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A.J. Wacaser is fond of a slogan by activist Jeremy Rifkin: “Eating is the ultimate political act.” There’s certainly a political component to the new Buy Fresh Buy Local campaign, which Wacaser is helping to coordinate. By promoting local growers, farmers’ markets, and businesses that use produce from the Quad Cities area, organizers hope to strike a blow against prevailing trends – toward processed food and distribution systems that favor corporate agriculture, driving family farms out of business.

But eating is a multifaceted thing, and those political aims can be accomplished using much baser appeals: that locally produced food tastes better and is more nutritious; that farmers’ markets are sensory feasts; and that buying local can boost the financial well-being of farmers, restaurants, and the community alike.

It is, in many ways, a no-brainer, yet Buy Fresh Buy Local faces one major impediment: the buying and eating habits of a populace that values convenience above all else. As Steve Rosetti, co-owner of the Faithful Pilot restaurant and a longtime consumer of locally grown produce, said, “It’s pretty hard to change people’s eating habits.”

Kamyar Enshayan, a faculty member at the University of Northern Iowa who has helped initiate Buy Fresh Buy Local campaigns around the state, agreed: “This is a cultural change.”

But if Buy Fresh Buy Local works, it could be a major boon to the local marketplace. The Quad Cities area spends $1.1 billion each year on food, Wacaser said, and steering just one-tenth of 1 percent of that to locally produced food would mean an impact on local farmers of more than $1 million.

“There Is a Choice”

The Quad Cities Buy Fresh Buy Local campaign aims to make a big splash in the next month, inserting 100,000 directories into local newspapers. These guides – expected to be distributed annually – will showcase farmers’ markets, grocers, and restaurants that use local produce, and

list participating farmers in the initiative's eight-county area. The Web site (http://www.farmpaths.org) will provide up-to-date membership information.

Money for the directory will come from grants. Buy Fresh Buy Local Quad Cities so far has been awarded $6,500 from the Figge Foundation and $2,500 from the Riverboat Development Authority. The group has also secured a $2,500 grant from Practical Farmers of Iowa. In its second year, the organization hopes to be a self-supporting not-for-profit.

The all-volunteer Buy Fresh Buy Local board of directors will also place full-page newspaper ads over three months focusing on the health, taste, and economic benefits of buying local, and will also spotlight sections of the directory on a rotating basis. (The *River Cities' Reader* and Genesis Health System are co-sponsoring these advertisements.) And the campaign is working on a harvest calendar that lists different categories of food and when they're in season that will be available at local farmers' markets.

The premise of all these efforts is that people might make the effort to support local growers – and businesses that buy from local growers – if they only had the information. "There's just a lack of awareness," Wacaser said. Buy Fresh Buy Local aims to "highlight some of the local treasures here."

For example, during the growing season the Buy Fresh Buy Local area has 13 weekly farmers' markets that the campaign will promote, with something happening six days a week.

"It really helps consumers make an informed buying decision," Wacaser said. "There is a choice."

Ed Kraklio, a Buy Fresh Buy Local farmer in Walcott, agreed. "What we're doing now is developing relationships" between growers and consumers, he said, "teaching them a little more where their food is coming from, ... so that kids don't think carrots come out of a bag at a grocery store."

Eventually, the hope is that consumers start applying pressure to local grocery stores and restaurants to use local produce. "It's really up to the consumer to request it," Wacaser said.

Another component of the effort will be publicizing Community Supported Agriculture, or CSA, programs, in which subscribers receive shipments of local produce throughout the growing season. "If they ... can't get to the farmers' market, the farmers can come to them," Wacaser said.

Kraklio thinks the initiative needs to stay focused on relationships, with an emphasis on restaurants and consumers, not grocery stores. "They're the ones that are going to use the food on an individual basis," he said.

Restaurants provide a good example to consumers. Many people don't know how to store and cook fresh produce properly, Kraklio said, and they can learn from the preparations at local

restaurants. Farmers at local markets can also help educate them.

Kraklio said that for eight years, his farm has been trying to reach out to both consumers and restaurants. For two years, his Nostalgia Farms had its own restaurant on Harrison Street in Davenport.

But as a small farm, Nostalgia was not able to make many inroads with restaurants and stores. “It was hard to do on our own,” he said. “We could not keep up with the volume.” With Buy Fresh Buy Local, the volume of local growers should ease that problem.

“These Numbers Should Be in the Millions”

The roots of Buy Fresh Buy Local are in the “Be a Local Hero, Buy Locally Grown” campaign in Pennsylvania in 1999. The FoodRoutes Network then developed Buy Fresh Buy Local on a national scale. The Practical Farmers of Iowa purchased the Iowa rights and has worked to establish local initiatives based on the model.

