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by Amy Donahue

With diesel prices nearing \$5 a gallon and recalls plaguing the national food system, many Durango restaurants and individuals are seeking different production channels. The growth of the Durango Farmers Market is a tell-tale sign that “local” is no longer a fashionable buzz word in the Four Corners area but a mainstream solution. Restaurants like Cocina Linda and Cyprus Café are bringing local produce, meats, dairy and other products into prominence, hoping also to bring national food issues to the forefront. Meanwhile, individuals are finding ways to make local food production a meaningful and vital part of their diets.

As the market director for the Durango Farmers Market, Peg Redford arrives at the First National Bank parking lot at 5:30 a.m. every Saturday morning. Until the market opens at 8 a.m., she bustles around the empty lot helping vendors set up, putting out signs, and generally preparing for the people who will soon be wandering through the tents filled with everything from produce and meats, to crafts, coffee, and pastries.

“The farmers and food producers of the Durango Farmers Market work incredibly long, hard hours to fulfill the growing demand the public has for their products,” Redford says. Redford said that a large part of the market’s purpose is to build a community around regional agriculture that will improve the quality of life for all community members. Since its inception 14 years ago by then-student Carol Clark as a Fort Lewis College project, the Durango Farmers Market has grown to include nearly 40 local farms and businesses.

Linda Isley’s Cocina Linda got its start at the Durango Farmers Market eight years ago and hasn’t lost its local roots since becoming a permanent establishment. Isley said that she has made local ingredients a priority in her menu from the beginning and hopes to include even more local in the future.

“I have a belief that organic and local food have the highest levels of nutrition because they haven’t traveled very far,” she says. “It’s not just environmental issues that are attached to food traveling 5,000 miles. Supporting local food production also supports a domino effect in the local economy.”

Alison Dance, owner of Cyprus Café, also says that building local business is a key component in her decision to include local ingredients in her dishes.

“About seven years ago, I got into the place where I wanted to have a value-based business. That means a more natural, local and sustainable business plan,” she says. “It makes sense to support local business because it’s an important step for us to get ready for when transportation costs are so high that everything you buy is affected by them.” For both Isley and Dance, the remedy to these looming problems is to support the local agricultural community in an effort to create a stronger, less vulnerable food system for the region.

Many area growers share this aspiration. Thomas Buscaglia of R.A.S. Farms says that supporting local food is a way of retaining knowledge and self-sufficiency within the local community.

Linda Isley, of Cocina Linda, displays an abundance of local food for her Meet the Farmers event./Photo by David Halterman

“Local food is a counteraction movement to a national and international food system monopoly,” he says. “Local food is reminding the people of who and what we are.”

Kay James, who, along with her husband, Dave, is the owner and operator of the 47-year-old James Ranch says that local production stems from accepting the challenges that face national food systems and finding creative solutions.

“We are the beginning of a revolution in food production that takes the best of the past and partners with the best of technology to achieve a tastier, healthier and economically viable product for the customer and community,” she says. “The people of our community are demanding and supporting local food production, which is the basis of the creativity and innovation that makes our wonderful nation tick.”

However, there are doubts that a local system could single-handedly support the food demand for the Durango area.

Although she sees a great opportunity for local food in Durango, Linda Mannix, of Santa Rita Ranch, says that she sees many hurdles for farmers and ranchers in the area. Among these are the facts that farmland continues to be sold into housing projects, extreme seasons create a limited growing time, and small-scale farmers are often out-competed by corporate agricultural enterprises.

Buscaglia expresses similar sentiments, asserting that the only way to true food security is to personally grow your own. “Mankind has no more easy answers outside to run to,” he says. “We can only be as sustainable as far as we are willing to change the ways we live.”

Stacy Warren is a Durangoan who is hoping to help neighborhoods establish community gardens that will empower individuals who want to learn to feed themselves on a local level.

“I can’t afford to eat organic, and I want to,” she says. “I have a demonstration garden in front of my house; I want people to plant food instead of flowers.”

Warren’s desire to plant the seed of community gardening in Durango has led her and friend Rebekah Doyle Guss to form the group Victory Gardens, based on a similar project in San Francisco.

Warren hopes that the group can serve as a catalyst for helping people create community gardens that will decrease Durangoans’ dependence on national food systems that are in turn dependent on fossil fuels. “If the city can’t afford to do it, this is an alternative way to do something in the meantime,” she says.

For now Warren and Doyle Guss have planted their first community garden in the Durango Housing Preservation on East Fifth Avenue. They intend to have the garden serve a large part of the neighborhoods south of College Drive, and so far have had an overwhelmingly positive reaction from residents of Durango Housing.

“The second we started weeding, the kids started coming out. We hope to meet their parents and also to get more neighbors involved,” Doyle Guss says.

In the last two weeks, the Victory Gardens group has replaced the cheat grass and clover in five concrete beds with squash, herbs, tomatoes, peppers, greens and watermelon. Also in the plans are compost bins and an extension of the garden into the terraced flower beds on the hillside above the garden.

“I’d like to see this garden take off and have more people who live here involved,” Doyle Guss says. “We see this as a model, a platform for seeding a network of community gardens around town.”

She adds that as people realize their capacity to grow their own food, questions of self-sufficiency and the extent of sustainability in Durango come to the forefront.

“We can show that we don’t have to wait for someone else to do something, we’ve just been doing it,” she says in closing. •