The Argument for Local Food

AT AN UNIMPOSING DINER IN VERMONT, A REVOLUTION IS TAKING PLACE.

by Brian Halweil

Vegetable photos by Lyle Rosbotham
Menu covers courtesy Farmers Diner

Stop in at the Farmers Diner in Barre, Vermont, and you have landed in the middle of a revolution, although you might not see it at first glance. It's about what you'd expect in a town known for quarrying granite and carving tombstones and where Main Street consists of a courthouse, movie theater, hardware store, florist, bank, and diner. Twelve green vinyl stools line the white linoleum countertop in this 60-seat eatery. On the back counter, a 1960s glass pastry case displays fresh-baked pies and muffins. A stainless steel milk dispenser hums as its contents cool, and old-fashioned blenders stand ready to make milk shakes. A pass-thru window to the kitchen frames the cooks as they flip omelettes and pancakes and push burnt bits of hash-browns and bacon towards the grill's gutter. Not too different from the original diner that opened in this long and narrow building 70 years ago.

The place has its early morning regulars—a retired farmer, a couple of state highway maintenance workers, electricians, plumbers, and other assorted craftsmen—who on this gray winter morning are already cradling their bulky white coffee mugs by 7 a.m. Booths are illuminated by 1930's style pendent lights.

A dozen conversations rumble, including one between me and the diner's owner and manager, Tod Murphy. Coffee cups clink against their saucers. An occasional ring signals that dishes are up. The waitresses' sneakers squeak on the wood floors. "My son says his dad smells like French fries," says Murphy.

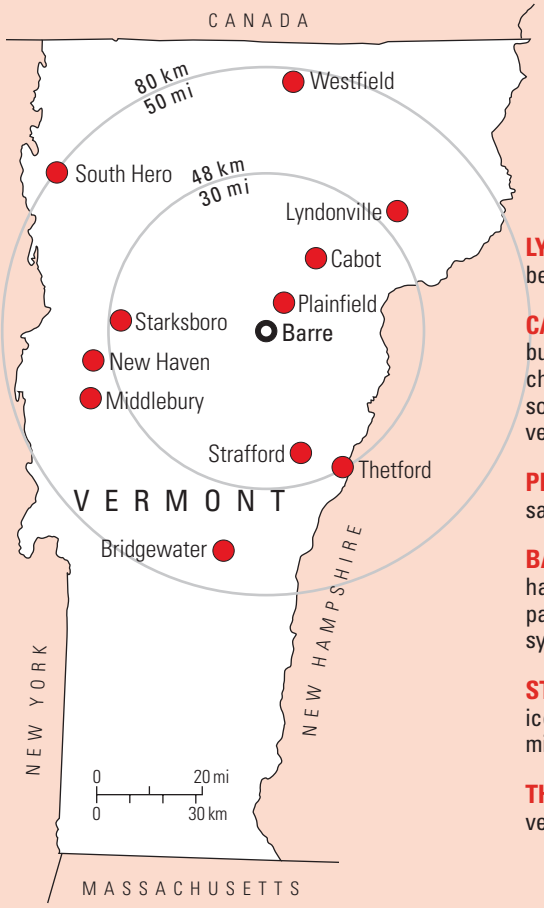
Linger a bit longer, though, and you find that this isn't any ordinary diner. The milk in the blenders and dispenser is certified organic, which means the cows it came from weren't given shots of antibiotics, and weren't given feed grown with chemical fertilizers and pesticides. It's also from a local dairy, which means it didn't arrive in a tank truck from a place most of the folks in Barre have never seen.

The eggs in the omelettes are local too. The berries and flour in the muffins and pies are from local berry patches and wheat fields. The diner cuts all its own French fries and grinds all its own hamburger meat—the beef too coming from local farms. In fact, while most of the food that Americans eat travels at least 1,500 miles from farm to plate, most of the food served in this place was grown within 50 miles, and Murphy's goal is 100 percent. It's February now and there's still snow on the parking lot. But even in the dead of New England's winter, the menu continues to serve a range of local produce, from grain for the bread and pasta to beans, meat, carrots, potatoes, onions, applesauce, cider, and beer.

