

Colleges Chew on Local-Food Phenomenon

Dining halls weigh practical benefits against diverse needs and corporate interests

By SCOTT CARLSON

Atlanta

The local-food movement might be popular in California, where people can sip biodynamic wines grown in local vineyards. The word "locavore" might be familiar in Vermont, with its grass-fed dairy cows and boutique cheeses. But in Georgia, where about 1 percent of farms are organic, far fewer than in even its neighboring Southern states, a different kind of thinking prevails for now.

"You have entered the land of conservative, conventional practices," Ciannat Howett, sustainability director at Emory University, said to a visitor this summer.

She and some of her colleagues at Emory are trying to change farming and food in the state, one meal at a time. Community gardens and farmers' markets have been set up on the campus to get people talking about seasonal food and regional farming. But the centerpiece of the university's sustainable-foods program is an ambitious — some might say unachievable — goal: by 2015, to have 75 percent of the 25,000 meals served each day at Emory feature regional or sustainable sources of food.

Nationally, students have pushed hard for local-food programs, and the amount of local produce in the dining hall is sometimes used as a litmus test for a college's overall commitment to sustainability. Local food has been a hot topic in popular culture in recent years, thanks in part to books by Michael Pollan and Barbara Kingsolver, movies like the documentary *King Corn*, and a popular if somewhat romantic sense that modern agriculture, which has become industrialized, should return to smaller, family-farm operations.

But the motivations are not just sentimental. For colleges — especially land-grant institutions and rurally situated colleges — buying organic, humanely grown, or local food has practical benefits. Although food expenditures can be a small part of the budget, food is a highly visible symbol of a college's amenities and priorities.

Local purchases can also support important town-gown relationships. Dean Koyanagi, sustainability coordinator at Cornell University, which gets 30 percent to 50 percent of its food locally, says the university's local food purchases could be a boon to the economy of upstate New York. "Every dollar we spend exchanges hands three times" within the state, he notes, citing a recent report to the Legislature. Cornell organizes tasting events at which its chefs can meet local farmers and set up deals to buy more local food.

Less publicized but still important, Mr. Koyanagi says, is the issue of food security. A pandemic, an oil shortage, or, more likely, an ice storm could hobble transportation in the region, leaving the university stranded with thousands of mouths to feed. Under scenarios like those, local food would be much easier to bring in.

But local food programs raise a number of questions as well: What counts as local food? What takes priority: local food or sustainably produced food? How do you bring a corporate food-service company around to your local priorities when it already has deals with multinational food suppliers?

From the Ground Up

Emory University is wrestling with those issues and others. Peggy Bartlett, a professor of anthropology who studies and writes about sustainability and agriculture, was deeply involved in setting up the sustainable-food initiative here. She was part of a sustainable-food committee, appointed last year, that set out to find sources of food that is local, humanely raised, and vetted by the Food Alliance, a national advocacy group with a robust certification program for organic food.

Some groups have defined "local" as within 150 miles, but Emory has set its sights on "regional" sources — which means that the university can range into North Carolina or Florida to get food that is grown more sustainably than food grown closer to the campus.

One of the main problems that Ms. Bartlett and others at Emory encountered early on: The organic and local-food movements in Georgia are far behind those in other states. "I couldn't say, Let's just work with the extension service," Ms. Bartlett says. "If I were at Cornell, all I would have to do is say to my county agent, Here is a list of what we need, and they know the farmers who produce it."

So Emory is wooing farmers to create its own local-food movement. The university hired Chaz Holt, a young Georgia farmer, to be the "farmer liaison" who goes around spreading the word about Emory's local-foods program and talking to other farmers about organic certification.

"I have rarely had to go out and rally," he says. "The farmers are coming to me." For many of them, the issue is not trying to sell the produce they already grow, but whether investing in more production will pay off.

"I get a phone call every day from someone who says, 'If I get a loan from the bank to build a greenhouse, will Emory buy all the food I grow in it?'" Mr. Holt says. Emory will most likely buy a lot of it, he tells them. His job is not to set up deals or promise payment; the farmers have to decide if an investment in organic crops makes business sense.

"Marrying the romantic, local producer to the corporate model — how do you do that without a crash?" Mr. Holt says. "That is what I am trying to figure out every day."

Emory has also enlisted a food distributor, Destiny Produce, which buys and sells food from organic and local farms, to help organize more local food production. Dee Dee Digby, manager of the company, asks farmers to grow less squash and peppers and more mesclun, lettuce, and broccoli, which are traditionally hard to find locally.

