



Each of us holds significant power when wielding a fork at the dinner table. With every bite taken, we indirectly vote on numerous issues which vary in scope and distribute power accordingly. These issues include how food is raised with regards to fossil fuel inputs, in terms of miles traveled from farm to fork, and also the use of fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides. This shows our opportunity as individuals to choose to mitigate our impact, especially as the Union of Concerned Scientists (2015), the United States Environmental Protection Agency (2015), among many other leading groups link the primary cause of global warming to the burning of fossil fuels. The one small action of eating dinner does, in fact, have far-reaching implications throughout our world. Or we can take our scope of power distribution down to our local communities where numerous studies have shown that sourcing locally-grown products creates jobs and keeps money in the local community, thereby increasing a community's resilience and security (Swenson, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Schnell, 2013). Consuming local foods is also one way to increase our health and well being as fresh foods are generally higher in vitamins and minerals (Frith, 2007).

THE CREATION AND VISION

To help others recognize their purchasing power and to successfully link purchasing decisions to Utah's farmers, land, and people, in 2012 the Utah Farm-Chef-Fork program was launched. This program is a collaboration between Utah State University Extension, the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food, and Slow Food Utah. Utah Farm-Chef-Fork combines university research with local expertise to provide workshops, farm tours, farm dinners, and additional opportunities to link farmers and chefs across the state. As research has shown, farmers that directly market their local products to local restaurants will see an increase of income with a resulting decrease in farmland losses (Govindasamy et al., 1996; Adam et al., 1999). Our team has offered eight workshops to-date, ranging from Good Agricultural Practices to Food Hub Explorations. We have also created six meet-and-greet opportunities between farmers and chefs statewide and two farm tours for chefs and the general public.

TASTING IS BELIEVING

In addition to direct marketing workshops, farm-chef meet-and-greets, and farm tours, our team is working to connect Utah farmers with local chefs on a more in-depth level, by pairing the two to collaborate to prepare and host farm dinners. In the autumn of 2015, we coordinated our first farm dinner event at Red Acre Farm in Cedar City, Utah. Two local chefs participated, Michel Attali of The French Spot, and Andrew Nehrenz, Culinary Arts Instructor at Southwest Applied Technology College.

The evening was beautiful with ideal temperatures, twinkle lights, and a full moon to grace the table of 32 people. The food, sourced from various local farms, was prepared in gourmet fashion with exquisite tastes and a beautiful visual appeal. Direct collaboration between the chefs and the farm “make for a more well-rounded event and creativity,” according to Chef Nehrenz. Afterward, a survey was emailed to the ticket purchasers inquiring about their experience as well as their potential increased likelihood of purchasing subsequent food with a local eye. The results confirm that attendees are much more likely to have increased relationships with local foods and farmers as all respondents (n = 18) were either ‘likely’ or ‘very likely’ to request local foods in subsequent dining experiences. And with the exception of one respondent who indicated ‘no change,’ the respondents had a ‘stronger’ or ‘much stronger’ connection with local foods and local farmers.

The respondents seemed very happy with the dinner experience. One survey respondent noted, “What a wonderful event, hope to attend another one.” Another stated, “Most fun and unusual experience we have had in years! Loved meeting the farmers and getting the tour of the farm. Loved seeing the animals! Loved that we got to interact with some animals. Food was great. We’ve not been exposed to farming, farmers, etc. only to backyard gardening and landscaping.” Yet another said, “I hope that more of these start popping up in the Southern Utah area. I also am interested in being a producer.” Lastly, one diner succinctly summed up the evening in their statement, “The whole experience was

perfect.” Farm-chef mingles, farm tours, and farm dinner events have so far produced measurable outcomes such as chefs increasing their use of locally-sourced products and local farms increasing sales of their products to these chefs. Chef Nehrenz noted that as soon as products were available next season he “will be sourcing more from these local producers” as his “knowledge of sources has increased.”

PROMOTING THE POWER

Given the effectiveness of this first Utah Farm-Chef-Fork farm dinner, more dinners are to follow in the future in different communities in Utah. Currently, a lunch is being planned that will occur in Moab in June of 2016, while others are in the works along the Wasatch Front. Our goal is to further communication and collaboration between local farms and chefs and to see an increased sourcing of local foods by the attendees of these events.

Knowledge equals power and power exacted by conscious choices can and will make a difference for local farmland retention through increased farm income and will result in stronger and more resilient local communities. Increase your knowledge and have fun by getting to know your local farmers and chefs. The impact is high in supporting local chefs and restaurants that incorporate local foods into their menus, or by asking whether restaurants source any of their ingredients locally. Never forget the power you wield with your fork! ●



PICTURED: Dinner table - Utah Farm-Chef-Fork/S. Duncan