



Southwest Marketing Network

Expanding Markets for Southwest Small-Scale, Alternative, and Minority Producers

Promoting Local Agricultural Marketing in the Southwest

October 2003

Fresh, Wholesome, and Local in Southwest Colorado

One of the projects that the Southwest Marketing Network (SWMN) has adopted as a demonstration project is in my own backyard—centered in the far Southwestern corner of Colorado and surrounding areas—about as close to the Four Corners proper as you can get.

Durango has an amazing number of groups working on some aspect of local food and fiber—considering that we are a relatively small town of about 15,000 people. What is equally amazing is that I keep getting surprised, pleasantly that is, with new local food initiatives here. In spite of Durango's small size, these groups are still not well connected in many cases. So this seemed to be a perfect fit for one of the SWMN's demonstration projects since we specialize in bringing people together to learn, share, coordinate, and collaborate, and we would like people throughout the region to benefit from the lessons learned here.

What does “local” mean in Southwest Colorado?

Much of our work in SW Colorado is currently centered in Durango's La Plata County—mostly since we know it best. Yet we know that a practical local trading area for our climate and agricultural production patterns is bigger than one county, so we are looking at a trading area of one or two counties in all directions. After all, what would our dinners be like without New Mexico chiles from across the border in San Juan County?

Enlightened consumers and producers

Durango and surrounding areas have a relatively high number of enlightened consumers—those who



photo by Jim Dyers

2002 SW Colorado Small Farm Conference.

are hungry for fresh, wholesome, and local foods. Many more are probably ready to “buy local” once they hear evidence that local food can meet their concerns for a healthy diet, healthy community, and a healthy environment. As a mountain resort community, Durango attracts many residents with high interest in health and wellness, and many like-minded tourists who fill the town's numerous restaurants. No wonder healthy local foods are catching on.

In spite of the challenges to production—frosts, drought, topography, and the like—Southwest Colorado has a firm agricultural base, but one that fares poorly for many producers in conventional markets. Yet, we have several types of producers trying to break into direct local marketing. To generalize broadly, they include:

- Long-established producers selling some of their product directly to consumers, restaurants, or local retail stores. Especially common here

continued on page 2

are ranchers who can differentiate their beef or lamb as grass-fed, grass-finished, or lean. We are very fortunate to have a USDA meatpacking house in the county, which is a great encouragement to these efforts.

- Career-changing beginning producers—new to farming, but already attuned as consumers to higher quality food products.
- Part-time producers who raise niche products to supplement off-farm income, and often to settle into a more fulfilling lifestyle while providing much-appreciated products to their community. (The combined impact of these part-timers should not be underestimated in local food systems.)
- Young college graduates who have learned the health and environmental benefits of local, wholesome foods, who have enormous energy and optimism, but who often find it too hard to find affordable land to farm.

A wealth of projects

The number of local food initiatives, either underway or planned, adopted by an organization or just an informal group, is impressive. The Durango area has a Slow Food Convivium, an extensive community garden, a brand new USDA slaughterhouse and affiliated market, a completed community kitchen feasibility study, a soup kitchen, Permaculture educational center, Local Agriculture Coalition, and of course several farmers markets.

Groups are planning farm-to-school programs, value-added processing, a regular newspaper insert on local food and agriculture, a community food security project, and winter storage for producers. Specialty wool producers are trying to link to local spinners and weavers. Local discussion groups and “study circles” are finding local food to be a critical part of a sustainable community’s future. Numerous non-profits, Fort Lewis College departments, and the local CSU Experiment Station are involved. The third annual Southwest Colorado Small Farms Conference was just held last month in La Plata

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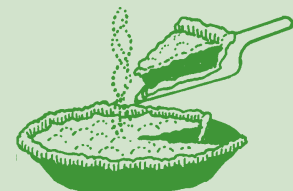
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County. And this is just in and near La Plata County—so much more is happening in the surrounding areas that will be included as the project expands into nearby counties.

The Colorado Plateau connection

While this demonstration project is well nested in the Southwest Marketing Network, we also have discovered fruitful connections with local food initiatives in Northern Arizona and across the Colorado Plateau. The Center for Sustainable Environments at Northern Arizona University, with renowned author, ethnobotanist, and local food activist Gary Nabhan at the helm, is tackling some of the same issues in the broader Flagstaff area that we are: climate-challenged production, a large restaurant base, enlightened consumers, the current drought, high land prices, and generally small overall populations. With so much in common, and so much energy on both sides of the Plateau, we are convinced that we can be more effective by sharing strategies and lessons learned.

Nested directories

Already underway is the “Mesa Verde Country Guide to Local Food and Fiber.” Producers who are direct marketing, or are willing to do so, in the area roughly 90 miles around Mesa Verde can list their products and how consumers may buy them.

Producers are asked to state how their products are unique or out of the ordinary and what elements of sustainability they incorporate in their production. This “self-declaration” is not as exacting and is more honor-based than certification-based processes, but direct marketing generally allows for personal contact where claims can be discussed. The whole process of “self declarations” can be an educational benefit for consumers and producers alike, especially as producers compare their statements. (Contact me if you are in this area and want to be listed.)

