

# Mission Accomplished at the Tri-State Farm and Food Conference

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It was important to start a community discussion about food in the Huntington foodshed. The market is huge and the community is firmly behind a local food system adjustment. Gail Patton, Executive Director of Unlimited Future, Inc. and “conference planning partner” summed it up best when she said, “Of course we are solidly behind our local food system and this conference; it is an economic development issue.”

Our goal for the Tri-State Farm and Food Conference was to teach farmers and community food businesses new ways of producing, adding value to, and marketing what we grow on our farms. Another goal was to promote the vision that both family farms and their communities must build together to take advantage of this unprecedented opportunity. We wanted to discuss and teach ways to tap into the opportunity within this \$1.2 billion food market and share examples where some are already doing it. And last, we wanted to promote the local food industry in the community now and seek out new alliances for production, processing and marketing.

Few disagree that farmers learn best from other farmers. Here, many farmers were able to network and share their experiences and advice. Like Larry Gardener, from Waverly, who produces and markets lamb and other meat products to restaurants across the state. Gardner encouraged farmers to commit to a market and never “let it down” by falling short on quantity and quality. This advice was directed to farmers just entering the market who naively underestimate the sheer volume required to satisfy a market and the challenges that must be overcome to offer a supply all year long. He warned about the danger of losing a market and never getting it back, because a restaurant was reluctant to give the farmer another chance. Other classes were taught by university and agency professionals like Dr. Barbara Liedl from WV State University. Liedl showed her class of 30, how to build a low-cost high tunnel. She and her volunteers built an 8-foot by 20-foot model on-site at the Douglass Institute, so that farmers could actually walk in it, get a feel for it, and see how simple and inexpensive they are to build. She challenged the group to build their own 20-foot by 48-foot low-cost high tunnel and surprised them when she told them the price tag would be approximately \$800!

The food is always a very important part of a conference, as it instills much confidence in a beginning farmer or one contemplating a change to eat delicious food grown by his or her neighbors and prepared in the local community. The menu was sourced in the local foodshed with a few items traveling

from other areas of the state. The Mountwest Community and Technical College-Culinary Arts Program under the direction of Chef Lawrence Perry prepared the lunch and the breaks. The food was delicious, and it was remarkable to see the young students of that program learn to use and appreciate our locally grown food. The lessons they learned with the conference will last them throughout their career and also help many small farmers along the way.

Gathering food for the conference allowed us to work with Andie Leffingwell of the Ebenezer Medical Outreach Program. She has been sourcing (finding, buying, and delivering food) a “fresh market” for her “at risk” families for years. She was invaluable to us as she knew where to find many products we needed for our menu. As we worked together to find food and, in some cases, people to prepare it, it became clear that an entire food system could be built around such a person with the leadership skills and



dedication she possesses. Having a person like Leffingwell who is capable of buying large quantities of food and who would raise farmers' confidence to grow, could be the very foundation for a local food system.

The bread prepared for and served at this conference marked the most significant milestone in my five-year long pursuit of integrating West Virginia grown wheat flour into our state's food system.

To offer an all local menu for the conference we had to find someone willing and able to bake with our local flour. Earlier conferences led us to artisan bakers who very patiently experimented with our white winter wheat flour to make a product we could use for local sourcing – all the time believing it would never compare to what they could do with their staple hard red winter wheat flour. Upon visiting Huntington, I contacted John Brunetti of Brunetti's Italian Bakery in Kenova for help. I was amazed and gratified when John took one look at the West Virginia flour, rolled some around in his hand, quizzed me about the content of protein and bran, and said, “bring me 100 pounds next

Thursday”. Baking day came and I got to help Josh Brunetti mix, proof, shape, proof again, and bake 100 pounds of our flour into pizza crusts, dinner rolls, hoagie buns and 100 loaves of West Virginia whole wheat bread, which was used at the Tri State conference and days later at the West Virginia University (WVU) Extension Annual Conference. The grain was grown in Preston County, milled at WVU Jackson's Mill, and baked in Kenova; that is the beginning of a bread pathway.

At this conference and previous others, we have treated our attendees to West Virginia grown popcorn. The local popcorn is so much better than the national brands – people always want more and ask to take some home. The Tri-State Farm and Food conference was special, as the farmer who grew this treat was also our lunch keynote speaker. West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA) Deputy Commissioner Bob Tabb shared his philosophy on value-added agriculture. Then he referenced the farmer's share of the U.S. food dollar. He explained that small farmers must learn to add value to their commodities so they can compete in this world of slim margins and huge acreages. To make his point he poured a handful of un-popped corn into a popper and compared it to the same volume popped. The analogy is unmistakable.

Our conferences are much more than a program full of production information; they are also about farmers and food-interested and food-educated people, each with slightly different agendas, networking and developing friendships. Those attending this first conference also learned that there is so much help out there for farmers. The conference attendees learned that the WVDA and the Extension Services from the 15 counties in three states is equally interested and professionally prepared to help develop a successful local food industry. The agents as a group were excited about the conference and offered help at every step of the process. In fact, extension agents from WVSU, Ohio State University, University of Kentucky, and of course, WVU, helped promote, present classes and locate food. The process of developing a vital, locally driven agricultural infrastructure will rely on these key people and resources. At this conference, it became obvious that our collective staffs are more than ready and willing to help.

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