I notice that the menu covers feature pictures of the farmers who supply the food. (Who would have thought that the food you eat in a restaurant could come from individual people?) The plastic place-mat reads like a Who's Who of radical thought on the state of the modern food system, which is decidedly not about individually responsible people. I chuckle at the quote from Columbia University nutritionist and suburban homesteader Joan Gussow: "I prefer butter to margarine because I trust cows more than chemists." There is Wendell Berry's famous declaration that "eating is an agricultural act." And there's a quote from Murphy himself: "Think Locally, Act Neighborly." He tells me he won't hold it against anyone for acting or thinking globally, but it seems too complex to him. "Acting neighborly is something we know," he says.

The diner is thriving. Meghan, a waitress, tells me,

Local Sources for the Farmers Diner, Barre, Vermont



WESTFIELD
black beans
kidney beans
whipped cream
whole wheat
yogurt

SOUTH HERO
wines

STARKSBORO
beef

NEW HAVEN
chicken
turkey

MIDDLEBURY
beer

BRIDGEWATER
beer

LYNDONVILLE
beer

CABOT
butter
cheeses
sour cream
vegetables

PLAINFIELD
sauerkraut

BARRE
ham
pasta
syrup

STRAFFORD
ice cream
milk

THETFORD
vegetables

"We open at 5:30 every morning and close at 9 every night. Lunch is always busy. Weekends are always busy. And as the seasons change, things just get busier every day." The owners have plans to open four more locations, riding a wave of interest among local farmers, chefs, environmentalists, and concerned eaters who would like to see more locally grown food on grocery store shelves, restaurant menus, and kitchen tables.

But all of this interest doesn't mean the work is easy.

Organic vegetables (except carrots) courtesy of Nick Batty, Naples, Florida

"I'm slaying dragons every day," says Murphy, referring to the obstacles he faces in running a restaurant built on local food, from onerous food safety regulations designed for industrial-scale ventures to shortsighted farm policies that have reduced Vermont's crop diversity, to the crushing weight of global food brands on struggling local businesses.

As I listen to Murphy describe his vision—what he calls a "wild experiment"—I can't help but think that the feudal analogy fits. He really *is* talking about revolution. He's talking about a shift in power as potentially profound as the eighteenth-century dismantling of aristocracies throughout Europe. In a modern food landscape where the Krafts, Monsantos, and ADMs play the role of the Tudors, Tzars, and Louis XIVs, Murphy's life work is fighting for food democracy.

At first blush, "food democracy" may seem a little grandiose—a strange combination of words. But if you doubt the existence of power relations in the realm of food, consider a point made by Frances and Anna Lappé in their book *Hope's Edge*. The typical supermarket contains no fewer than 30,000 items. About half of those items are produced by 10 multinational food and beverage companies. And roughly 140 people—117 men and 21 women—form the boards of directors of those 10 companies. In other words, although the plethora of products you see at a typical supermarket gives the appearance of abundant choice, much of the variety is more a matter of packaging and branding than of true agricultural variety, and rather than coming to us from thousands of different farmers producing different local varieties, has been globally standardized and selected for maximum profit by just a few powerful executives.

From this imperialistic food landscape, we are beginning to see declarations of independence. Some of them may seem merely quixotic, like the case of Jose Bove, the French shepherd who drove his tractor smack into a McDonald's to protest the homogenization of global cuisine. In Oaxaca, Mexico, a group of citizens motivated by the same concerns succeeded in keeping a new McDonalds from being built in their historic city center. In Canada, a continent-wide protest against Monsanto took root when the giant agricultural chemical and seed company filed a slapp suit against a farmer named Percy Schmeiser after finding some of its patented seed on his land. (The Federal Court of Canada in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan didn't find that Schmeiser had planted it—the seed had evidently blown onto Schmeiser's land from adjoining farms using Monsanto seed—but ruled in favor of Monsanto anyway.) And in Europe, even larger numbers of people—enough to move governments—have been resisting the importation of such genetically engineered products from the United States.

