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Road to Recovery: Local foods spice up economic picture

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A meal at downtown Sacramento's fashionable Grange Restaurant & Bar shows how one segment of local agriculture has room to grow.

The Grange, home to politicians, tourists and hometown crowds at the Citizen Hotel, thrives on an old idea become new again: locally grown food. A typical meal, conceived by executive chef Michael Tuohy, includes Yolo pastured chicken, salad greens, organic potatoes and a "good local olive oil."

"Local food is why I came to Sacramento," said the San Francisco-born chef, who in 2008 left Atlanta for the capital. "Within 50 miles you have everything from honey to olive oil to cheese to goats to lamb to pork to vegetables."

Regional leaders say Tuohy's four-piece meal represents a small, but key, contributor to the economy. Whether discovering a fledgling chicken supplier in Yolo County or ordering wine from Amador County, newcomer chefs and consumers alike are building a niche for locally grown and consumed food in the region's otherwise globalized farm economy.

Witness new generations of farm families running wineries, selling olive oil and growing all manner of seasonal delicacies, many of them organic.

Farming no longer constitutes a huge sector of the Sacramento economy, but it has been a stable one during the recession.

Area farms actually produced more income during the downturn, not less: \$1.66 billion in 2008 compared with \$1.3 billion in 2006. Employment, while still a small part of the local jobs picture, grew from an annual average of 7,400 people in 2004 to 8,300 people in 2008, according to the state Employment Development Department. Rice led the way as buyers turned from meats to cheaper grains.

Fertile farmland is 'our oil'

At this point, Sacramento's farming industry is still heavily dependent on tomatoes and rice – two commodities trucked out of the region in bulk for processing. But in the past few years, government and business leaders have joined growers and restaurant owners in an effort to encourage more local food consumption.

Leaders talk about food security in the event of a prolonged energy emergency. They aim to build stronger rural economies to help contain suburban sprawl. There's also the idea of just plain making more money for all.

"If we better connect local food consumption with local food production, there's more value to squeeze out of this economy," says Mike McKeever, executive director of the Sacramento Area Council of Governments, the regional planning agency. McKeever, hailing the capital's enviable blend of fertile farmland and Mediterranean climate, says, "We're one of the few places in the world to have this unique resource. It's our oil."

At this point, the local food movement is tiny. An estimated 233 farms in the region sell directly to local consumers. They account for about 2 percent of the farm economy. Yet they also produce the greatest variety of fruits, vegetables and animals in year-round growing seasons. Seeking to empower those farms, SACOG recently launched a visioning process for rural areas to complement its groundbreaking urban planning blueprint.

"If that 2 percent went to 10 percent, there might be a lot of jobs, a lot of small farmer jobs," said McKeever.

The SACOG chief, alongside other establishment groups such as Valley Vision and the Sacramento Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce, foresees a day when local farms might supply not only restaurants and farmers' markets, but hospitals, schools, nursing homes, prisons and other institutions.

"As the cost of fuel and diesel goes up, it's going to get more expensive to transfer food long distances," said Matt Mahood, president of the Sacramento Metro Chamber of Commerce. The business group proves how the local food movement is going mainstream: Recently, it asked the downtown Hyatt to seek local food for its annual dinner.

Best-selling books like "The Omnivore's Dilemma," "Fast Food Nation" and "Animal, Vegetable, Miracle" have raised public consciousness about the environmental harm of shipping food around the globe and popularized the idea of eating simple, nutritious meat and produce grown close by.

Last year, the federal government joined the push when the U.S. Department of Agriculture launched a local food initiative dubbed "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food." A local organization, Soil Born Farms, received one of the department's first \$240,000 grants to build a produce hub for small area farms.

"This is an economic movement," said Suzanne Peabody Ashworth, who grows more than 200 varieties of herbs and vegetables at her West Sacramento farm, Del Rio Botanical. Recently, she signed with Lake Tahoe's new Ritz- Carlton Highlands resort hotel to provide locally grown food.

Wholesalers play key role

Del Rio's salad greens kick off Tuohy's chicken dinner menu, arriving at the Grange via Produce Express, a Sacramento wholesaler with a local food service. The local food operation is run by former Sacramento chef Jim Mills.

Wholesalers like Mills play a key role in the local food chain, helping Ashworth and other farmers connect with potential customers.

"I did not farm so I can drive all over and peddle things," Ashworth said one afternoon at the Produce Express offices at Fifth Avenue and Broadway. She had just dropped off cases of fava beans, Italian lettuce leaves, red frisée mustard and red Russian kale, all headed to chefs like Tuohy and Patrick Mulvaney of Mulvaney's Building and Loan.

Selling food locally, Ashworth is able to break the hiring cycle that requires workers for a few weeks or months and then sends them elsewhere along the seasonal migration trail. She has eight employees, who get wages and benefits, wear uniforms and have Christmas parties.

"We do all the things that offices do. We just happen to pick vegetables," she said.

Yolo Poultry, which provides Tuohy's Yolo pastured chicken, consists of two childhood friends, Nick Deamer and Mike Read. The two started their business about a year ago on Deamer's family farm. They send 100 grain- and grass-fed chickens weekly to such Sacramento restaurants as the Grange, Waterboy, OneSpeed and Davis' Osteria Fasulo.

"It keeps us in business, and we're still building," said Deamer. "We want to get up to 300 a week."

Deamer said, "I knew the Grange liked local food, so I cold-called them. I walked in and said, 'Here's what we're doing.' A week later I dropped off a couple of chickens. A week later he (Tuohy) ordered his first case, and since then it's been magic."

Tuohy's potatoes for the pastured chicken dinner are from Capay Organic in Yolo County's Capay Valley. The 240- acre organic farm is a local food pioneer that sells 70 varieties of produce direct to consumers in Sacramento and the Bay Area. Its business model includes 80 full-time employees.

"Working that local connection is a ton of work," said co-owner Freeman Barsotti. "We call the chefs and do three deliveries a week." But selling local "also protects us" from the whims of selling to a handful of wholesalers, he said. Capay Organic has a wide client base: restaurants,

consumer food subscriptions and direct sales at area farmers markets. The family has a permanent store in San Francisco's Ferry Building.

Tuohy discovered his olive oil choice – Bariani – while exploring the farmers' market at nearby Cesar Chavez Plaza.

Perhaps no product better shows local food's growth potential. Sacramento's Bariani family started with 88 olive trees in 1990. Now it has 35,000 trees on acreage near Zamora, 40 miles northwest of Sacramento in Yolo County.

Bariani's growth followed years of direct sales in farmers' markets in the Bay Area and Sacramento. Restaurants became customers. So did grocers: Raley's, Nugget, Taylor's Market, Whole Foods, Corti Brothers, area food co-ops and the Bay Area's Andronico's.

"We never meet demand. We always run short," said the family's Sebastian Bariani.