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A Growing Trend: Small, Local and Organic

Popularity of Farmers Markets, Natural Grocery Stores Helps Cultivate a Rise in Niche Farms

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This is where Michael Pappas farms: not in the great wide fields of Iowa or in California's industrial salad bowl, but in Lanham. He is eight miles from the Washington Monument, three or four turns from the Beltway, at the end of a long road in a residential neighborhood. He's growing crops on 2 1/2 acres with 2 1/2 employees.

How's life? "Lately, it's really pretty good," Pappas says, in the middle of his fall harvest at a place he calls Eco Farms. He points out some lemon verbena, which he sells to chef Michel Richard for his D.C. restaurant, Citronelle, considered one of the country's best. Nearby he has a little patch of wild arugula for chef Johnny Monis at Komi. He's also got mesclun salad, basil, peppers, radishes, carrots, beets and pineapple sage, not to mention plenty of customers at a co-op, other restaurants, local grocery stores and a gourmet caterer.

Pappas has, on this hilly field, created what few people thought was possible in the age of industrial farming: a small organic operation that is both environmentally and economically sustainable. Like dozens of other farmers across the region, he has leveraged the grass-roots-turned-mainstream popularity of farmers markets to expand the market for locally grown produce to restaurants, caterers, grocery stores and even college dining halls. Pappas, who is single and has no children, typically can't afford to eat at Citronelle, but he says he's making a nice living.

It's not just nostalgia for a quaint notion of local farming -- or fear of *E. coli* in spinach -- that drives Pappas's success, though those are important components. He's also benefiting from the heightened sophistication of Whole Foods customers and their ilk, people who want to feed both their bodies and their social consciences, and who ask themselves, "What good is eating organic if it's been trucked 3,000 gas-guzzling miles across the country?"

"The whole trend for the past 100 years was to get bigger or get out, but in the 1970s and '80s people started to get smaller," said Lynn Byczynski, editor of the Growing for Market newsletter, whose 5,000 subscribers are mostly small farmers. "Now it's about attention to detail, about getting retail pricing and having relationships with customers. People are making a livelihood out of this."

The trend toward smaller farming can be seen locally in farm Census data. While the number of farms in Maryland has fallen from 39,000 in 1950 to about 12,200 in 2002, the number of niche farms of 10 to 49 acres grew from 3,979 in 1992 to 4,412 in 2002. In Virginia, such farms grew from 10,361 in 1992 to 14,082 in 2002.

"This has really been happening all over the country," Byczynski said. "People are managing to make a go of it."

The increased demand for local produce was enough to help Brett Grohsgal, a former chef, succeed in a third

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career as a farmer. At first, it certainly didn't seem like he would be a much of a hit. In 1997, when he started Even' Star Organic Farm on about 100 acres in Lexington Park, in Southern Maryland, he generated \$8,000 in revenue, for a salary of about 23 cents an hour.

"That was pretty tough," Grohsgal said. But last year, his revenue was in the low six figures, and he is expecting 20 to 40 percent growth this year. He has relationships with several D.C. restaurants, and his biggest wholesale customer is a catering service for American University, Gallaudet University and St. Mary's College. "Life is good, man," he said. "Life is really good. It's a seller's market if you are at the high end of the product stream. Sales are not a problem."

Even larger local farmers are benefiting from the push toward local produce. John Lewis, who farms about 1,500 acres in Virginia's Northern Neck, said his crops fetch good prices with his main customer, Giant Food.

"They try not to beat down the farmer on price, and that makes them different from the general produce market," Lewis said. "They are trying to get good produce at a reasonable amount where the farmer can survive and not cut the farmer's throat."

Whole Foods recently announced a heightened focus on buying local produce, including a \$10 million budget to promote local agriculture, following pressure from author Michael Pollan, who has called into question the wisdom of industrial organics. Of course, nothing is ever truly easy in farming territory, particularly when it comes to the increasing development of houses, each bigger than the last one. Grohsgal understands his land is worth more to developers than it is to him as a farm. He turns home builders away anyway. "I know it's worth a fortune," he said, "but if we always sell to developers, our nation will just stop growing food."

