

NEWS

HOME > NEWS

Local food, local fans

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Escalating grocery prices are adding to the momentum of a growing local-food movement as bargain hunters are joining the ranks of the health-conscious, gourmet, anti-corporate and pro-local shoppers at area farmers' markets.



BRANDON KRUSE/The Gainesville Sun
Rose Koenig, with Rosie's Organic Farm, places boxes of sun-dried tomatoes out on her stand at the Downtown Farmers' Market Wednesday afternoon. Because of increases in the price of store-bought produce, many people have found local markets to be a more cost-effective alternative.

The cost of 16 basic grocery items increased 8 percent from the fourth quarter of 2007 to the first quarter of this year in the American Farm Bureau Federation's Marketbasket Survey as rising energy prices add to the cost of transportation, processing and packaging.

Stefanie Samara Hamblen said she's noticed people standing in lines at stalls at the Haile Plantation Farmers' Market at 8:30 a.m. in the last 4-6 weeks where there used to be just a few people.

"Until gas and food prices started going up, you didn't see that at the farmers' market," she said. "I

hear people talking, saying this is so much cheaper than the grocery store."

Hamblen publishes the Hogtown HomeGrown Web site and newsletter. Last month, 70 people participated in the eat-local contest she organized, pledging to eat only locally grown produce or buy food at local restaurants and businesses throughout May.

She said her family saved \$200 to \$300 on groceries by not buying more expensive processed and frozen foods while shopping at Ward's Super Market, local businesses and farmers' markets.

Local dairy, eggs and bread cost more than grocery store prices, she said, but the lower cost of vegetables more than made up for the increase, Hamblen said.

"As long as you like vegetables, it wasn't hard at all because May was a prime month for mass quantities of vegetables," she said. "My 17-year-old luckily was a real good sport, but by the end of the month we were craving pasta."

The local-food movement is growing nationally, spurred in part by books such as "Animal, Vegetable, Miracle" by Barbara Kingsolver and "The Omnivore's Dilemma" by Michael Pollan.

The movement is also picking up locally.

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Hamblen started her newsletter in 2006 and said the number of farmers' markets from Starke to Micanopy has doubled.

A Gainesville chapter of the nonprofit Slow Food movement that promotes food traditions and sustainable production has about 100 members.

Earlier this year, the Eastside High Culinary Arts Institute won state championships in management and culinary competition after going to a local food curriculum.

Hamblen said she was contacted by the Gainesville Area Chamber of Commerce to discuss ways to encourage restaurants to buy local food.

"Where we overlap is we both see local sources first as being very critical to the area's economy, whether it be local restaurants buying from local growers or even a local food distributorship like Florida Food Service," said chamber President Brent Christensen. "That's something the chamber stands for on a daily basis, but the rising transportation costs are starting to open people's eyes that it does make good business sense."

Sharon Yeago of the High Springs Farmers' Market said she doesn't know if more people are coming to that market because of prices, but said high transportation costs are getting people to look at the costs of everything.

Gretchen McIntyre and Elizabeth Nesbitt of Gainesville said they are looking into starting a local food cooperative with hopes of opening storefronts in Gainesville and High Springs that would be open seven days a week once they get enough members. They held their first fundraiser and membership drive after the High Springs Farmers' Market on Thursday and plan more events in Gainesville in August.

McIntyre said the average American meal travels 1,500 miles. With some local foods being more local than others, she said food in their distribution channel averages 300 miles.

The co-op model also saves money off the operating costs added to grocery store food prices by using a volunteer board and sharing profits with workers, growers and customers, she said.

"Most of the conventional grocery stores have a 40 to 50 percent markup to cover their overhead and huge corporate salaries and everything that goes into running a huge supermarket chain," McIntyre said. "If you can minimize that profit markup on just the cost of the food, that will save people some money."

One problem she sees with rising food prices is that people are making nutritional decisions based on the price of food, such as avoiding healthier but sometimes more expensive organic food, she said.

"Because of that, we don't have a lot of consumer power on choices of what we put into our bodies," McIntyre said.

That was a concern of 68-year-old Marty Easters of Gainesville as she stood in line at the East Gainesville Community Center on Monday for a \$40 farmer's market voucher for low-income seniors from ElderCare of Alachua County.

"People are going to the cheaper foods. They're not getting the nutritional things," she said. "Your cheaper foods have the starch in them, but that's not what you should feed children and the elderly, so the vegetable thing here is a good thing."

ElderCare gave out more than 500 vouchers to use at farmers' markets recently, but with federal cuts, the number of vouchers was down and the dollar amount reduced from \$60 to \$40 since last year, according to Jeff Lee, manager of program operations.

Gerald Criswell, 73, of Alachua said after getting his voucher that he looks for sales at the

grocery store and goes to the Alachua County Farmers' Market on NW 13th Street to stretch his Social Security income.

"That's the good thing about the farmers' market program," Lee said. "It's not a ton of money, but that \$40 is significant to someone on a fixed income. With the rising prices of everything, food costs, everyday living expenses are making it tougher for the senior population to take care of themselves every day."

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