

Local food coalition celebrates two-year anniversary

By KEILA SZPALLER of the Missoulian, August 1, 2007

Bonnie Buckingham celebrated her birthday this year by eating locally grown asparagus and raspberries prepared in delectable dishes. Buckingham, with the Community Food and Agriculture Coalition, ate that meal at The Catalyst, where the chef and owner used the berries and vegetables during a special Friday dinner. "She (Chef Martha Buser) did an asparagus-phylllo dough thing. That was really good," said Buckingham.

There's more that's really good, too. Several other Missoula restaurants are creating special menus with a focus on local food the first Friday of every month. It's all part of the coalition's plan to increase awareness about the value of food grown nearby, Buckingham said. The group of people from all aspects of the food system - from farmer to consumer - celebrates its two-year anniversary this year, and does so with strong accomplishments and an appetite to do more, Buckingham said.

First Friday is one success, as is a program allowing people to shop at Missoula's outdoor farmers markets using the equivalent of food stamps. The coalition also is working to ensure that planners consider the agricultural use of land when they review subdivision proposals. "The big challenge is to not just talk to the people that are already interested in local food - because there is a lot of interest in local food in Missoula. But the challenge is to make it commonplace for everybody, for all aspects of Missoula," Buckingham said.

Some 21 people belong to the group, and they meet monthly to share information and plan for the future. One of the newest undertakings is a land-link project, which Paul Hubbard directs. "It is pretty cool, because it's one of the most concrete ways we can actually preserve farmland," Buckingham said. "The objective is to connect agricultural generations," said Hubbard, a consultant to the coalition. Such programs are active in roughly 20 states across the country, and the goal is to keep agricultural land active from one generation to the next. "There's a lot of challenges with that," said Hubbard, who applied for grant money to fund the land-link project and will hear the results in September. Development dollars put pressure on land, and while some farmers and ranchers are retiring, they want to see their land continue to be used for food. "There's a lot of farmers and ranchers who have a deep-seated value and connection to the land. And we're lucky that they have that because if they didn't, we'd be seeing houses everywhere," Hubbard said. "... The dollar is a powerful force, but it doesn't rule everything."

The program connects these farmers and ranchers with young people who want to farm and ranch, but can't get their hands on land. "People just assume nobody wants to farm and ranch anymore. The truth is, lots of people want to farm and ranch. They just can't access the land," Hubbard said. And he said consumers are increasingly demanding local food. As the number of local farmers increases, the amount of food eaten locally also rises, Buckingham said. "We care about our place. We care about our landscape.

One way to express that care is to eat local food," Hubbard said. Katie Kurz, who works at Scotty's Table, sees that demand at the Hip Strip restaurant. Sometimes, customers ask for local food, but the restaurant also lets guests know its priorities. On its menus, Scotty's prints a statement in favor of local food and sustainable living. Local food isn't a priority just once a month, either. Rather, the restaurant constantly works to reduce its carbon footprint made by bringing food in from other places. "For us, I guess, it's important to remain as local as we possibly can throughout the year," Kurz said. That means buying a lot of cherries now and pitting and freezing them for later. It also means workers sometimes make a run down to the farmers markets, or even bring in goods from their own gardens.

Demand for food grown here is expanding, and Buckingham said outreach and education will remain a priority for the coalition as it moves forward. "We really try to ... make sure that everybody's voice is heard, and make sure we're reaching people who might not think that much about their food," Buckingham said.

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On the menu / The Community Food and Agriculture Coalition meets the fourth Thursday of the month from 6 to 8 p.m. at the Missoula Food Bank, 219 S. Third St. W. For more information, call 880-0543 or go to www.umt.edu/cfa .