

## Local Foods, Local Opportunities

[MUSIC]

Interest in food that's consumed not far from where it's produced has grown over the past two decades. Disruptions in the food supply chain during the COVID-19 pandemic have brought even more attention to this segment of our nation's agricultural industry.

How has the pandemic affected farmers and others involved producing and selling local foods? And what does the future hold for local foods in our state?

I'm Dee Shore, and these are the questions we'll explore in this episode of Farms, Food and You, a podcast from North Carolina State University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

[MUSIC]

**(Whitney Allen)**

We're receiving more demand for our products, and that's across all board, the eggs, the flowers. Especially when people were locked in their houses for very long periods of time, flowers really brought a lot of joy in their homes. But also just stockpiling on farm goods, because we as farmers had food for people. We, as farmers – we were ready to jump. We were ready to adjust really quickly to what was happening.

It's a pretty big eye opener for some people to know how all small businesses – how we've been able to be here for the community.

That's Whitney Allen, who farms on 20 acres in Orange County, North Carolina, with her husband, Isaiah. They produce flowers, tree fruits like peaches, fresh produce, and eggs and meat from ducks and chickens. They sell them locally.

For the Allens, the months since the World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus a pandemic haven't been easy. Traditionally, a portion of what they produce on their farm has gone to The Eddy, a restaurant in Saxapahaw where Isaiah is co-owner and executive chef. When the restaurant closed temporarily this spring due to COVID-19, they had to find new ways to sell what they grew.

Whitney turned to the internet. She developed an online system that allowed her customers at the South Durham Farmers Market to preorder items that they could pick up on the weekends. And she began making food and flower deliveries in a nearby neighborhood.

It's unlikely that the Allens' experience was typical for farmers producing for the local markets, because not many farmers also own restaurants. But the fact that they experienced some good and some bad

seems consistent with what NC State University experts have to say about the overall impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on local food producers.

Hannah Dankbar is manager of North Carolina Cooperative Extension's local foods program, and I asked her how the pandemic has played out for those in the local food industry – positive, negative or both.

**[Hannah Dankbar]**

I'm going to go with the "both" answer. On one hand, we're seeing this really huge increase in consumer demand and interest in local food, for getting healthy food to their families, and people are really interested in supporting their local economies. So there's huge demand, huge interest in learning more about how to do that, which is fantastic.

But then, on the other hand, we're seeing a lot of mixed results as far as farmer revenue goes. Some of the big revenue streams for local producers are agritourism, wholesale and restaurant sales, and then direct-to-consumer sales.

Dankbar says that two of those market channels – agritourism and sales to restaurants, schools and universities -- were cut off without much notice.

**[Dankbar]**

Pivoting has been really the keyword throughout this pandemic. We've seen some farmers that were able to pivot their whole marketing plan for the year, which is difficult and not ideal to be doing in March as far as farming goes. And then we saw some where there were some issues like broadband access, just the way that their business is structured, labor issues, that weren't able to pivot quite as quickly.

Limited broadband access has been an issue in North Carolina for years, but the pandemic accentuated the challenges it presents for rural farmers. To find customers for products they'd normally sell to restaurants, schools and cafeterias, some growers, including Whitney and Isaiah Allen, looked to the internet. But not all farmers could do that.

**[Dankbar]**

Consumers are being encouraged to shop online as a way to encourage physical distancing from each other, but a lot of our producers, they're located in areas that don't have broadband access.

To give local foods a space in these online platforms, one of the issues is making sure that people can even access those platforms from their farms. If they can't do that – it's already an administrative burden to make some of those shifts. It just takes time to learn a new system and create things the way that works for you.

So being able to access that right on the farm is really important. Yeah, it's very spotty just across the state. It's a pretty big issue.

Dankbar says that other big challenges have included shortages of personal protective equipment for farmworkers, concerns about the availability of farm labor and the fact that federal relief packages didn't provide small- and medium-scale farms the support that other industries had.

Lack of cold-storage facilities was also problematic: The demand for emergency food supplies rose quickly, but without ample cold storage, some food banks and pantries couldn't accept all the local produce that farmers had available.