In one way or another, these are all acts in defense of local food supplies and culinary traditions. Nor are all these acts just protests. The Slow Food movement, which is growing explosively and now has 75,000 members in 80 nations, is the largest organized movement against culinary imperialism, but draws its energy not so much from what it is against as what it is *for*—a preservation of the social value of good food in connecting people with each other, their communities, and their land. The Slow Food movement summarizes its vision in the phrase "the right to taste." Service at the Farmers Diner may not be slow, but the Farmers Diner shares the Slow Food movement's interest in not hav-

ing what you eat be dictated by fast-food or mass-food marketing executives.

"My allegiance is to this place," Murphy declares, "and I won't let Vermont land and farmers and food history go undefended." And Vermont is not the only place where interest in the defense of local food is rising fast.

PLANET OF COLONIES

For many of those who are declaring food independence, there is a sense of growing urgency—"slow food" notwithstanding. Food travels farther and is controlled by a smaller number of global entities than ever before. Advances in technology that allow longer storage and more distant (and less costly) shipping have encouraged the food system to sprawl. Cheap gasoline and transportation subsidies have facilitated the expansion. The value of international food trade has tripled since 1960; the volume has quadrupled. In the United States, the average food item travels between 2,500 and 4,000 kilometers, about 25 percent farther than in 1980. In the United Kingdom, food travels 50 percent farther than two decades ago.

"In the present food marketplace, there are great inequalities with respect to voting power and, more fundamentally, with respect to control," says sociologist JoAnn Jaffe of the University of Regina in Canada. "This loss of control has progressed steadily over the last few decades as people have become increasingly removed from their food sources by both distance and processing." And it is this issue of control, perhaps more than any other, that is driving the nascent global movement in local food.

In Vancouver, food activist Herb Barbolet points out that the issue of local control is not just a vague provincial resistance to a globalizing industry. Founder and director of the nonprofit FarmFolk/CityFolk (FF/CF), Barbolet rattles off a list of concrete benefits:

"Less fossil fuel use and road congestion from moving food around." (Surveys show that a basic meal made from imported ingredients can easily account for four times the energy and four times the greenhouse gas emissions of an equivalent meal made with ingredients from local sources.)

"Preservation of local farmland and local farmers." (Farmers that have a local market are less likely to go extinct.)

"Superior flavor." (Double-blind studies show that people consistently choose farmers' market produce over stale, long-distance fare—one of the reasons this movement has attracted the attention of chefs, food critics, and discriminating eaters around the globe.)

