

What Do We Know and What Do We Need to Know about the Community Impacts of Local (& Regional?) Foods?

Clare Hinrichs

Associate Professor of Rural Sociology
Dept. of Agricultural Economics & Rural Sociology
The Pennsylvania State University

19 May 2009



Benefits ascribed to local & regional food markets

- Higher & more stable farm incomes
- More jobs & wealth retained in local communities
- Improved access to fresh produce

Benefits (cont'd.)

- Decreased vulnerability to widespread contamination & disruption
- Greater accountability & choice
- Diversification & sustainable production
- Fewer food miles, less global warming

Source: Farm and Food Project, 2007

PICKING TODAY

BLUEBERRIES

~~BEANS~~
LETTUCE (4 KINDS)

GARLIC BULBS,
SCAPES & SCALLIONS

~~SPINACH~~

KALE (2 KINDS)

POTATOES

RADICCHIO (2 KINDS)

ONIONS (RED + WHITE)

SWISS CHARD, RHUBARB

ZUCCHINI

CABBAGE

CILANTRO, BASIL

PARSLEY (2 KINDS)

THYME

OREGANO

MINT

SAGE

DILL

CHIVES

HOT PEPPERS

ARUGULA

RUTABAGA



Civic agriculture as...

“the emergence and growth of community based agriculture and food production activities that not only meet consumer demands for fresh, safe and locally produced food, but create jobs, encourage entrepreneurship and **strengthen community identity.**”

- Lyson (2004)

Community-building: Sub-text for local foods?

- Nexus & necessity
- Proximity effects
- Restore social connection & meaning



Photo credit: Charlie Maloney

Local food systems ...

