



## Book Review

### **Growing local: Case studies on local food supply chains**

Robert P. King, Michael S. Hand, and Miguel I. Gomez (Eds.)

University of Nebraska Press, 2015: 384 pages

Review by Ryan Phillips (Ryerson University)

The local food movement in North America has grown significantly during the last decade, yet there still remains relatively little empirical research on the subject. Fortunately, however, the recent work *Growing Local: Case Studies on Local Food Supply Chains* edited by Robert King, Michael Hand, and Miguel Gomez helps to further develop an understanding of this increasingly popular food system. *Growing Local* examined five case studies in order to gain a better overall understanding of local food supply chains—apples in Syracuse, New York; blueberries in Portland, Oregon; spring mix in Sacramento, California; beef in the Twin Cities, Minnesota; and milk in Washington, DC. These region and product pairings examined mainstream, direct, and intermediated markets to address the impact of local food supply chains on social, economic, environmental, and health dynamics of the examined communities. Each case study employed both semi-structured interviews with members of the supply chains and contextual data gathered from secondary and third-party sources—such as per capita income of communities and size of local markets.

A recurring theme throughout the study is the conveyance and perception of the “local” attribute of foods within these supply chains. The study used a flexible working definition of local food to refer to foods produced or processed within the study state or within the study state and surrounding states (p. 15). In order to be considered local, the food also needed to convey information—through its label or marketing strategies—regarding where it was produced.

Similarly, the study’s working definition of local supply chains involved “the set of trading partner relationships and transactions that delivers a local food product and conveys information to consumers about where, by whom, and how the product was produced” (p. 16). However, the authors also acknowledged the fact that local food remains a fickle concept

amongst both academics and the general public. For example, the study of New York apples highlights both the romanticized and subjective nature of local foods: though many larger or intermediated supply chains met the criteria for being considered local, consumers typically perceived food delivered through direct sales methods—such as farmers markets—to be more local. While assessing blueberries in Oregon, the authors also raised the question of whether consumers’ perceptions of a food’s localness decreased depending on how many times the product changes hands (p. 116). The final chapters concluded that, as an attribute, the localness of a food tended to depend mostly on how the product was produced and processed rather than where, though both elements were still important in these supply chains (p. 268).

Regarding supply chain performance of local food systems, the study draws several conclusions. The social and economic benefits of local foods are highlighted, noting that direct marketing strategies—specifically, farmers markets—while relatively small-scale, provide highly transparent information relating to food production and processing for consumers. These local food systems also tend to create sustainable prosperity. For example, financial benefits remain largely within the local communities, and many individuals within these supply chains are also actively engaged in their respective communities through promotion of healthy eating at hospitals, investing in local farmers’ entrepreneurial skills, and similar endeavors (p. 295). In terms of environmental sustainability, the performance results are mixed. As with consumer perceptions of what constitutes local food, the environmental sustainability of local foods depends more on how the product is produced rather than its geographic proximity (p. 301). For example, many of the local apple producers in New York use pesticides similar or identical to those used in more mainstream supply chains. This emphasis on production methods is still significant even when factoring in environmental impacts of transportation, as the authors note that transportation in any food supply chain accounts for only a small portion of energy use—approximately 3.5% (p. 300). As such, the study’s assessment of the potential for local foods to improve environmentally sustainable agriculture concludes with a host of possibilities for future research.

Overall, *Growing Local* provides an exceptional indepth examination of the current state of local food supply chains in the United States. The book offers both a better understanding of a growing trend in North American food systems as well as an identification of areas in which further research and critical analysis are needed. For example, though admittedly limited in scope, the study results imply greater levels of local food transparency in direct and intermediated systems, as opposed to the typically more veiled geography and production of mainstream market supply chains. Most noticeably, the study also acknowledges that its focus on metropolitan areas means that the structure and performance of similar food supply chains in rural communities are still not being addressed, and thus further investigation is needed. Indeed, *Growing Local* is an excellent read for anyone interested in the economic elements of contemporary local food studies.

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