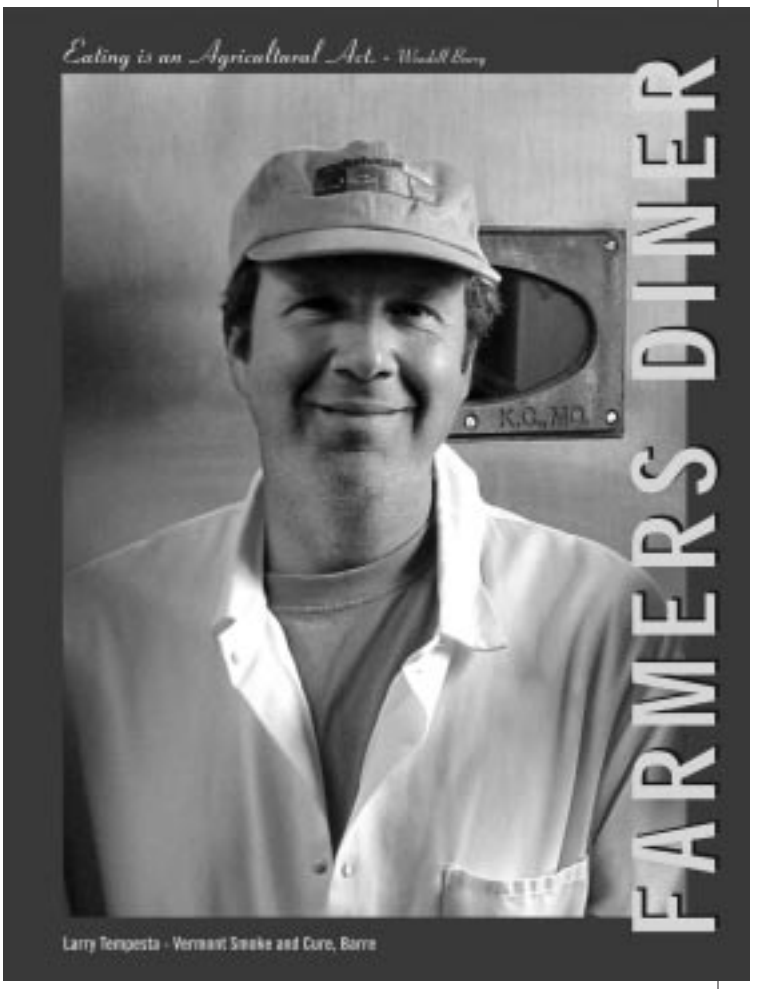
Barbolet's group has worked toward these ends by promoting food delivery schemes and farmers' markets, helping to start a rooftop gardens project, opening healthy cafés in inner-city areas of Vancouver where good food options are limited, and reintroducing farming to a large regional park.

SAFE AND SECURE?

Barbolet pauses in his listing of the benefits of local food, then adds one more:

"Reduced food safety risks."

This last advantage may not be immediately apparent. But food that travels thousands of miles and changes hands multiple times encounters many opportunities for contamination. For example, there was the 2001 foot-and-mouth outbreak in the United Kingdom, which brought sales of British meat to an abrupt halt and devastated rural communities. It spread considerably farther and faster than an earlier outbreak in 1967, largely because animals today are shipped from all over the nation to central slaughterhouses. In 1967 most slaughtering and consumption took place locally. Investigation also showed that the infectious animal feed for the recent outbreak came all the way from China. Foot-and-mouth is not a disease that harms humans, but long-distance hauling of food means that any infectious



agent (*E. coli*, Listeria, anthrax) can be quickly spread over a large area and expose a large number of people.

Recent terrorist incidents have raised fears, especially in the United States, about how vulnerable a highly centralized and long-distance food system could be to tampering and disruption. (One estimate suggests that most major cities in the eastern United States have less than two days' supply of food on hand and are thus vulnerable to sudden transportation restrictions.) Beyond

the vulnerability issue, there is a certain peace of mind that comes from knowing where your food comes from—a peace that may be unique to local cuisine. For instance, a bottle of Tropicana brand apple juice says it "contains concentrate from Germany, Austria, Hungary, Argentina, Chile, Turkey, Brazil, China, and the United States"—a list of countries with a wide range of pesticide standards. Good luck knowing what you're eating.

In turn, when people have some say over local food production, they also have say over how the landscape is used, what pollutants may end up in their water, and how secure are the livelihoods of their neighbors. "It's much easier for our customers to make the choice for antibiotic free meat or organic milk or non-genetically engineered crops when we know all the growers," says the diner's Murphy.

"This is about homeland security, in a way," says Nina Thompson, director of the Vermont Fresh Network, an organization that helps link Vermont farmers and Vermont chefs. "What if the infrastructure of trucking were hit by terrorists? Here, we'd be set."

