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A Philadelphia Effort to Spread 'Local Food' Raises Its Ambitions

By Debra E. Blum

Danilo Burgos, owner of a grocery and takeout store in West Philadelphia, wants to offer his customers the big juicy cucumbers and green peppers that grow on farms all over the region.

But Mr. Burgos, who says his big sellers are hoagies, chips, and soda, doesn't know any farmers, let alone a way to get their produce conveniently and affordably to the city corner where he does business.

For help, Mr. Burgos, who is president of the Dominican Grocers Association, a group of nearly 400 bodega owners in the city, has turned to White Dog Community Enterprises, a nonprofit group dedicated to bringing locally grown food into the Philadelphia marketplace. For starters, White Dog officials plan to take Mr. Burgos and some of his colleagues to visit local farms.

"If we want to sell fresh vegetables, fruits, and chickens — and we do, because it makes good business sense — we have to start with the first step, connecting with the agricultural community," Mr. Burgos says.

Early Supporter

White Dog is one of a growing number of nonprofit groups around the country dedicated to making those kinds of connections among farmers, sellers, and consumers. Part of the burgeoning local-food movement, White Dog wants to create a viable alternative in Philadelphia to what local-food advocates describe as the mass-produced, prepackaged, seasonless global marketplace for food that dominates American agriculture and dictates the American diet.

Mr. Burgos's store, like most markets large and small, is stocked with inventory from big-business distributors that deliver meats, produce, and processed foods shipped from far away. According to some estimates, most ingredients in a typical American meal have traveled at least 1,500 miles from farm to plate.

Shortening the distance food travels, the local-food argument goes, bolsters local economies by keeping more dollars close to home, safeguards the environment by not wasting energy on packaging and transportation, and protects the livelihood of family farmers, thus also helping to preserve the open space the farms occupy.

What's more, food that travels fewer miles, local-food advocates say, is more likely to be fresher, tastier, less processed, and more healthful than its long-distance counterpart.

Only five years old, White Dog is one of the oldest of the organizations focused on local food, and its short history in some ways mimics the maturation of the movement.

The group is an offshoot of a Philadelphia restaurant, the White Dog Cafe, known for its fresh, seasonal menu and social activism. Ever since Judy Wicks opened the coffee shop in 1983 that was soon to grow into the full-fledged restaurant, she has served local fruits and vegetables when available — a practice that has helped to popularize her business.

Over time, Ms. Wicks began to see the relationships between her interest in local food and other issues she spent time and money on, personally and through activities organized by the restaurant, such as community development and environmental stewardship.

"I was thinking about global warming, the destruction of rural communities, the viability of small family farms, health in our urban neighborhoods, and I realized that local food should not just be my market niche, that I've got to get my competitors to do the same thing," Ms. Wicks says. "We all have to look at the big picture together."

Textiles and Energy

In 1999, she started a project, called Fair Food, intended to foster connections between family farmers and Philadelphia restaurants, chefs, and caterers.

Two years later, she started the Sustainable Business Network, an association of local businesses committed to a notion of corporate responsibility, called the triple bottom line, that values not only profits, but also people and the planet.

In 2002, Ms. Wicks formed the White Dog Cafe Foundation to act as an umbrella organization for the two projects. Last year, the business network spun off on its own, and recently the foundation changed its name to White Dog Community Enterprises.

With four full-time employees and four part-time staff members, White Dog will spend about \$650,000 this year, far more than its first year's budget, which amounted mainly to one \$30,000 foundation grant it received to run its Fair Food program.

The bulk of White Dog's money comes from government and foundation grants, and the White Dog Cafe provides up to \$60,000 a year from its profits. The group also raises about \$40,000 each year from individuals, mostly people who are involved in the community activities organized by the restaurant.

White Dog officials are beginning to investigate a possible new area of interest for the organization: textiles.

Andrew Altman, White Dog's first executive director, hired last May, says the group is considering promoting locally produced clothing and other textiles in efforts that might mirror its involvement in the local marketplace for food. Other areas to tackle in the future, he says: shelter, transportation, and energy.

For now, though, the focus of White Dog Community Enterprises is still food, and its Fair Food program has expanded quickly to include much more than the restaurant's first project.

The organization runs a chapter of Buy Fresh, Buy Local, a national campaign to encourage consumers to buy local food through events, educational materials, and local-food guides.

It also runs a concession, the Fair Food Farmstand, at Reading Terminal Market, a food bazaar housed in an old train station in the city. The stand started a few years ago selling a handful of items on a folding table for a few hours each week.

To keep up with demand, however, the stand took over a permanent space in the market, which includes a large refrigerator and freezer, and it is now open all day, six days a week.

All the food is labeled with the name and the location of the farm where it was produced and with information about the product.

Nitrate-free bacon from Country Time Farm, in Hamburg, Pa., may sit in a cold case alongside chickens "humanely raised" and "pastured" in Lilitz, Pa. "Chemical free" all-blue potatoes from Green Meadow Farm, in Gap, Pa., may be piled high in a basket next to "certified organic" red cabbage from the Tuscarora Organic Co-op, in Maddensville, Pa.

Ian Brendle, who works with his father, the owner of Green Meadow Farm, delivers produce each week to the stand, to the White Dog Cafe, and to other restaurants around the city.

He says he and other farmers in the region have benefited greatly from White Dog's work. Reading Terminal's stand, for example, acts not just as a vendor, but also as a place where people can learn about local food. And as the movement spreads, Mr. Brendle says, the chance increases that he and his fellow farmers will stay in business.

"There are a lot of developers coming out to our area because property values are going up," Mr. Brendle says. "But as more people want to eat better food, tastier food, food they know where it came from, that's better for our business, and we can stay on the land as farmers."

Beyond Farmers' Markets

Ann Karlen, director of the Fair Food program, is proud of the thriving farm stand and the awareness the Buy Fresh, Buy Local campaign has raised among consumers throughout the city. But, she says, White Dog has recently stepped up

its efforts to push the availability and consumption of local food beyond individual shoppers.

"Having local food available as a retail option at farmers' markets is only part of the equation," Ms. Karlen says. "On a larger scale, to have fully sustainable systems, we need local food to get into stores, restaurants, schools, colleges, hospitals — in all the places people buy food."

Last year, White Dog started its Farm-to-Institution program to bring together food-service companies and the institutions they serve to figure out a way to put more local food onto their menus. And the group began working with a few local farmers' markets, a produce company, and a Philadelphia property owner on the Common Market project, a plan to build and run a distribution center for local food.

"We want to generate our own answers to the logistical problems of trucking, transportation, consolidation of orders — all the infrastructure that is in place for conventional food, but shuts out the local-food system," Ms. Karlen says.

White Dog is also moving into other collaborative efforts that include the promotion of local food as a way to solve problems on a bigger scale. Together with a group of partners — including the city's health department and the Food Trust, a local charity working to improve access to low-cost and nutritious food in inner-city neighborhoods — White Dog created the Philadelphia Urban Food and Fitness Alliance.

The alliance, which is set to receive a two-year, \$500,000 planning grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, in Battle Creek, Mich., intends to promote healthy eating and exercise as a way to lower the rate of obesity among low-income families in the city.

Mr. Altman, White Dog's executive director, says the organization is growing quickly but won't lose sight of its smaller programs, like its effort to help the Dominican Grocers Association.

After the farm visits, he says the next step will probably be to help the store owners form a cooperative so they can together order chicken directly from local

poultry farms. "They are interested in getting fresh chickens in their stores," Mr. Altman says, noting that many of the stores serve neighborhoods with recent immigrant populations. "And we know people with chickens."

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