webs: building market power for farmers so that they get the prices they need to make a profit. He describes tactics for building consumer loyalty and collaborative business strategies that keep buyers paying the prices producers need.

This book is not about “local” food, although the author writes: “To reduce our food’s dependence on fossil fuels and to obtain the freshest foods possible, we need to localize our food supplies.” The point isn’t just how far the food item traveled to get to the consumer, but what kind of food system brought it there. “Local food is an outcome we desire, not the purpose of food work,” Meter writes.

River Market Community Co-op is where I’ll continue to spend my food dollars because it offers products — pork, ground beef, milk, butter, pancake mixes, and vegetables — from regional growers and companies that care about good land stewardship. I don’t care if there are thousands more, lower-priced grocery items at Aldi. By the way, it doesn’t sell air conditioners. ☐

Former Land Stewardship Project associate director Dana Jackson has a deep background in developing and promoting regional food systems in Minnesota and western Wisconsin.



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