LOCAL FOOD, LOCAL MONEY

At the Farmers Dinner, Murphy sketches out his master plan. His words come at the steady pace of a thoughtful businessman, not a fanatic. Murphy is a slender, attractive man in his thirties—people told me to look for "the guy with the pony tail" of long straight blond-brown hair. A standard diner, Murphy explains, has at most five suppliers, and often fewer. The suppliers are the long arms of the global agribusiness industry—behemoths like Sysco Corporation, which is the largest food distributor in North America, and is ranked by *Forbes* as the second-largest food processor as well. Most diners and restaurants just call up Sysco, place their order, and an 18-wheeler drops it off, Murphy says. In contrast, the Farmers Diner has roughly 35 suppliers and plans to add 20 more next year (see map). In its first six months of operation, the Diner spent 70 percent of its food budget on food grown within a 50-mile radius.

Murphy plans to boost that share, using a model he calls the "pod." Attached to one side of the diner will be a government certified meat processor. Attached to the other side will be a certified food processing facility, equipped for canning, drying, and baking. "Most diners use pre-sliced, frozen carrots," says Murphy, "but our goal is to have a place for processing local carrots in season and also freezing or pickling or canning them for the off-season."

Murphy's pod idea addresses one of the biggest barriers to greater reliance on local food—the difficulty of building back the local crop diversity and food processing capacity that has been eroded by successive waves of consolidation. "In most communities, the dairy is gone, the cheesemaker is gone, the cannery is gone, even the bakery is gone," says Andy Fischer, director of the U.S.-based Community Food Security Coalition. In this respect, Vermont already has some big advantages over most communities in the United States and the world. It has one of the most diverse farm landscapes in the nation, and more certified organic land as a share of total area than any other state in the union. And it has more local cheese diversity than the next five states combined, with more than 50 farmstead varieties.

"We want the diner to be the catalyst, so farmers and food businesses can take chances with new products and new crops," says Murphy. The food process-

ing shop attached to the diner can use the "seconds" and blemished fruit and veggies that farmers would normally throw out to make soups, jams, and chutneys. As Murphy develops relationships with local growers, the costs of doing business can actually go down. "If we know how many potatoes and onions and tomatoes we will need on a monthly basis, the grower knows exactly how much he can sell us," he says. The farmer benefits in terms of cash flow and security, and can charge Murphy less as a result.

Of course, as Murphy's corner of Vermont becomes more self-sufficient with respect to food, it will also tend to hold on to more of the money local people spend on food; less money is siphoned off to pay shipping and storage and brokering fees. The diner now buys $15,000 of produce from local farmers per month, a number Murphy says will increase as the diner expands. "My favorite job is writing checks to farmers," he says with a smile. He has recently been speaking with the son of a farmer who is trying to figure out if he can keep the family farm afloat by raising pigs for the diner.

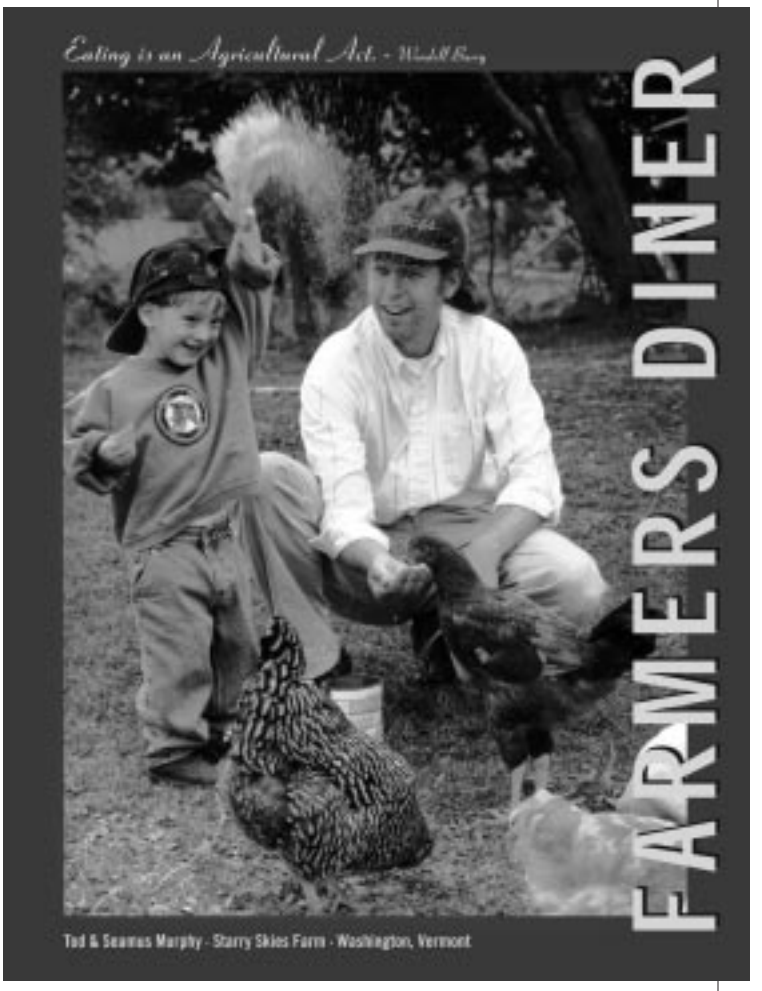
The argument for greater self-sufficiency has been substantiated by a recent study from the New Economics Foundation in London, which found that every £10 spent at a local food business is worth £25 to the local area, compared with just £14 when the same amount is spent in a supermarket. Whether it's in pounds, pesos, or rupees, money spent locally generates nearly twice as much income for the local economy.