Some foods are easier to get regionally than others. All of Emory's milk comes from Georgia, while only 5 percent of meat, cheese, and eggs comes from in and around the state. All told, Emory's local-food purchases stand at about 30 percent of its total.

But there are major challenges to raising that proportion — at Emory and at other colleges.

One is the range of foods available. Dining halls now offer a cornucopia, with stations for food as diverse as pizza, roast beef, noodles, and Asian stir-fry, not to mention a range of appetizers, beverages, and desserts. Some dining halls plan their menus by analyzing the ZIP codes of students and the dietary preferences of those regions. But offering more food diversity can be problematic for colleges that want a greater proportion of local food.

"We have such a global population — from China, from Korea, from everywhere — we have got to have a very diverse menu selection," says Patty Erbach, senior director of food-service administration at Emory. "It makes the job a little harder. What is accepted from one particular group is not accepted by others."

Smaller colleges might decide to offer less, but they would have to confront students' expectations. "We can meet peoples' dietary needs without providing a smorgasbord, which becomes a tradeoff of lower-quality foods for a higher diversity of foods," says Philip Ackerman-Leist, an associate professor of environmental studies who directs the local-food project at Green Mountain College, in Vermont. If college dining halls could provide two or three high-quality offerings, he says, "it would make it easier for the farmers to provide food for the colleges, it would make it easier for the dining staff to deal with all the processing that is necessary, and it would reduce cost."

Another challenge shared by colleges pursuing local food is their relationship with food-service providers. Major food-service companies like Sodexo, Aramark, and the Compass Group have said they are interested in making local food part of their mix of offerings. But the companies also have policies that make doing so difficult.

For one, food-service companies will work only with distributors and growers that carry insurance against liabilities like food-borne illness. That minimizes the possibility of individual deals with small local growers.

Food-service companies also have established contracts with large food distributors, which generally do not deal in local food. Managers of dining halls are encouraged, even required, to buy from them.

In Emory's case, that means the university gets its chickens from somewhere out of state, even though Georgia is the top poultry producer in the country. "It's a good example of how it doesn't make sense," says Ms. Howett, the sustainability director at Emory. The university has pushed Sodexo to help figure out how to get more local foods, and the company has expanded its local focus at Emory and on other campuses. Nevertheless, she says, the 75-percent-by-2015 pledge has made the company "very nervous."

Personal Connections

Colleges that run their own dining programs have more flexibility. (They also often have more money, which helps.) Middlebury College, for example, which has pursued local foods for decades,

gets about a quarter of its food from nearby farms. "We'd like to buy more local, but the reality is we would either blow the budget or wipe out the farms' produce," says Matthew Biette, who runs dining services at Middlebury.

In the corporate system, a dining manager is always "serving two masters," he says. By contrast, "I can change things this afternoon." Relationships with farmers near the campus can be informal and personal. Among apple producers, for example, there is a "gentlemen's lineup" of growers who know where they stand on Middlebury's procurement list, Mr. Biette says.

The college is also helping a dairy farmer purchase a clean room where she will make yogurt for the dining hall. "I can actually see that farm from my office," Mr. Biette says.

Green Mountain, which has less money and a corporate dining service — a more typical scenario — is trying to find a pathway to local foods that other colleges can follow. "If it can work here, it can work everywhere," says Mr. Ackerman-Leist.

Standing in the pasture of his own farm, amid lowing cows, he describes the college's "three-tined approach" to buy 28 percent of its food locally within two years, compared with about 20 percent now. The first, of course, is buying more from local farmers. The 5-percent annual increases in Green Mountain's local-food purchases put an additional \$70,000 into the local economy each year. That might not sound like much, says the professor, but it goes a long way toward helping the college's relationship with other Vermonters, who value their rural environs.

The second is increasing production on Green Mountain's farm, where students work. The college runs a 30-acre farm, of which one acre is in crop production now. Three or four acres should be in production within a couple of years, providing 5 percent of the college's consumption. The farm is run without fossil fuels, so it has to use draft animals and natural methods of fertilization.

The third and most important approach is education — reshaping students' attitudes and expectations about food. Mr. Ackerman-Leist has set up a series of courses with an economist and an agronomist to convey the complexity of local-food issues, like liability and the climatic constraints of growing food in the Northeast, along with the ethical concerns and economic advantages of buying local.

With the popularity of local foods, Mr. Ackerman-Leist sees a window of opportunity that will not be open for long.

"While we have the heat of the moment, we have got to capture that and build the infrastructure, so this will work not just now, but also in another decade or two," he says. "It would be a shame to have all this energy and then lose it in another four or five years, when people want to jump on another bandwagon."