

# Big Future for Small Farms

As consumers seek opportunities to know more about their food, small farmers have an opportunity for direct sales.

by **Kindra Gordon**

**A**s the local food trend continues to grow in popularity among consumers, it could bode a bright — and big future — for beef producers with small- and mid-sized operations.

Chuck Hassebrook, executive director of the Center for Rural Affairs in Lyons, Neb., says he sees consumers seeking authenticity, a sense of community, and a tendency to value quality and experience.

“These trends give us [small- and mid-sized farms] an opportunity. The key for smaller operations is to offer quality and authenticity,” says Hassebrook in talking about direct sales of food from gate to plate.

Hassebrook adds, “There’s a growing willingness among consumers to pay more for food they support,” which he believes

indicates many people may be happier to buy direct from a local farmer who they know and with whom they have built a relationship.

## Testament of local support

Marla Peterson can attest to the consumer’s interest in buying local, fresh food. Peterson is director of the Big Hollow



Food Cooperative that opened in 2007 in Laramie, Wyo. She reports that in just three year’s time the food coop is debt free and grosses \$750,000

per year. Meat (grass-fed and natural beef and buffalo), milk and eggs are three of the coop’s best sellers.

“People like that they can identify the producer. People are looking for that authenticity and accountability,” she says.

Similarly, Celeste Havener operates the Laramie Farmer’s Market from July through September. She, too, says that when consumers have the opportunity to meet the producer, local food sells well. During her 14-week season, the Laramie Farmer’s Market will gross \$170,000 per year.

Peterson and Havener say a food coop or farmer’s market is a great way to capitalize on added income for a small farm operation, whether you are selling supplemental crops from your farm or ranch — such as berries, vegetables or eggs — or are building a business selling beef direct to consumers.

“Local meat is in demand, and a farmer’s market is a great opportunity to meet customers,” Havener says. “They may try your beef, and like it, and then contact you about purchasing a larger quantity like a quarter or half down the road.”

## Tips to tap the market

Havener says a key in tapping the local market is to help the consumer feel comfortable with you and your product.

“If you intend to sell direct to consumers,” she says, “you must not only have a good quality product, but you also must be good at communication. You must engage with people and be educated about why people should buy local and buy your product because of how you raise your product, health attributes, etc.”

At a farmer’s market, Havener says attractive signage and displays are also essential to engage consumers in learning about your product. For someone aiming to

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## Urban ag on the rise

With the popularity of local food, the trend in urban agriculture — from community plots to rooftop gardens using aquaculture and hydroponics — is also growing.

Columbus, Ohio, already boasts 200 community gardens, with a goal of expanding to 500 by 2012. Cleveland presently allows city residents to keep bees and chickens and is considering forming urban ag districts so residents could house cows and other livestock. Denver and Milwaukee have existing urban garden programs, while Seattle and Detroit are also working to develop urban farms and gardens.

While this trend may never produce a large amount of food, it is a trend that is connecting consumers to their food sources, and, it is hoped it will also help consumers better understand what real-life farmers and ranchers do every day and the stewardship and animal care practices they utilize.

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sell larger quantities of beef, she also suggests doing a display with boxes to illustrate how much product an eighth, a quarter, a half or a whole beef would be. That way people can gauge how much freezer space they need, says Havener.

Regarding price, Havener and Peterson say the key is to charge what you need to for your business. "If you sell too low, you won't stay in business. If consumers want cheap, they'll go to a discount retailer."

This duo says that's where relationship building can help garner a better price for local foods. They report that often when people find a quality product and know the producer, they are willing to pay a premium for the product and will be a long-term customer.



**Editor's Note:** *USDA has launched the 'Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food' initiative designed*

*to promote local and regional food systems that help keep wealth in rural communities, and to encourage a national conversation about what we eat and where it comes from in order to benefit producers of all sizes. The site includes an Ideas and Stories page where producers are encouraged to share real-world examples of the entrepreneurship and support for agriculture that are taking place every day across the country. Visit the site at [www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/knowyourfarmer?navid=KNOWYOURLFARMER](http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/knowyourfarmer?navid=KNOWYOURLFARMER).*