Compare this multiplier with the more colonial relationship prevailing in most rural economies. Ken Meter and Jon Rosales, economists at the Crossroads Resource Center in Minneapolis, recently found that while farmers in southeastern Minnesota had sales of $866 million in farm products in 1997, they spent $947 raising this food, primarily as payments for fertilizer, pesticide, and land made to distant suppliers, creditors, or absentee landowners. (If not for federal subsidies, many of these farmers would not be in business.) Meanwhile, residents of the region spent over $500 million *buying* food that year, almost exclusively from producers and companies based outside of the region. Doug O'Brien, director of the nation's largest hunger relief organization, noted the irony of Midwestern Americans "going to a food bank for a box of cornflakes to feed their children in a community where thousands of acres are devoted to growing the corn for the cornflakes." In toto, Meter and Rosales concluded, the current agricultural relationships extract about $800 million from the region's economy each year.

LET THEM EAT GMOs

The last few times I've spoken to Murphy, he can barely catch his breath. He's been busy, not only running a diner, but also fielding publicity calls. *Gourmet* has already done the diner story; the *New York Times* "Dining" section and *Vermont Life* have stories in the pipeline. He asks me if I've seen the recent quote from him—"It's a freakin' diner!"—and then promptly denies that he ever said it.

With all this attention from the culinary elite, it might be easy to dismiss the interest in local food as a fad. But look at an inner city area where there is no greengrocer, though it may have quite an adequate supply of liquor stores and fast food joints, and where a farmers market may be the only source of fresh fruits and vegetables, or look at the poor nation that cannot afford to import food but could grow more of its own food with the proper government supports, and it becomes clear that the benefits of local food production are not just for people who have money.



I recently had a chance to discuss this point with Anuradha Mittal, who directs the Institute for Food and Development Policy, a California-based economics think tank better known as FoodFirst. Her group is well known for its critique of the Green Revolution, the World Trade Organization, genetically engineered seeds,

and patents on life, but Mittal harbors a particular interest in local food, which she sees as a major antidote for all of these other evils.

"Local food production is about exerting independence from the whims of international markets and the dictates of international trade agreements," Mittal told me. "The minute you start eroding food self-sufficiency, it's a recipe for famine." And poor nations that find themselves without food reserves will learn that

beggars can't be choosers. Mittal points to the recent diplomatic nightmare that occurred when the government of Zambia, confronting a famine, refused American food aid which contained genetically engineered crops. After criticizing the African leaders for jeopardizing their citizens' lives, American negotiators ultimately agreed to find non-genetically engineered grain to donate, then mill it to ensure that Zambian farmers wouldn't plant the engineered grain. But the incident raised questions about food sovereignty.

