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Neva Hassanein
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INTRODUCTION

MAXINE JACOBSON AND NEVA HASSANEIN

Food is the most basic of necessities. Yet, food is even more than that. Food links us to others socially as we share meals with friends and family. It provides the catalyst for interaction at community events, church socials, farmers' markets, grocery stores, and potluck dinners. It creates economic rewards through employment – for farmers and farm workers, grocery store clerks, restaurant servers, packers and processors, truckers – and it creates commerce through markets, grocery stores, restaurants, and street vendors. Food also has psychological meaning. It comforts and consoles. It links us to people and places through distinctly pleasant memories of Grandma's apple pie, Aunt Edith's country pot roast, Uncle Harold's belly burnin' chili, and Mom's strawberry freezer jam.

Despite the importance of food, in today's global food economy most of us know little, if anything, about the food that nourishes our bodies and our souls – where it comes from, the conditions under which it was grown, and how it got from there to here. Food changes hands an average of 33 times between the farm and the supermarket shelf,¹ and it travels an average of 1,300 miles to reach our plates.² Typically, many North Americans take food for granted, as we do the oxygen we breathe.

Over time, images of pastoral settings graced with tall stalks of corn planted in meticulously spaced rows and chickens pecking in the barnyard have faded from memory, replaced with images of clean, well-stocked supermarkets with tidy shelves of colorfully labeled, packaged foods and an abundance of vegetables and fruits. Some of what we eat comes from far away places we will likely never see – Hawaiian coconuts and pineapples, succulent Chilean grapes, green beans and corn on the cob from Mexico, and New Zealand lamb. While this picture captures the imaginations of those privileged enough to have access to the abundance of food produced in today's global food system, the picture is in sharp contrast for those with access to fewer resources.

Imagine instead waiting in line at a food pantry where choice is determined by the availability of surplus commodities donated by supermarkets; manufacturers and restaurants; hand-me-down food expired, damaged, overproduced or rejected by consumers in the open market; or the generosity of community members. Or consider standing in the check-out line at your local grocery store anticipating the reaction of others as you thumb through this month's miserly ration of food stamps to purchase food supplies you know will only last a few weeks.

¹ Guptill, Amy and Wilkins, Jennifer. (2002). Buying into the food system: Trends in food retailing in the US and implications for local foods. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 19(39), 51.

² Kloppenburg, Jack R., Jr., Hendrickson, John, and Stevenson, G.W. (1996). Coming in to the foodshed. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 13(3), 33-41.

How do farmers and ranchers fit into this picture? Like most eaters, most Montana farmers and ranchers are a small link in a complicated global agribusiness chain. The majority of our agricultural products are exported out of state and into world markets. For example, Montana wheat producers ship 81 percent of their crop out of the country. But farmers do not seem to be benefiting from this export economy, as many of them struggle to survive. Just as most eaters do not know the origins of the food they eat, farmers' options appear increasingly limited as they become ever more economically remote from consumers. Montana is not alone: nearly every state in the country buys 85-90% of its food from some other place. And we now depend on tremendous amounts of fossil fuel, and a small number of food distributors, retailers, and food services to move food from field to plate.

We all have a stake in the health and well-being of our food system – that is, the complex web that includes production, processing, distribution, and consumption. Understanding how our community food system works is the first step toward advocating for necessary change.

A SYSTEMIC VIEW OF COMMUNITY FOOD SECURITY

To understand food issues in a community, we need to think systemically. A “system” is a combination of parts that form a whole. For example, the human body is a system composed of interrelated parts whose overall functioning is compromised should one vital component fail. We know this only too well if an individual has a liver disorder or heart disease. Failure in one part of the system can have grave consequences for other parts of the system. This analogy applies equally well to food. “The food system includes all processes involved in keeping us fed: growing, harvesting, processing, packaging, transportation, marketing, consuming and disposing of food.”³

Because communities have become increasingly dependent on food grown, harvested, processed, and packaged far away, what predicament might we find ourselves in if, for example, transportation of food to our community is somehow curtailed? It would undoubtedly have devastating results and create a ripple effect throughout the entire food system. Produce would rot in the farmer's field, harvesters and truckers would be without work, local suppliers such as supermarkets and restaurants would see a decrease in sales, and families would have fewer choices at the supermarket counter. Given the dependency of one part of the food system on all others, it is important to understand how these pieces fit together and how they shape and influence one another.

By adding the word “community” to “food system” our definition becomes localized. The idea of “a community food system is promoted as an ideal – a food system in which food production, processing, distribution and consumption are integrated to enhance the environmental, economic, social and nutritional health of a particular geographic

³ Wilkins, Jennifer. (2000). *Community food systems: Linking food, nutrition, and agriculture*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Cooperative Extension.

location.”⁴ A key question is how “secure” a community food system is. A widely used definition of “community food security” is “a situation in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice.”⁵ While most hunger intervention models locate the issue with individuals and families, the idea of community food security claims a much broader stroke. The concept incorporates not only concerns about whether individuals and households have nutritionally adequate foods available, but also considers strategies for empowerment, sustainable food production, and the ability of a locality or region to meet at least some of its own food needs.

THE MISSOULA COUNTY COMMUNITY FOOD ASSESSMENT

Community food assessments are a vital first step in planning for community food security. In the spring of 2003, we initiated a community food assessment (CFA) to increase understanding of Missoula County’s food system. To date, about 15 communities in the United States have undertaken such an effort, with projects ranging from a focus on a single neighborhood to multiple counties in a region.