This Mesa Verde Country directory is a subset of the Colorado Plateau directory being enlarged and updated by the Center for Sustainable Environments. With similar objectives and criteria, their directory entitled, “Fresh, Organic, and Native Foods of the Colorado Plateau” will list producers and suppliers across the whole Plateau region. (see the

Center’s website at www.environment.nau.edu/index.html)

How is the network helping out?

Besides spearheading the local producer directory, we are in the process of gathering information about all of the local initiatives—to be posted on one of our local partner’s websites along with the producer listings. We held a work session in Durango in September to start our assessment of the local food situation, and were fortunate to have Gary Nabhan here to share his expertise and lessons from Arizona projects. Other plans include exploration of a multi-producer CSA, a farm-to-institution program, development of sustainable indicators for possible use on local labels, coordination of educational and promotional efforts, and a “land link” type of program connecting existing producers with young entrepreneurs lacking farm land.

What does this have to do with the rest of the Southwest?

Besides strengthening the food system of Southwest Colorado and surroundings, we know that this demonstration project will have wider benefits. There are many other resort communities in the Southwest that can learn from our mistakes and successes. Only parts of Southwest Colorado are truly resort-based, so most of the lessons should apply to communities of all sorts, and it should be clear that our intention in the Network is to help ensure that healthy local food is affordable to all, not just the well-to-do. The SWMN is helping a variety of demonstration projects—from remote parts of the Navajo Nation to larger metropolitan areas, so stay tuned as we uncover new strategies, lessons, and examples of successful community efforts across the region.

Jim Dyer, Project Director



Grow them Sustainably, Irrigate them Slowly: Honoring Farmers and Ranchers in the Painted Desert

On an unseasonably warm day in the Painted Desert, Slow Food convivia in the Southwest co-sponsored a special event celebrating sustainable farming and ranching efforts rooted in the cultures of the Four Corners states. Organized by the Center for Sustainable Environments at Northern Arizona University, “Sustainable Foods of the Four Corners” was hosted by the Turquoise Room at the historic La Posada Hotel in Winslow, Arizona, where new Southwestern cuisine pioneer John Sharpe regularly features the unique foods and vintage flavors of the region.

Although most people do not think “agriculture” when they think of the Painted Desert, Grand Canyon country, and the Four Corners area, this region has the longest continuous history with the most diverse set of heirloom crops and rare breeds of any existing American agricultural tradition. At the event, community members were able to listen to the moving testimonies of Hopi, Zuni, Navajo, Hispanic and Anglo farmers and ranchers who struggle to stay on some of the same arable lands that have been farmed for two millennia. Twelve of these individuals were honored as “culture bearers” of their communities’ time-tried traditions and adaptive innovations. In their own words, they demonstrated how the stories of their land, their farming practices, their engagement with rare seeds and breeds are as interesting to the public as the food products they produce.

It is ironic that American institutions like the Smithsonian have for decades honored performing and visual artists as “treasure keepers of rural traditions,” but not the farmers and ranchers upon whose work these derivative arts depend. Southwestern cuisine is widely celebrated, but support for the agricultural traditions upon which it is based is still needed. Award-winning food writer Deborah Madison gave examples of heritage food promotion strategies from her book, *Local Flavors*, in a slide show of lessons learned from her visits to numerous farmers’ markets across the country. Folklorist and

musician Tony Norris offered a workshop for the seventy farmers and ranchers present about fresh ways of telling their personal testimonies of life on the land, and later in the day, hosted Grand Canyon country musicians in a “Music from the Land” jam.

Perhaps the greatest attraction was the all-afternoon market of regionally produced, sustainably grown foods, featuring periodic cooking demonstrations by Sharpe, Madison, Lois Ellen Frank and James Whitewater. Two dozen farms, ranches, non-profits and collectives offered their products for sale, ranging from Navajo-Churro lambs and goat cheeses to dried tepary beans and smoked chipotle peppers. Three hundred visitors roamed the grounds of historic La Posada, one of the Southwest’s most colorful resorts, renovated by historic preservationists over the last four years in a manner which has received international acclaim. Simultaneously, each honored farmer or rancher talked for five to ten minutes about their motivations, aspirations and challenges.

The evening five-course tribute banquet featured Hopi piki bread from Verlie Tawahonva on Third Mesa, blue corn muffins from Santa Ana Pueblo crops, Shepherd’s Lamb from Antonio and Molly Manzanares, a Syrah from Sutcliffe Vineyards, vegetables from Crooked Sky Farms, tepary beans donated by Native Seeds/SEARCH and assorted goat cheeses from Stargate Valley Farms. After remarks by John Sharpe of the Turquoise Room, John Sutcliffe of McElmo Canyon, Colorado, and Kevin Dahl of Native Seeds/SEARCH in Tucson, awards were presented to the farmers and ranchers identified as culture-bearers by NAU interns working last summer on a Ford Foundation-funded project to promote grassroots solutions to food sustainability.