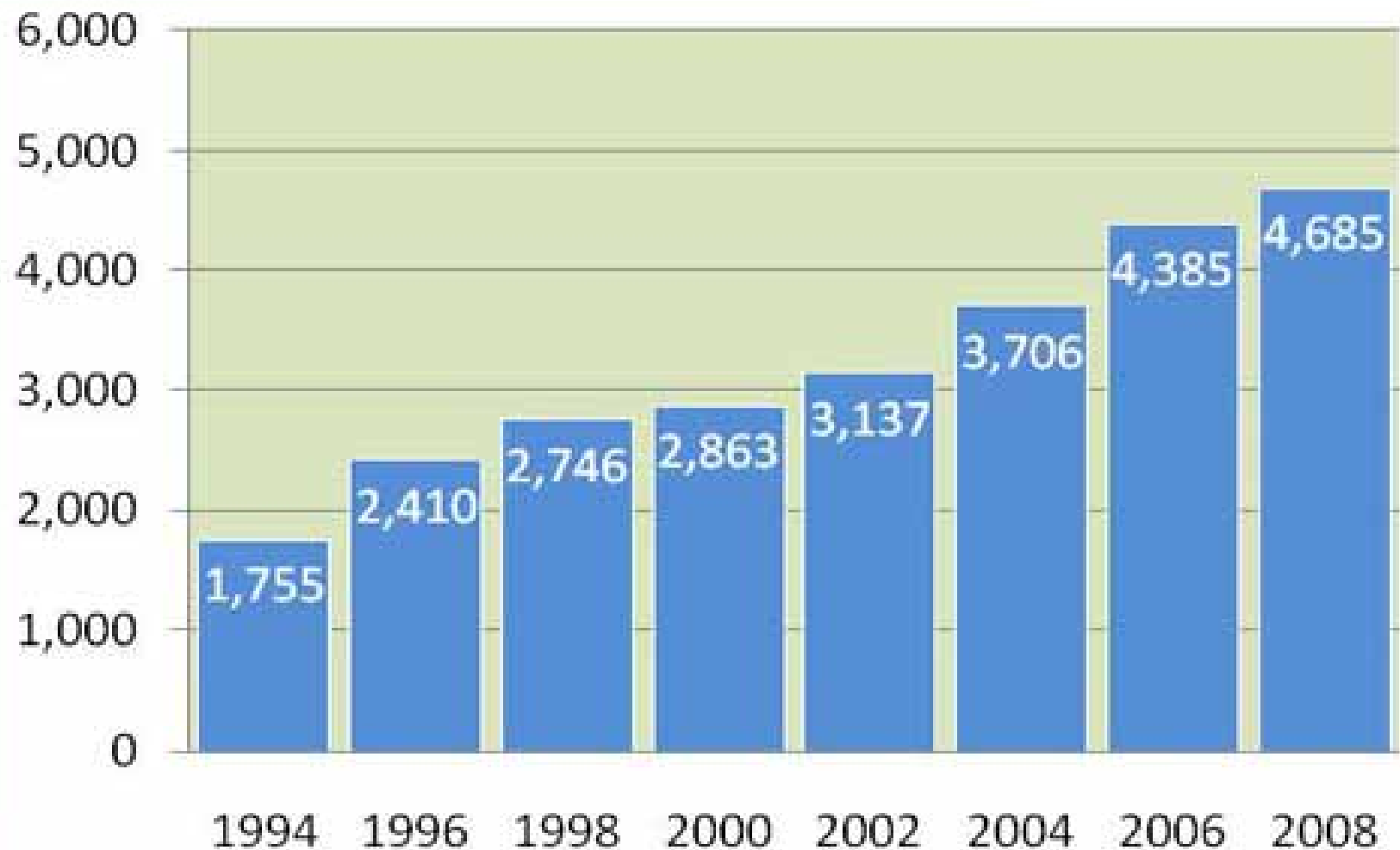


Most often understood as direct, unmediated market links between food producers and consumers: "food with a face."

Farmers' markets



Number of Operating Farmers Markets



Source: USDA - AMS - Marketing Services Division

6.8%
Increase

Community supported agriculture



Community supported agriculture (CSA) farms

- Began in US mid-1980s; ~ 1700 today
- Geography: Most prevalent on coasts & in upper-Midwest
- More likely to be located in rapidly growing, urbanizing counties



Local food impacts on "Community"?

- Building social connections
(positive social interactions,
attachments)
 - Child and family well-being?
- Learning, social adaptation
- Enhancing social equity, justice?

Evidence for **Social Connections**...

- Consumers report they value supporting CSA & FM farms
- CSA consumers use (or agree with) language of “building community”



Evidence for Social Connections....

- Producers feel more involved in community as result of local food sales
- Producers describe direct relationships with customers as "beneficial"



How Deep are the Social Connections?

- Farmers admitted economic motivations for making social connection with customers
- CSA farmers assumed burden for “community” component in Ostrom’s (2007) upper midwest CSA study
- CSA members in another study had more of a conceptual than actualized “community of interest” with other members

Weak social connections found
in some well-done local food
studies

Community building NOT an
important motivator for consumer
participation in CSA nor perceived
as important benefit (NH &
central IL; Brehm & Eisenhauer,
2008)

But do prior community attachment and satisfaction matter?

Strong general community attachment & satisfaction were significantly correlated with CSA members' desire to support local economy & develop stronger sense of community (Brethem & Eisenhauer, 2008)

Social Connections: Children and Families

- Consumers cite FM visits as family event/tradition (Hunt 2007)
- Farmer observes CSA providing recreation (& learning) for children (Macias 2008)



But a step forward or back in gender relations?

- CSA consumers– reinscribing traditional gender roles food preparation (Sokolofski 2004)
- CSA core group– a women's domain? (DeLind 1999)

Evidence for **learning & adaptation** through local foods

- Customers in Ontario FM study found casual social interaction with farmers more important than learning about actual farm practices!

Learning and collaborative work

Evidence of knowledge, sharing ideas, efficacy and a “growing the community good” orientation across participants in a local food initiative in Montana over time => **food democracy**

Learning and collaborative work

Community-based food system development in Michigan, premised on local knowledge & assets, and diverse partnerships: Collaborative problem identification & solutions

Evidence for Social Equity via Local Foods...

Early studies
CSA and FMs
found consumer
participants to
be among the
more
advantaged.