Mittal also argues that the guiding principles of global agriculture are far from democratic. The 1999 WTO negotiations in Seattle collapsed, she says, because the trade ministers from the Third World walked out to protest the fact that most of the "negotiating" was going on in backroom deals that excluded most nations. Mittal goes on to note that the guiding language of the WTO's Agreement on Agriculture was drafted by a vice president of Cargill, the multinational food processor and trader.

"This is not food democracy, but food hypocrisy," Mittal says, explaining that in recent rounds of trade negotiations the United States and Europe have successfully encouraged poorer nations to reduce tariffs, while keeping their own tariffs and subsidies to domestic farmers high.

Mittal is a native of India, and I asked her about the Navdanya ("Nine Seeds") movement to help preserve India's crop diversity and promote food self-sufficiency. Founded in 1991, Navdanya protects local varieties of wheat, rice, and other crops from patents by cataloguing them and declaring them common property. It sets up locally-owned seed banks, farm supply stores, and storage facilities, and helps to establish "Zones for Freedom," villages that pledge to reject chemical fertilizers and pesticides, genetically engineered seeds, and patents on life.

"Freedom" in this context has both an economic and an ecological meaning. Local crop diversity helps to reduce dependence on expensive agrochemicals and other inputs, and provides resilience against major pest outbreaks or climatic shifts. And when farmers produce for local (as opposed to export) markets, their customer base diversifies considerably, encouraging them to plant a wider range of crops. In this way, crop diversity reinforces self-sufficiency.

"Navdanya is one of many, many movements at the local level," Mittal says, " where people have realized how dire the situation has gotten, and are responding to the loss of biodiversity, the erosion of their environment, the destruction of their livelihoods." In India alone, she says, there are hundreds. But she also points to the Long March Against GMOs in Thailand (working for local control over biodiversity and greater respect for local crop varieties) or the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil (working to rectify the glaring land distribution in Brazil by settling landless workers and farmers on the land of large landholders).

Of course, as Mittal would agree, a certain amount of food trade is natural and beneficial. But greater self-sufficiency can help buffer nations against fickle international markets, generate wealth and jobs at home, and avoid dependence on distant countries and companies that may not always be reliable.

FOOT SOLDIERS OF THE REVOLUTION

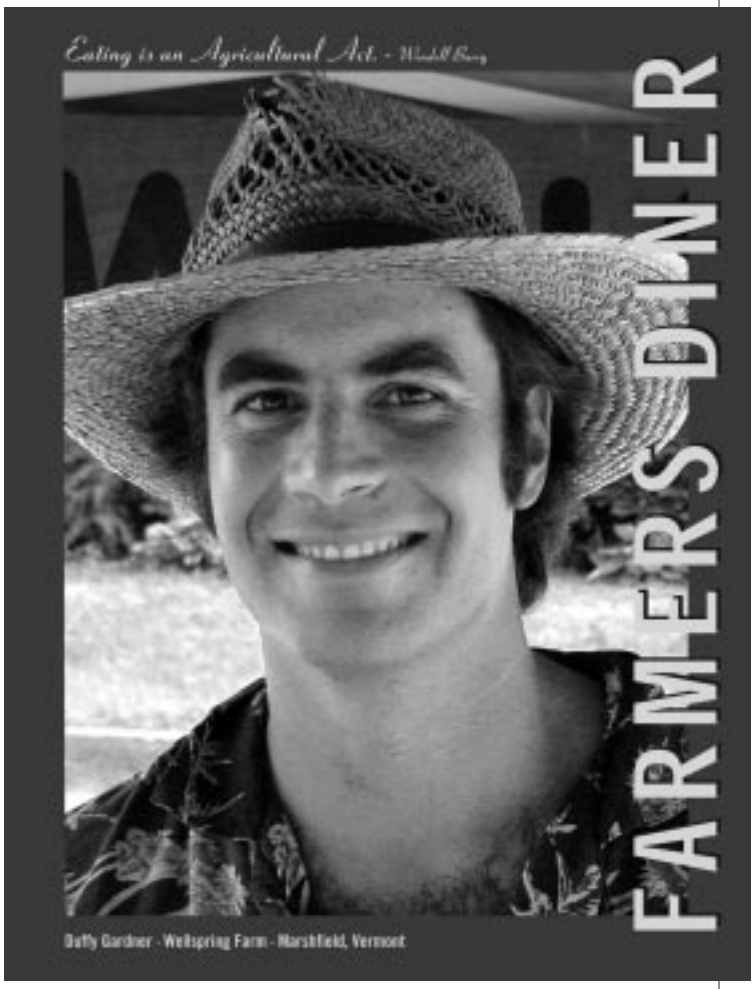
The Farmers Diner isn't rebuilding Vermont agriculture single-handedly. Instead, this knight's tale depends on an array of supporting characters. The Vermont

