

## **SABBATICAL REPORT**

### **Spring Term 2011**

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#### **Sabbatical Intent and Plan (paraphrased):**

In 2004, the New England Culinary Institute (NECI) embarked on a project initiated to establish connections with, and to provide support to, local agriculture producers; to maximize the quality of goods utilized by NECI; to become a leader in the 'Farm to Table' concept in Vermont; and, finally, to involve students in this exchange in as many ways as possible, through conscious curriculum design and planning. This effort was to occur as a member of the established Vermont Fresh Network (VFN).

Having worked at NECI in the first half of 2004, I witnessed this new curriculum direction begin to unfold.

My intent is to return to NECI during this Sabbatical to review the processes that the Institute underwent to get where they are today – as leaders in the sustainable, farm-to-table field. Working with administrators and instructors, I plan to delve into the steps and hurdles that NECI underwent; the successes and pitfalls that the organization experienced.

#### **Purpose:**

To better understand the steps and processes required, and to eliminate or minimize the trial and error steps, in creating and integrating a sustainable agriculture component into Lane Community College's Culinary and Hospitality Management program.

## **Preamble**

The project involved addressing three key areas:

- 1) the practices incorporated by the institution, NECI (a for-profit school)
- 2) the current status and philosophy of the Vermont Fresh Network (VFN)
- 3) the perspective of some local farmers regarding the efficacy of the VFN, and the farmers business dealings with food service operations , such as NECI, as well as local area restaurants, care facilities and hospitals

I approached the sabbatical time in the order listed above.

Since the majority of my sabbatical project involved personal interactions and interviews with the various stakeholders, this report will offer a synopsis, a glimpse, into the depth of information that was discussed.

## **Part 1**

I met with three key stakeholders at NECI – the Campus Executive Chef, who is in charge of the operational and fiscal aspects of the Institute (and also provides direction to the curriculum Directors); the Sustainability Co-ordinator, who develops the sustainable initiatives for the Institute and assists in designing curriculum for the BA program; and an AOS program instructor who develops curriculum and teaches in the AOS program.

The Campus Executive Chef, Tom Bivins, is also the current president of the Vermont Fresh Network. We first discussed the Institutional aspects of using local food connections and then discussed the VFN organization.

The Campus infuses sustainability concepts throughout its operations. The key aspects are to involve all employees and students into a sustainable work-style. Defining this style for NECI has been many years of struggle, the greatest challenges being the changes required in people's perceptions and habits. Chef Tom brings a simplified definition of "sustainable" to all areas on Campus – "Don't waste anything." In his opinion, this is the starting point for sustainable practices. Maximizing product usage, purchasing and installing only energy efficient equipment and using the equipment correctly, proactive preventative maintenance, buying "green" products, and utilizing local food growers.

This perspective has, and still is, being adopted at NECI in gradual steps. Like any business, a focused plan was developed to affect theses changes over a defined period of time. Chef Tom estimates that the equipment change over will be completed within the next 10 years. It is clear these changes cannot happen quickly and have the business remain viable.

Employee education and on-going training has played a major role in the growth of these habit-changes.

AOS program instructor, Chef John Barton, describe to me the NECI model for teaching sustainability practices to AOS students:

- first year students learn about the practices through hands-on learning; the day to day operations of the kitchen labs which are infused with sustainable practices, such as composting, use of local foods and kitchen preparation principles.
- Second year students discuss the ideas and concepts of the sustainable movement in their kitchen classrooms, and participate in community projects, such as school gardens, senior centers, and farm works projects

One of Chef John's classes is the "The Kitchen Garden" which instructs students how feasible it is for all kitchens to have simple gardens. This is followed with "extending the Season" or how to preserve the foods you grow.

In these classes, emphasis is placed on project concepts and the planning process of the project. The execution of the project is then monitored and assessed according to the student's submitted plan.

Chef John begins his class with a very important question – what is local? Then follows – when is it available? A key element that Chef John returned to was the 'small steps' idea – the sustainability effort has to take place in small steps, over time, with lots of positive reinforcement and education.

Sustainability Co-ordinator, Chef Lyndon Virkler, leads the BA program classes that focus on sustainability, as well as co-ordinating the sustainable efforts across the entire Campus, in partnership with department managers. My conversations with Chef Lyndon focused on the instructional aspect of his work.

There are two main classes with a sustainability focus at NECI (BA Level) :

- 1) Economics of a Sustainable Community
- 2) Critical Food Systems

The first class is a traditional classroom setting whose purpose is to have students focus on the economic viability of the local, sustainable movement. The class begins by re-establishing or defining "What is sustainability?". Explorations then begin with the traditional food growing and distribution systems before moving into the local scenes. The economics of scale are examined, as well as food distribution models, comparing the pro's and con's of 'traditional' vs. 'sustainable'.

Students participate in many community outreach activities which serve as the vehicle to put the students in touch with the farmers, distributors and end users of the food products, in order to gain the first-hand experience of these key issues. One event, considered important by all the sustainable movement supporters, is "Community Connections", where the Culinary students assist in teaching at-risk community members how to utilize and cook the myriad of local food products available to them, typically through donations. Nutritional advice is also woven into these events. Many other services and information sessions are available to the attendees, as well.