The first Buy Fresh Buy Local campaign was in the Waterloo area and is coordinated by Enshayan. In 1997, he said, he started trying to link institutional buyers – such as schools and nursing homes – to local farmers. When Buy Fresh Buy Local was started in Waterloo in 2003, he said, it was meant to provide a consumer component to the initiative. The project spread to Des Moines last year and Burlington, Decorah, Fairfield, and the Quad Cities this year. Practical Farmers of Iowa has hired a full-time staff member to develop the program statewide, Enshayan said.

Although it’s related to Practical Farmers of Iowa, the Quad Cities Buy Fresh campaign includes four Illinois counties: Rock Island, Whiteside, Henry, and Mercy. (The Iowa counties are Scott, Clinton, Cedar, and Muscatine.) Many Illinois farmers sell their products at Iowa farmers’ markets, Wacaser explained, and “we didn’t want to cut them off.”

Roughly 80 growers are already signed up with the Quad Cities Buy Fresh Buy Local campaign, and “we’re still signing up farmers now,” Wacaser said. Participating growers receive a listing in the printed and online versions of the directory, as well as marketing materials such as price cards and Buy Fresh Buy Local signage. These growers are also able to post photos and notices of available inventory at (http://www.farmpaths.org) , where consumers can sign up for e-mail notifications when their favorite food items get posted.

While publishing the directory is the organization’s primary goal in its first year, its end target for its inaugural growing season is to increase participating growers’ sales by 10 percent.

That’s a small number, Wacaser conceded, but it can make the difference between surviving and shutting down. Local farms often produce food that doesn’t get purchased. “A lot of times growers don’t have outlets” for their products, Wacaser said. “It’s either recycled or thrown away.”

According to Farm Aid, there are now 2 million farms in the United States, 5 million fewer than

in the 1930s. Of those that remain, only 28 percent are family operations.

In Waterloo, Wacaser said, half the farmers featured in the Buy Fresh Buy Local directory saw their sales jump at least 5 percent in the first year. About 28 percent had sales grow at least 10 percent in the first year.

And last year, Enshayan said, the amount of institutional purchases in Waterloo nearly doubled, from $226,000 in 2003 to $465,000. “These are dollars that would have left our area,” he said. Still, he added, the improvement is just a start: “These numbers should be in the millions.”

Restaurants can also benefit from the effort, Wacaser said. “I really see the campaign as helping restaurants,” he said. For one thing, participating in Buy Fresh Buy Local can help them differentiate themselves. Even more importantly, he said, the food is better.

“It’s a huge advantage because the produce is so much better,” said Rosetti, who co-owns the Faithful Pilot restaurant in LeClaire with his wife, Nancy Rosetti. “I’ve been buying down at the farmers’ market for many years.”

The key advantage that local produce has over items shipped in from other parts of the country, Rosetti said, is that it ripens in the field. Produce brought in from far away “ripens on the truck,” he said. Local fruits and vegetables “go from the field to your place in as little as 24 hours.”

The only disadvantage, Rosetti said, is that the consumer isn’t able to plan menus far in advance, and sometimes doesn’t have an ideal selection. “You have to go with what they have,” he said.

“Under the Microscope”

The biggest barrier that Buy Fresh Buy Local has is consumer habit. People seem to want convenience – whether it’s prepared foods or shopping for produce at the grocery store – over taste and nutrition.

“Planning food and cooking food takes a lot of time,” Wacaser conceded. “Food has become an impulse decision.”

It’s also possible that the Quad Cities Buy Fresh Buy Local one-year goal of 10-percent sales growth for farmers is overly optimistic. Although Waterloo achieved results consistent with that goal, it also had a six-year-old institutional program in place, spearheaded by Enshayan.

Enshayan also noted that most communities don’t have enough capacity to meet large-scale institutional needs. “We just don’t have enough production,” he said. “We need more farmers. But that should develop over time.”

He added that improved infrastructure and distribution channels would also be a big help. For

example, a processing facility could allow local growers to supply restaurants and stores with produce year-round.

Another challenge is breaking restaurants of bad habits that prevent them from seeking out the best produce they can find – which is often in their own backyard. “It seems a convenience factor for them to order and receive a box at the back door,” Wacaser said.

At this point, Faithful Pilot is the “profiled” restaurant for Buy Fresh Buy Local Quad Cities, and Rexie’s Gourmet House is also participating.

But early in its existence, Buy Fresh Buy Local is finding some resistance among restaurants, even those that already use locally grown produce.

Wacaser said he sent out letters to 80 restaurants and has followed up with several chefs. “The response has been very positive,” he said, but most restaurants are waiting to see how the campaign goes before making any commitment. Many “don’t see the value” of spending $50 for a corporate Buy Fresh membership, he said. “They’re waiting to see how well we’ll promote them.”

And grocery stores are also reticent. To date, none have signed up. “All the campaigns start out with one or zero” grocery stores, Wacaser said.

That makes achieving goals all the more important for the Buy Fresh Buy Local. “We’re under the microscope,” Kraklio said. “We want to do everything we can to do this right the first time.”