Land Trust runs one of the few successful programs in the United States to give a head start to beginning farmers by providing low-interest loans, mentoring, and tax relief. Vermonters now use at least three forms of local currency—Burlington Bread, Green Mountain Dollars, and Buffalo Co-op Bucks—that can only be used to buy Vermont-grown food. And the Intervale Foundation in Burlington has helped to establish a community farm that provides food to over 350 families. It has also developed a network of farms that supply the local hospital with most of its vegetables, fruit, and herbs, and has plans for a community incubator kitchen where farmers and food entrepreneurs can try their hand at food processing and catering businesses.

Hundreds of Vermont restaurants already "source" much of their food from nearby farmers and food businesses, largely as a result of the efforts of the Vermont Fresh Network (VFN), the six-year-old nonprofit devoted to strengthening Vermont agriculture. All of these agreements are based on handshakes, the group's Nina Thompson explains. A restaurant has to have at least three different handshake agreements to maintain membership in our network. Every farmer has to have at least one agreement. VFN produces a monthly "Fresh Sheet" listing all the produce available from local farmers and providing both one-stop shopping for chefs and one-stop marketing for farmers. But it has also discovered that many farmers and restaurateurs are duplicating each others' efforts. "In one case, three nearby farmers were doing three separate deliveries of different products to the same town, all selling to different buyers," Thompson explains. "Now they share a vehicle, do just one trip between them, and get wider distribution by piggybacking on each other's customers."

The need for this sort of assistance appears to be widespread, since similar efforts are unfolding in southwestern England, where Devon County Foodlinks has been working since 1998 to connect local growers and local food outlets. On an annual budget of less than £500,000, this government-funded effort has created an estimated 150 new jobs, 15 farmers' markets, and 18 "box schemes" (food delivery subscriptions known as CSAs in the United States). It has also spawned many successful food businesses and helped to retain an estimated £9 million in the local economy. In Devon, as in Vermont, the need for action by government or local groups is clear. "We are making 'interventions' to address local market failures," says Foodlinks founder Ian Hutchcroft, "because the private sector is not investing in local food businesses in a major way, and, in many ways, the cards are stacked against them."

Thompson shares this sentiment: "Lobbyists are working for everything else. There is no special interest group." But while the advocates of local food production aren't a major lobby group, they are gaining support from a growing segment of the population, a segment that potentially includes every person who plants a home garden, every farmer who wants to sell food to his neighbors, every parent who cares about the food served in school cafeterias, and every family that takes the time to eat home-cooked food together—all people performing small but powerful acts of rebellion against food that is increasingly transformed, sterilized, and removed from its source.



That segment also includes the 50 or so people crammed into the Farmers Diner on this winter day, not to mention the founder of the diner himself. Murphy was born on a dairy farm in Connecticut, but laments the fact that his family sold off the last of the animals well before he had a chance to try his own hand at farming. "I've spent the last 33 years trying to get back to farming, " he says. He has started a 100-sheep dairy with his wife, and hopes that one day his cheese and lamb will be on the diner's menu.

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