Houses are creeping closer and closer to his farm -- and just about every farm in the United States. The country loses two acres of farmland every minute, according to American Farmland Trust. Count to 60, and there go two more acres. From 1992 to 1997, more than 6 million acres of agricultural land -- about the size of Maryland -- was converted for development. Farm and ranch land disappeared 51 percent faster in the 1990s than in the 1980s.

Still, growers like Pappas and Grohsgal press on, determined to live off the land and perpetuate a way of life. And to do so they are getting help from the palates of mainstream grocery and restaurant customers. A few years ago, researchers for the Leopold Center at Iowa State University conducted an Internet study in which respondents chose between two kinds of strawberries -- one with a tag that said locally grown and another with a tag that said USA grown. More than 90 percent preferred the strawberry that was locally grown.

And talk about paradoxes: In many instances, a big chunk of the increasing demand for local produce comes from many of the same people who buy the big houses on converted farmland or near what remains of it. This is the circle of life in the new millennium.

Ann Yonkers, whose organization Freshfarm Markets runs a weekly farmers market in Dupont Circle, thinks local farmers are benefiting from the phenomenal growth of farmers markets across the country. From 1994 to 2004, they grew 111 percent, to more than 3,700, according to federal statistics. The Dupont Circle market went from 15 farmers selling \$265,000 worth of goods in 1997 to 35 producers on track to sell more than \$2 million worth of goods for 2006. Typically shoppers find fresher, more and varied products at such markets, and they get to meet the people who grow them.

"Small farmers need to have multiple ways of selling," Yonkers said. "So at farmers markets, they meet restaurateurs, they meet people from various local institutions, people saying, 'Why can't we have this food, too?' "

Most businesses find local farmers this way -- from the Clyde's restaurant group, which has featured locally

grown produce for more than a decade; to My Organic Market, a local grocery chain that relies heavily on produce from Pappas and other local farmers; to a San Francisco caterer called Bon App?tit Management Co., which spends \$30 million a year on local produce for cafeterias at big businesses and universities, including several in the Washington area.

Kimberly Triplett, Bon App?tit's general manager for Georgetown University law school, said the company discovered Grohsgal through the Chevy Chase farmers market. She called, asking to buy from him. "He turned me down at first," Triplett said. "He doesn't like big corporations. That's why he went into business for himself."

She explained her company's commitment to relying on local farmers. "After a while, I think he felt bad for me, and he invited us to his farm. We walked the fields. I think we bonded over that experience and we formed a partnership."

"They have been very good to us," Grohsgal said. Bon App?tit has become his biggest wholesale customer. Students at American and Gallaudet can find Grohsgal's arugula salad or peppers, or whatever he has that looks good that week at various stations in the school cafeterias, with a little card nearby that explains who he is and where he grows his food.

Pappas says his biggest customers are D.C. restaurants. "D.C. is a real hot restaurant town," he said. "And more chefs are realizing that it's important to buy locally and to make their menus around seasonal produce, and that to do so they need to develop relationships with local farmers."

Omri Aflalo, the sous chef at Citronelle, said the argument to buy locally is powerful. "It's a much better product," he said. "It is about using indigenous ingredients. You're taught to use what's around you."

Aflalo and Pappas communicate a couple of times a week, by phone, e-mail or fax, about what is growing well. Pappas tries to stay on top of the restaurant and food world by reading magazines and newspaper food sections. He said Washingtonian magazine's annual list of the 100 best restaurants is his "marketing bible."

"Instead of chasing the market," he said, "I want to drive the market."

My Organic Market, which has four stores in the Washington area and is known as MOM's, has been selling his salad mix next to packaged salad from Earthbound Farm, one of the country's biggest industrial organic farm operations, which was implicated in the recent *E. coli* spinach scare. Earthbound Farm's salads come in fluffy plastic bags, which have found their way to millions of busy people. Pappas's salad comes in flimsy clam-shell plastic boxes, like those take-out salad bars. It is the big corporation salad vs. the little guy salad. And the little guy is gaining ground.

Jon Croft, the store's produce director, said: "Mike's salads are really selling well over the last few weeks. I was surprised. They are essentially the same price. It was a gamble to bring in a clam-shell box without a label, without a big farm name. It's just a little plastic container. That's been very interesting to me."

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