Reasons for exclusion—

Cost, access, cultural assumptions and norms

Responses to exclusion—

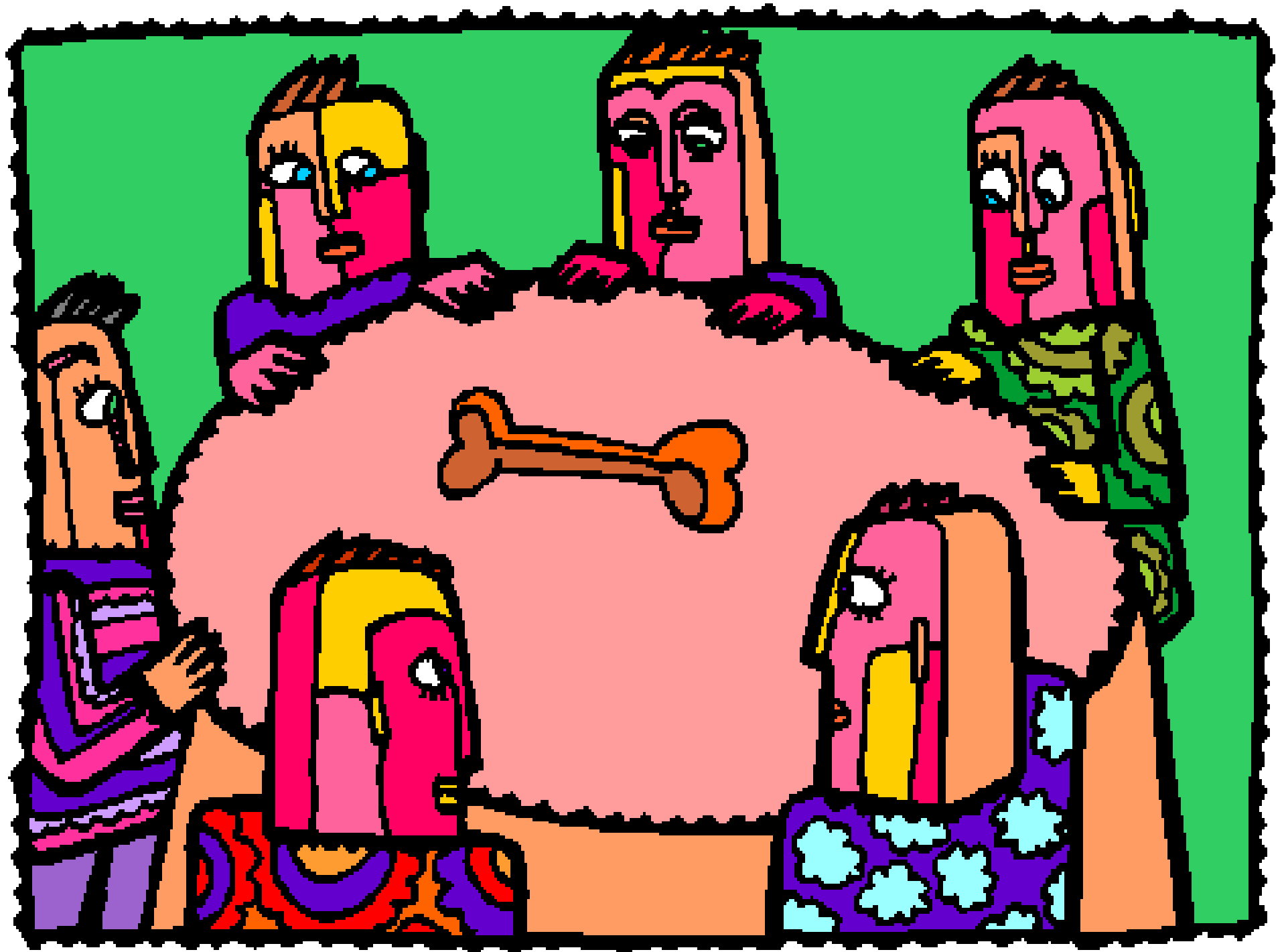
Subsidies, location, participation, changes in format & local food products

Research on local food justice: Trade-offs & tensions

- CSA and FM managers in CA try to address affordability (food security), but default to “farm security” (Guthman et al., 2006)
- Comparative case study 2 Bay Area FMs: justice & sustainability framing undermined by economic imperative (Alkon 2008)

Observations about much of this local food research

- Often “exploratory”
- Often surveys OR focus groups OR interviews
- Initiative-specific (CSA or FMs or FTS)
- Many case study evaluations
- Non-cumulative knowledge across sites and regions?



Further Questions about Community Impacts of Local Foods

1. When and how does simple interaction centered on local foods expand to deeper civic engagement on related issues?
2. How does the effort to produce, obtain, buy and serve local foods strengthen or strain family dynamics across the life course?

Further Questions

3. How does consumer knowledge about food and ag system change as a result of local food participation?
How is it shared and used?
4. How effective are different local food initiative efforts to be more inclusionary and just?



~ Thank you ~

Contact:
Clare Hinrichs
chinrichs@psu.edu