

# Sustaining the little guy

“Great things are done by a series of small things brought together,” said Van Gogh. Can life imitate art, asks John Turenne FCSI?



Welcome to the third installment in the Sustainability in Foodservice series. My last column discussed the environmental aspect of the four pillars of sustainable food. These four pillars are: Environment, Community, Social, and Health and Wellness. In this column we focus on the Community pillar – the impact our choices have on businesses, farms, artisans and diversity. We begin by asking ourselves: “How do my purchasing choices affect the world around me?”

## Bigger isn't always better

Big versus small. It's a big world, made up of small entities – individuals, families and communities. Over the last century, commoditization has resulted in streamlining and systemizing almost everything: the big get bigger and the small go away. As an example, consider the recent evolution of healthcare. Gone are the local physicians we developed lifelong relationships with. Nowadays large health systems are the norm, where we are reduced to a ‘client number’ and become victims of phone message trees. We have stacks of impersonal forms to complete at each visit and referrals and more referrals. Now compare that to our current food system for context.

Obsolete are the small, family farms, dairies, artisanal bakers and the like. Extinct are many varieties of fruits, vegetables, grains and livestock. Enter the modern world of less choice, mass-produced, highly processed and

nutritionally void food-like-substances. Goodbye small food business, hello corporate boardrooms.

As an example, these days we seldom see the small community bakeries producing real bread, made with whole grains packed with natural (real) nutrients. They've been replaced with mass-produced loaves of bread (or, truth be told, bread-like-substance) made from flour stripped of its nutritional value. The same can be said for small farms. We've sacrificed freshness, taste and seasonality for an “anything, anywhere, anytime” attitude that often equates to less flavor and a lack of creativity for cooks. Going big doesn't always mean getting better.

## Community spirit

When the primary purposes for our decisions about food are being made based on profit and loss, return on investment and shareholder return, something is going to give. That something is often quality, health and community. Quality and health will be discussed in my later columns, but this feature's subject of the Community pillar of sustainable food does relate to small businesses and diversity.

Why should we care about small business in the food industry? Because when we lose small farms, we lose a piece of the community. Conversely, when we support local food we support community, taste, freshness and culinary creativity. We build local economies by

ensuring some of our money stays within the community. Buying local food can protect food security and genetic diversity. It can also help keep taxes in check and can maintain a rural, working landscape.

## It's in the genes

By supporting local food producers we also are strengthening genetic diversity. Local farms grow a huge number of varieties to provide a long season of harvest, an array of eye-catching colors, and the best flavors. Many varieties are heirlooms, passed down from generation to generation. These old varieties contain genetic material from hundreds or even thousands of years of human selection. In contrast, most conventionally grown food is chosen for its ability to ripen slowly, withstand harvesting equipment and survive shipping, as well as for an ability to have an extended shelf life in the warehouse or store.

Nobody is saying we can survive exclusively on local food, but we can begin to shift some choices. Local and small food is about the future. By supporting local farmers today, you can help ensure there will be farms in your community tomorrow. Ask yourself how your choices impact your community. Bigger isn't always better. The world still needs individuals. ■

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