Community food assessments are a systematic, participatory approach to investigating a wide range of issues related to food consumption and agriculture in a particular location. Broadly speaking, the purpose of the community food assessment is “to inform change actions to make the community more food secure.”⁶ Instead of focusing strictly on problems in the existing food system, we also sought to identify assets, strengths, and community resources that contribute to the food system in positive ways. We wanted to recognize and honor the contributions already made in the community toward addressing food security, creating stronger linkages between producers and consumers, and promoting increased awareness about the possibilities for a sustainable food system.

To guide our efforts and incorporate community input, we brought together a diverse steering committee of 15 organizations, which represent various aspects of the food and farming system and could contribute their knowledge to the process. The committee includes farmers, a County extension agent, a public health official, a planner, anti-hunger advocates, conservationists, and others (see inside front cover). The steering committee identified specific questions to investigate, provided input into the research process, and developed recommendations based on the findings.

University of Montana undergraduate and graduate students, primarily from the Environmental Studies Program and the Department of Social Work, were key participants in this process.⁷ Under our supervision as UM faculty and the guidance of

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Hamm, M. W. and A. C. Bellows. (2003). Community food security: Background and future directions. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 35(1), 37-43.

⁶ Pothukuchi, K., Joseph, H., Burton, H. and Fisher, A.. (2002). *What’s cooking in your food system? A guide to community food assessment* (p. 11). Venice, CA: Community Food Security Coalition.

⁷ In addition, a student in the Society and Conservation Department and one from Communication Studies participated.

the steering committee, students carried out much of the data collection and analysis for the food assessment. The process has given them a unique opportunity to learn valuable skills while making a strong contribution to a community-based research project.

To begin our assessment, first we had to identify what we meant by community. We limited our project to Missoula County, although we are well aware of its ties to surrounding counties as it relates to our local food system. Because this food assessment is the first of its kind in Montana, we thought other counties in the state might initiate a similar process and learn from our successes and challenges. In addition, much existing statistical data from governmental sources pertains specifically to the county level.

To provide the background information necessary to understand Missoula County's food system, students produced two reports.⁸ The first, *Our Foodshed in Focus: Missoula County Food and Agriculture by the Numbers*, relied upon existing statistical data from various governmental and non-profit agencies to identify trends in the local food system, why these trends might be occurring, and why this information is important to County residents. Seven chapters, authored by students, address relevant food-related trends in the following areas: demographics, agricultural production; environment; food distribution; employment in farming and food-related businesses; consumption; and food security and access. At the same time, several students completed *Grow, Eat and Know: A Resource Guide to Food and Farming in Missoula County*. The guide provides contact information and a brief description of a variety of organizations, programs, and businesses involved in the local food and farming system. Both reports provided a wellspring of information from which to launch our subsequent investigation of agricultural viability and community residents' food-related concerns and assets.

OVERVIEW OF THE REPORT

Food Matters: Farm Viability and Food Consumption in Missoula County presents key findings from the food assessment process. Unlike *Our Foodshed in Focus*, this report is based on original data collected during the spring of 2004. The research was designed in an attempt to answer the following questions about Missoula County's food system that were identified by the steering committee:

1. What is needed for viable and sustainable, commercial food production in Missoula County? What are the existing assets and barriers to creating a more viable and sustainable production system?
2. What concerns do Missoula County residents of various income levels have about food (including quality, access, transportation to food outlets, cost, eating behaviors and choices), and what do they perceive as the County's food-related assets?

⁸ These reports are available at: www.umt.edu/cfa or by contacting Neva Hassanein at the University of Montana.

Food Matters is organized into three major parts:

Part I: Exploring the Viability of Farming and Ranching. The first part presents research aimed at answering question one above. The first chapter describes some recent trends in the County with respect to our agricultural resources and their management. Then, in Chapter Two, we present the results from a telephone survey with farmers and ranchers, covering topics ranging from factors threatening and contributing to farm/ranch viability, to perspectives on growth and development, to opportunities for expanding local marketing. Chapter Three takes a closer look at some of the same issues through use of in-depth, qualitative interviews with 13 farmers and ranchers. Lastly, Chapter Four presents results from a focus group with market gardeners who are Hmong and who make up a sizeable portion of the vendors who sell at the Missoula Farmers' Market.

Part II: Food Consumption: Issues and Assets. The second part of the report presents research aimed at answering question two above. Chapter Five provides context for the consumption study by looking at related trends drawn from the literature and *Our Foodshed in Focus*. Chapter Six presents the methodology and results of an extensive survey used to investigate consumers' concerns about food-related issues and what consumers perceive to be the food-related assets in the County. Chapter Seven analyzes the findings of two focus groups with low-income residents of the City of Missoula. Key areas of concern are discussed, as well as food-related assets and resources in the County.

Part III: Food for Thought and Action. The food assessment process reveals that there our local food system has many things going for it, but there are also a number of challenges that deserve public attention. The report calls attention to the value of an integrated and comprehensive approach to food system issues. The final part of the report presents recommendations based on a series of conversations among steering committee members and their University of Montana partners and on a review of the research findings from the entire CFA process.

This report presents the first comprehensive analysis of food system issues in Missoula County. Based on that analysis, it also offers recommendations that are designed to generate a community dialogue about the future of our food and farming system. In describing our methodologies, we have also tried to identify the assessment's limitations; thus, the report should be utilized with these limitations in mind.



Missoula in 1909, K. Ross Toole Archives, University of Montana

Diverse farms, such as the one pictured above, and an associated processing industry met the needs of Missoula's population in the early 20th century. Below, the same view today illustrates how much local food production has been displaced by development. Now, about 85-90% of our food comes from someplace else. We depend on a tremendous amount of fossil fuel, extensive transportation networks, and a small number of food distributors, retailers, and food services to move food from field to plate. But how secure is our current food system?



Missoula in 2003, photo courtesy of Yogesh Simpson