Home for Supper: Why Alberta's Local Food Industry Can Taste a Tantalizing Future

Jeff Brown (/contributors/jeff-brown) | April 30, 2019



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Takeaway: *As other economic sectors tighten their belts, three local food insiders weigh in on their industry's apparent feast.*

There's an interesting phenomenon occurring in these uncertain economic times: more Albertans are choosing good, local food over cheaper, imported fare.

The 2016 Study of Local Food Demand In Alberta (https://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/$Department/deptdocs.nsf/all/explore16484/$FILE/SurveyReport.pdf) tracked Alberta's increased local food spending back to 2008, when the first of three editions of this quadrennial consumer study report was published. That same year,

our oil industry faltered (https://www.ualberta.ca/business/en/Centres/~/media/business/Centres/WCER/Documents/Publications/InformationBulletins/139electronic.ashx), and construction slumped with it. Apparently, those downturns didn't send us scurrying for 33-cent noodle packets.

The study found that 98.7 per cent of Albertans surveyed had purchased local food in the last year, with 78 per cent doing so at farmers' markets – up from 72 per cent in 2012. It also indicated farm retail operations, restaurants serving local food and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)/Box programs had also seen varying levels of increased business, possibly due to a long business season, increased frequency of visits and more spending per visit. However, it also cautions that the number of consumers could decrease.

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Read: Slow Food Calgary President Kris Vester On the Benefits of Local Food (https://www.albertaventure.com/slow-food-calgary-president-kris-vester-on-the-benefits-of-local-food/2/2818)

The next report won't be out until next year. Until then, we have those in the industry to tell us if local food is still still gaining, and why.



Fresh produce at City Market in Edmonton.
Photo: Mack Male/Flickr

Knowing Your Grower

"All of the markets in Alberta, especially the big centres, I think are going to experience some expansion," says Dan Young, President of the Alberta Farmers' Market Association (http://www.albertafarmersmarket.com/).

Consumers, he says, are attracted by the opportunity to meet the grower, to discuss likes and dislikes, and to ask questions about pesticides, organic produce and free-range meats. Young adds that Canadians are becoming more health and

longevity aware, and a 2017 Ipsos Public Affairs survey on food insecurity (https://www.ipsos.com/en-ca/news-polls/CFCC-food-insecurity)backs him up. Around 90 per cent of its respondents agreed that having enough nutritious food to eat should be a basic right, that it made people generally healthier and that the lack of it increased health care costs.

"There's an interest in knowing and an interest in building a relationship with the producer. That's key," Young said. In addition to nutrition, market-goers also ask about having events catered or having crafts designed to spec.

Surprisingly, this relationship exposes a shortage of vendors, and AFMA is working on attracting more. The association's member support system is already an incentive; it helps vendors develop label designs, packaging, and skills in sales and communication. With new markets opened in response to cultural diversity and an increased interest in vegan and gluten-free diets, vendors have more opportunities to turn their market tent into a storefront for a home-based venture.

Changing Priorities

Graham Sparrow is one such vendor. Once on track to work in finance, the University of Calgary economics graduate found a new calling after farm-working his way through Ireland via the Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (https://wwoof.ca/) program.

His Sparrow's Nest Organics (https://www.sparroworganics.com/) operation launched in 2001 and was certified organic in 2003. Sparrow splits his time and fresh-picked crop between the Old Strathcona Farmers' Market and his community supported agriculture operation. The CSA tradition is said to have begun in the 1960s, when a group of women paid local dairy farmers up front for "clean" milk.

In Sparrow's case, the farmer finds his customers – often at his farmers' market tent, where cheerfully answering questions, remembering faces and keeping brochures handy can win prospects. He's served up to 90 members a year in the past, but he's now comfortable with 30. They pay either a reduced lump sum or

make three payments over the season. Members in good standing can regularly visit either of two designated Edmonton locations to pick up an equal share of fresh, clean, picked-at-its-prime produce – mostly vegetables, but also soft fruit, rhubarb, herbs and fresh-cut flowers.