Students work with the instructor to develop their own assessment rubrics, structured around key concepts themes, and the instructor takes on the role of advisor to assist the students according to their rubric details. The second class has on-line aspects to it, and can be presented as a straight on-line class. The main purpose of this class is to have the student's examine the current food systems we rely on and analyze their effectiveness, sustainability and usefulness. Following some classroom presentations and discussions, students formulate a project for themselves that must be approved by the instructor. Again, the instructor works with the student to create an individual assessment rubric for the project. This class is a building block piece of a program-long project where students must create a sustainable menu, for a food service outlet of their choice, and explain why they consider their menu as 'sustainable'. I was amazed to discover the plethora of on-line resources on this topic, which I believe is best summed up by the title of a Times magazine article – "The High Price of Cheap Food", which, in part, investigates the hidden costs of our food due to governmental and other subsidies. Using these resources, students are encouraged to explore all aspects of food production.

## **Part 2**

VFN – The Network was established in the mid-1980's in an effort to bring together farmers and food service businesses in order to promote Vermont's agriculture industry. Originally known as the "Chef's Collaborative", this title now represents the educational arm of the VFN. Today, the VFN has a fee-based membership (\$50/year) of 275 members. It was pointed out that Vermont has approximately 5,000 food service businesses. Members agree to strive for a target of 34% of their buying dollars remaining in-State through local purchases, either directly or through third-party value added suppliers. They also commit to establishing and maintaining at least 3 relationships with local farms.

The VFN membership gives it's members the VFN branding. The VFN "brand" is recognized by consumers who value good, locally sourced foods. Point-of-sale support, advertising and an on-line presence are provided by the VFN to Vermont food service businesses. The agricultural community benefits by having their products featured on menus and other advertising. This can build direct-to-consumer sales, which greatly benefits local farms.

Currently, the VFN is working with State and local governments to establish affordable land parcels dedicated to farm production, in an effort to boost Vermont's agricultural base, through an Agricultural Land Trust foundation.

The VFN logo can be seen throughout Vermont. Members in good standing earn the right to display the logo in their business windows, on menus, and in all

forms of media advertising. The Chef's Collaborative has strong presence in local communities through schools, senior homes, farmer markets and festivals, all to educate consumers and to promote local Vermont food products and promoting alternative methods of food distribution.

### **Part 3**

Four farm operators were interviewed and a tour of their farms was conducted. Of these four, three were VFN members. Two were vegetable and small animal farms, and one was a large dairy farm producing various cheeses and beef retail cuts. One farm has been a VFN member since the inception of the VFN, and was an original board member. The other farms have been members of the VFN for two and seven years. The non-member farm was a vegetable and small animal farm.

The VFN Farmer members had very similar stories to share regarding the VFN.

1. The VFN conveys greater meaning than is actually required of members.
2. It is felt that food service businesses should be required to utilize a fixed percentage of purchasing dollar through VFN members in order to be members.
3. VFN is great for generating initial contacts, but results in very few follow-up orders or continued contact from food service businesses.
4. A large percentage of businesses using local products do not advertise their local food sources on their menus, even though the VFN customer survey's indicates that this information is "very important" to consumers.
5. Volume purchasing is important to farmers.
6. VFN should look at a second tier of membership for organic producers.
7. Membership classifications have been developed and proposed to the VFN by a graduate students team from University of Vermont's Sustainability program, but not implemented as yet.
8. Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and Farmer's markets produce the greatest sales volume and sales dollars. Sales to food service businesses represents approximately 15% of farm sales, at a wholesale pricing of 15 – 25% of retail prices.
9. Delivery/distribution is a serious challenge to farmers.

The general sense from the farmers was that the VFN logo is a great customer attraction, especially to the public. Through the VFN web site and annual meeting, it is a great way to form connections with food service businesses and for advertising the farm and it's products. All farmers agreed that the intent of the VFN is sound but the sales-purchasing process has to become time and cost effective for all parties.

Other interesting information:

- all farms reported that within their area, between 3 -5 restaurants have closed in the last year
- at least one senior care facility has established important contracts with the farms over the last year (except the dairy farm, including the non-member)

- The Fletcher-Allen hospital system has committed to purchasing at least 25% of its products from local area farms, and has achieved that benchmark in one of its properties
- Value-added products are becoming more important to consumers than raw products.

The non-member of the VFN was very clear in their support of the VFN principle, but expressed dissatisfaction in the execution of the program. From their perspective, the VFN has failed to address the distribution aspect of buying local products and has serious concerns regarding what 'membership' means.

This farm, located in Central Vermont, generates 85% of its business revenues from year-round Farmer's Markets, CSA sales, farm visitations (an increasing sales segment), 15% of sales from local schools, care facilities and local businesses. Again, value-added products are gaining popularity with their customer base.

## **Summary**

As in Vermont, Oregon has embraced the local food connections movement. It is clear, to me, that commitment, fair-value pricing, and viable distribution, are the key to the ongoing success of this concept.

By studying and analyzing how Vermont's systems function, we can assist the development of a stronger, more effective program in Oregon. As a Culinary program, I see our role as one of education; not only to our students, but also to food industry members. Establishing dialogue with the various stakeholders (including wholesale distributors), and creating well thought out models to address key areas of concern, will ensure that this local foods concept does not falter. In my mind, the relegation of farmers solely to the market stands of communities, will leave the food service industry relying continually on factory farms for their goods.