As the evening closed, there was one more surprise: the largest agricultural repatriation to any Native American tribe in history, as the Hopi tribe’s Natural Resources Department received more than eighty pounds of some seventy varieties of seeds of fourteen native crop varieties. Most of these crops had been

cultivated by their ancestors since prehistoric times, but some had fallen out of use due to various external pressures affecting Hopi society. Coordinated by the Hopi Cultural Preservation Office and the Center for Sustainable Environments at Northern Arizona University, a new tribal seed bank will make some of these seed varieties available for cultivation by Hopi farmers for the first time since World War II.

Thought to have been lost by some Hopi farming families, dozens of heirloom varieties of vegetables, grains, gourds and cotton have been grown periodically at farms run by the USDA and non-profit conservation groups, and then sequestered in seed banks to keep their viability high for future germination. The donors of seeds sending back to the Hopi tribe have spent hundreds of hours researching, documenting and packaging these seeds for their return. Donors included: the USDA National Seed Storage Laboratory and Regional Plant Introduction Stations, coordinated by Dr. Henry Shands; Native Seeds/SEARCH, a non-profit based in Tucson, coordinated by Dr. Suzanne Nelson; the Seed Savers Exchange in Decorah, Iowa, coordinated by MacArthur Fellow Kent Whealy; and members of those organizations, including Shane Murphy, Debbie Mancuso and Penny Wells. Micah Lomaomvaya, the Hopi Natural Resources Planner and a farmer himself, accepted the seed on behalf of the tribe, and will be involved in the future management of the seed

bank and its use by community members. Lomaomvaya has been personally committed to reviving traditional rain-fed agriculture, which kept community food self-sufficient through the 1930's, but has suffered a steady decline since then, due to drought, land use, and culture changes.

Seeing the dozens of colorful varieties of corn, bean, amaranth, sunflower, squash and cotton seeds reminded us how diverse an agricultural legacy the cultures of the Southwest have engendered. But what can't be seen by merely looking at the seeds in baskets and bags is their remarkable adaptations to drought, heat, sandy soils, root knot nematodes, and rust diseases. Nor is it easy to fathom all the varied cultural and nutritional uses that the Hopi and other tribes have maintained in their communities to this present day.

While some of the seeds will be grown this summer in fields, others will be maintained at tribal offices, where workshops on seed saving and keeping traditional crops free of genetic contamination will be undertaken later in the year. As for the farmers and ranchers, many seemed newly inspired, ready to return to their work with renewed resolve.

Gary Nabhan, Ph.D., Center for Sustainable Environments Director. (Originally printed on the NAU website. Reprinted here with permission.)
See the Calendar for this year's event.

Can't Get On-line to Access SWMN Website?

One of the most efficient and effective ways of getting large amounts of marketing information around the Southwest is via the Internet. This is why we are continually expanding and improving the SWMN Website (www.swmarketing.ncat.org). However we realize that Internet access is not easy for some people, and the Network is committed to making our information available to all in the Four Corners states.

If you haven't been able to get on our website, here are some suggestions:

- If you don't have Internet access at home, try your local school, public library, chapter house, or Extension office.

- If you don't know how to access the Internet, ask for help at the locations mentioned above. Your children may be some of the best teachers also—it seems to come naturally to them.
- If you still can't "get connected", contact us. We will try to help you gain access, and if necessary we can provide some materials on CD for those with computers but who can't get on-line, and some materials in paper form as needed.

Most importantly, don't give up—contact us with any problems you are having getting the information you need.

Jim Dyer, Project Director

Southwest Marketing Network Conference Scheduled for Next Spring—March 14, 15 & 16, 2004 in Flagstaff, AZ

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Calendar of Events

- October 4-5, 2003** • Free Workshop, Rangeland Health: Rangeland Plant Identification and Monitoring. Near Silver City, NM. Contact: Tamara. 505-820-2544. email: projects@quiviracoalition.org
- October 6-9, 2003** • Survival Strategies for Small and Limited-Resource Farmers & Ranchers, San Diego, CA. Contact: USDA RMA. 202-690-2803 or www.rma.usda.gov/calendar/2003.october.html
- October 11-12, 2003** • Gunnison Fall Fiber Festival & Fair, Gunnison, CO.
Contact: Extension, 970-641-1260
- October 17-19, 2003** • Bioneers Conference; including Food and Farming subjects, San Raphael, CA.
Contact: www.bioneers.org
- October 18, 2003** • Sustainable Foods from the Four Corners. La Posada, Winslow, AZ.
Contact: Julie Evans. 928-523-0330. email: events.cse@nau.edu or www.environment.nau.edu
- November 1-5, 2003** • Community Food Security Coalition Conference, Growing the Movement: New Opportunities and Challenges for Community Food Security. Boston, MA
Contact: 310-822-5410. www.foodsecurity.org
- March 14-16, 2004** • Southwest Marketing Network Conference. Flagstaff, AZ.
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Go to www.swmarketing.ncat.org to find updated information on the Southwest Marketing Network and other activities in our region.