Lacombe Farmer's Market
Photo: Mack Male/Flickr

Their payments can be a big relief. Last September's early snows devastated Sparrow's crops and forced him to temporarily rely on credit to cover fuel, soil mix, seed, heating, cooling, greenhouse upkeep, temporary foreign workers from Mexico and, last but not least, the mortgage.

"Probably three-quarters of my clientele are people with young kids," he says. Many are motivated to steer their children away from a corporate produce culture that includes chemical pesticides and fertilizers, water depletion, labour exploitation (https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jan/31/agribusiness-exploitation-undocumented-labor) and potential misrepresentation of organic product (http://www.grubstreet.com/2017/05/report-suggests-walmarts-organic-milk-isnt-organic.html) status. Budget priorities are also changing. Status items are out; spending more for proper nutrition is in. Sparrow estimates his farmers' market take is up about 50 per cent and his CSA membership expectations are on track.

"I do very little marketing," he said. Some returning members may drag their feet, but usually, emails or Instagram photos of young plants can hasten them back. So can the superior taste of his produce, which members say spoils them for mass-

produced fare with its listeria (https://www.foodsafetynews.com/2018/12/listeria-finding-prompts-nationwide-recall-of-kale-salad-in-canada/) and e.coli (https://edmontonsun.com/2012/11/14/another-case-of-e-coli-illness-in-alberta-traced-to-the-xl-foods-plant-in-brooks/wcm/1764e24e-eb74-48e0-aee8-475b75209497) recalls, which clean operations like Sparrow's Nest are able to eliminate.

A Taste for Finer Things

Mark Bellows, co-founder of Edmonton restaurant The Local Omnivore (https://www.thelocalomnivore.com/), is well aware of the correlation between production practices and great taste.

He and partner Ryan Brodziak met while paying their dues in the restaurant business. The two culinary experts developed a restaurant concept in 2012 and by summer 2013, their deli-on-wheels brought approving Edmonton diners "super smoked bacon" and other house-cured and smoked products. Working hard and smart, they started building their brick-and-mortar operation in 2015. Today, Google describes the Local Omnivore as a "hip mainstay with a convivial vibe & modern styling focusing on house-smoked meat & casual eats."

The atmosphere might be laid back, but the business model isn't. Bellows and Brodziak aren't riding on their local food reputation. It's about the cuisine.

"We're not going to buy something because it's trendy," Bellow says. He's discovered Albertans are very discerning, and what brings customers back is flavour.

Local producers have the inside track on supplying the Local Omnivore's meat products, being able to deliver it fresher and cheaper than outsiders. However, the partners are just as discerning as their customers and expect more than convenience.

"We strongly understand the connection between stress, hormones and flavour," Bellows said. The case for reducing anxiety (https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2011/08/how-animal-welfare-leads-to-better-meat-a-lesson-from-spain/244127/) in the lives and deaths of meat animals is well-documented, and Bellows agrees that humanely slaughtered meats are as pleasing to the tongue as they are to the conscience. That's reflected by his choice of producer "We have an organic pig farmer who produces unbelievable pork. I pay more for my product because it was done slower and better."

Changes on the way?

Will these observations be reiterated by consumers when the next Study of Local Food Demand in Alberta comes out in 2020? It will have a lot to tell Dan Young, the

AFMA, and the vendors at 130-plus Alberta-approved (https://www.alberta.ca/alberta-approved-farmers-markets-overview.aspx) farmers' markets across the province (http://www.agric.gov.ab.ca/app21/rtw/markets/markets_map.jsp). It will inform government initiatives like the Local Food Council (https://www.alberta.ca/local-food-council.aspx) and Local Food Week (https://www.alberta.ca/local-food-week.aspx), proclaimed last August by Agriculture Minister Oneil Carlier in support of a billion-dollar industry. Restaurateurs like Mark Bellows and farmers like Graham Sparrow will be interested not only in what it says about their bottom line, but also the values of the world they live in.

"These are all factors that are just working in the small local producer's favour," Sparrow says of the advantages local food holds over its corporate rivals. Local food, he believes, is on the cusp of something big. "So many of us have been invested for a long time, frustrated with how long it's taken people to wake up, but I really do think that that time is coming."