

Consumer Focus

► by **Ron Wilson**, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University

The ranch-to-retail link

Where does your food come from? The urban consumer might answer that question with the name of their local grocery store. But, this question goes beyond that: Where does the food in that grocery store come from originally? Where is it produced? One innovative retailer is reaching out to food producers as well as consumers and helping to connect them.

A family business

Fred Ball and David Ball, both with Ball's Food Stores in Kansas City, Kan., and Ball's Foods vice-president Matt Jonas share the story of a remarkable family-owned chain of local grocery stores.

It all began with Sidney and Mollie Ball, who opened a small neighborhood grocery store in Kansas City back in 1923. "My father came off the farm in Missouri and was looking for an opportunity in the hardware or grocery business," Fred Ball says. "He borrowed a thousand dollars and went in with some others to buy a grocery store."

They later built a small supermarket and called it Ball's Market. The business grew, and they opened more locations. Over time, Sidney and Mollie passed the business along to their son Fred, who in turn brought in his son David, who is now president and chief operating officer (COO). Ball's Food Stores now operate under the brand names Hen House Markets and Price Chopper. There are 13 Hen House Markets and 16 Price Choppers in the Kansas City area.

"We've been selling local goods since we started 85 years ago," Jonas says.

In recent years, one of the company's food suppliers in southeast Kansas was an all-natural beef producer named Diana Endicott. Fred suggested they do a story

about Diana and promote her and her products. The reaction from their store customers was quite positive, and the idea grew from there.

Buy fresh, buy local

Today, Ball's Food Stores is a member of the "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" campaign, which seeks to promote the quality of food produced by farmers in the greater Kansas City area. Kansas City is one of 14 regions where the Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) and the National Food Routes Network has campaigned to link growers who use sustainable farm practices with customers who want to buy locally grown produce and meat.

Starting on the central coast of California in 2002, the nonprofit organization Food Routes strives to reintroduce Americans to their food — where it grows or comes from, the farmers who produce it, and the routes that carry it from the farm to their tables. Ball's Food Stores is the first independently owned food store to be a member of Buy Fresh, Buy Local.

Under this program, some 100 local farmers and ranchers supply a wide variety of fresh produce and other foods to these Kansas City stores. The growers even have the opportunity to visit the stores and see their customers first-hand. Biographical

sketches of many producers are listed online at www.henhouse.com.

Of course, these producers come from rural locations all around Kansas and Missouri. That includes Kansas towns such as Fairview, population 269; Goff, population 177; and Carlton, population 38 people. Now, that's rural. These rural towns benefit when their producers can access an urban market, and urban consumers benefit from receiving fresh, nutritious, locally produced foods.

Ball's Food Stores is also involved with what is called Community Supported Agriculture, or CSA. Through the store's CSA, a customer commits to a certain level of weekly food purchases for a period of weeks. Each week, that customer receives a large grocery bag with a variety of the finest and freshest foods of the season, plus cooking information and promotional pricing.

These products include bread, eggs, cheese, honey, and natural beef and chicken plus seasonal produce, including everything in the food alphabet from apples to zucchini.

"It's a win-win for everybody," Jonas says. "It brings us closer to our customer and brings them closer to their food." As proof that it is a profitable enterprise for all, Jonas notes local food sales have tripled in four years.

"The food safety scares of today make it all the more important to know where your food comes from," Jonas says. For more information, go to www.henhouse.com.

So where does your food come from? If you live in Kansas City, it might come from Hen House Market, but beyond that it came from a hard-working, conscientious farmer or rancher in the fields of rural America. **AY**



Editor's Note: This column is adapted from the Kansas Profile radio series. The mission of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development is to enhance rural development by helping rural people help themselves. The Kansas Profile radio series and columns are produced with assistance from the Kansas State University Research and Extension Department of Communications News Unit. Audio and text files of Kansas Profiles are available at www.kansasprofile.com. For more information about the Huck Boyd Institute, interested persons can visit www.oznet.ksu.edu/huckboyd.