



Downtown Economics

Ideas for Increasing Vitality in Community Business Districts

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Creating a Local Food and Culinary Tourism Niche in Your Downtown

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Over the last decade, communities have experienced tremendous changes in the way food is produced, distributed and eaten. In light of these changes, many communities are re-connecting with their agricultural roots and culinary traditions as a way to revitalize downtowns, promote economic development, and build a stronger more resilient local food system. Increasing consumer and tourist interest in local, sustainably raised as well as “authentic,” place-based food and cultural experiences may represent a significant new market niche for downtowns. This issue of Downtown Economics provides an overview of best practices for communities to address food systems issues and capture dollars created by new trends in local foods and “culinary tourism.”

Your Culinary Niche: Beyond Restaurants & Markets

Food promotion and access issues are familiar to downtowns. In fact most communities probably have some experience with food system development; building an event around a regional food, developing a farmers market, or supporting a new downtown grocery store. Building a strategy around local foods however provides an opportunity to take a broader look at food related issues and assets in the community and region. This doesn't necessarily mean wooing expensive five star restaurants or fancy vineyards. Tourism research from [Your Town: A Destination The 25 Immutable Rules of Tourism Development](#) as well as UW Extension's [Tourism and Retail Development: Attracting Tourists to Local Businesses](#) indicates that communities and businesses should focus on assets that build on their uniqueness and sense of place as well as those that offer authentic experiences to make the community or business a true destination.

Your best starting point is the foods or food resources that make your community or region unique. According to the International Culinary Tourism Association culinary tourism is the “pursuit of unique and memorable eating and drinking experiences.” These experiences typically take the form of diverse restaurants that rely on locally grown products, but may also include farm stands, community suppers, sugar houses, cooking demonstrations, tours, festivals, even specialty gardens.

Developing a food asset map or conducting a [community food assessment](#)¹ will allow you to define your area's unique food related strengths, locate potential partners, and identify opportunities for other forms of economic development such as food entrepreneurship or distribution and processing infrastructure. The goals of your program may be to increase sales in the downtown, develop a new tourist base, encourage entrepreneurship, or address food access issues.

Consumer Trends and Culinary Travel

Recent tourism trends in the restaurant and retail food sales industries point to the potential for using local foods and culinary tourism as part of a community economic development strategy. A report released by the National Restaurant Association revealed that the [hottest menu trends of 2011](#) include “locally sourced meats and seafood, locally grown produce, sustainability as a culinary theme, nutritious kids' dishes, hyper-local items, children's nutrition, sustainable seafood, gluten-free/food allergy-conscious items, and back-to-basics cuisine and farm-branded ingredients.” [The 2007 Survey of US Culinary Travelers](#) found that 17% of all American leisure travelers (27.3 million people) considered themselves “serious culinary travelers” who “intentionally sought out wine & food experiences.” The majority of these travelers (42%) were between the ages of 35 and 50 and the tended to be better educated and more highly paid than non culinary travelers².

Food Education Programs

Education is often the first step in creating awareness about locally produced foods and culinary assets. Organizations that sponsor cooking education programs, farm-to-school programs, or master gardeners may be willing partners in your local foods or culinary tourism





effort. These educational programs can also serve as venues for connecting local culinary tourists to local food producers. Farmer in the classroom programs, for instance, not only educate young people about eating local seasonal foods but also connect producers with new potential customers in the region. Creating a [seasonality chart](#) indicating what foods are available and in season in your region may be a valuable first step in educating retailers and consumers.³

Connecting Food Producers, Retailers, & Consumers

While some communities have plentiful food resources close by, others may have to look well beyond the downtown to farmers located in nearby rural areas.

To strengthen connections between food producers and restaurants many downtowns have established programs in the “buy local” tradition. These programs typically including branding and marketing, but may also include chef education about food safety or how to best use seasonal foods, establishing product databases, or providing marketing training for producers. Successful examples include the Vermont Fresh Network and regional [Buy Fresh Buy Local](#) Campaigns. Visit UW-Extension’s [Buy Local](#) website for more information about buy local campaigns.

Farmer to consumer programs, also known as “direct marketing,” can be facilitated through online [farm maps or atlases](#) or [farmers markets](#) that encourage consumers to build face to face relationships with the people who produce food and products. For food conscious consumers, getting to know a producer or chef adds value to a product because the consumer learns how and where the food is produced. Farmers markets have been effective strategies for communities to generate consumer traffic downtown and encourage additional sales through side promotions such as “farmer market breakfast specials” that feature a fresh seasonal item.

Entrepreneurship, Training and Technical Assistance

Conducting a food asset map or community food assessment may reveal the need for training to build the skills and profitability of local food producers, chefs, or entrepreneurs who process foods into value added

products. Business networking organizations like [inventors and entrepreneurs clubs](#) or small farmer networks have been effective in encouraging both business skills training and creating a peer network where businesses can share resources and best practices.

Across the country communities are also establishing downtown “food business incubators” that provide affordable office, retail, or food processing space, and may additionally provide access to shared equipment, business support with logistics like labeling and distribution, recipe development, ingredient sourcing, or even labor. Business incubators can take many forms, supporting a variety of businesses including retail, restaurant, service businesses and food processing kitchens. The [Wisconsin Agricultural Innovation Center](#) provides resources about food entrepreneurship and processing⁴.

Assessing the Effectiveness of Your Efforts

To assess the effectiveness of a local foods program you’ll probably want to collect more information from consumers (including local buyers or tourists), restaurants, retailers, or entrepreneurs. While some culinary tourism research is being conducted at national level, the data you collect in your community will help you make the best decisions. This may take the form of surveys of tourists at food related festivals and events, restaurants and retailer regarding their current or future interest in using locally produced foods, farmers market attendees, or food entrepreneurs. UW-Extension’s [Program Evaluation](#) provides an overview of focus groups, survey research, case studies, and other techniques to gather data.

Conclusion

A downtown program focused on your culinary or local food niche may not solve larger problems related to food security, public health, and economic change, but it can serve as an effective way to generate income downtown, motivate the community, grow new regional partnerships, and build a stronger local food system. For more information and inspiring stories about local food systems efforts around the country visit the [Community Food Security Coalition](#).

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¹ Pothukuchi, Joseph, Burton, Fisher. “What’s Cooking in Your Food System?” 2002. Accessed at http://www.foodsecurity.org/pub/whats_cooking.pdf

² Travel Industry Association, Gourmet Magazine, International Culinary Tourism Association. 2007. Accessed at www.ustravel.org

³ <http://www.eatwellguide.org/i.php?id=Seasonalfoodguides>

⁴ <http://fyi.uwex.edu/aic/>

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