While COVID-19 has presented challenges for farmers, NC State economist Kathryn Boys says the pandemic has also provided opportunities because it's motivated some people to seek out local farm products.

**[Kathryn Boys]**

In some instances, there is an increasing appetite from the public to be sourcing from local farmers, and it can be motivated for health reasons, for food access reasons, and for wishing to support the local economy, especially as we may be moving into very serious recessions.

What "local" actually means when it comes to food varies from among farmers, marketers and consumers. For some, it's food that's consumed within a certain distance – say, 100 miles from its source – while for others, it's defined by a specific county, state or even nation.

While there's no firm definition of local food, we know that a considerable number of North Carolina's farmers – about 48% – sell some of their products directly to consumers.

We also know about trends in spending on locally produced foods. Between 2007 and 2012, consumers increased their spending on locally sourced products. This included purchases of agricultural goods through farmers markets, roadside stands, pick-your-own operations, community-supported-agriculture shares and the like.

However, some leveling occurred between the 2012 national agricultural census and the one conducted in 2017.

**[Boys]**

By the time we get to the 2017 census, while the number of operations engaging in local food sales nationally had increased, the actual sales, the dollar sales within those, actually has stayed flat during that intervening period between 2012 and '17. So there's certainly more players in the market, but the total pie didn't seem to expand significantly during that window of time. And it's not clear in the few years since that last national ag census if indeed there's been any change, one way or the other with regard to that.

We also know that farmers are not just selling directly to local consumers, they are increasingly selling their products to parties who then resell them specifically to local consumers.

**[Boys]**

We're having increasing volumes of local foods sold into intermediated channels in which a local farmer may sell to a food hub or a wholesaler, who then may sell to a local restaurant, to a

school operation, etc. And so what we have seen, while sales from direct-to-consumer channels may be relatively flat, there has been an increase in sales through these intermediated channels. So we're seeing an increase in use of these products by independent restaurants, by schools, in university cafeterias.

Of course, some of these markets, as Dankbar mentioned, were severely affected by COVID-19-related closures. Boys says that early studies are indicating an overall net loss to local food markets because of COVID-19. But that's only part of the story.

**[Boys]**

There are some bright spots -- there is some encouraging news, I guess it would be the better way to put it, in terms of sales to some standard grocery stores, as well as new marketing opportunities that our local foods community are very innovatively pivoting to.

When it comes to what's ahead, at least in the short term, Boys says North Carolina's local foods producers may fare relatively well compared to farmers in other states.

**[Boys]**

Overall, I think we're very well placed in North Carolina for our local foods community, for our local foods producers, to weather the storm better than in many other states.

We have exceptionally capable and dedicated extension outreach personnel that are servicing and in supporting our local foods community. We're focused on a wide variety of issues either directly or indirectly affecting local food systems – so fruit and vegetable production, processing, marketing, distribution, labor issues, and programs to support business transactions and supply chain efficiency all are getting attention and support through university extension services, as well as a number of very strong and very, very capable NGOs and farmer associations that work in North Carolina.

I think we'll do as well as we can – not to say, though, that there won't certainly be real challenges coming from this.

Whitney and Isaiah Allen recognize that. Years ago, the couple made conscious decisions to change what they were eating and where they bought their food. They eventually decided to combine their interest in healthy eating with their business and accounting knowledge. The result was Rocky Run Farm in Mebane.

The long hours and economic sacrifices they've made to build their farm have yielded rewards. I spoke with the Allens by phone early one June morning. Their rooster was crowing, but their son was asleep. They told me that they hope their farm will be an anchor for him in a fast-changing world, as it is for them now. Here's Isaiah:

**[Isaiah Allen]**

Right now we're sitting on the tailgate of our truck. I'm looking at a block of heirloom corn that's just now starting to break the surface of the soil. And, the orchard is in full bloom.

Hazelnuts are coming in. Peaches are looking good. And I'm looking to my left, seeing all the heirloom old Southern apples that are starting to come in, and to my right is all the animals in the back pasture.

Local food to me is my entire life, stepping outside and watching the leaves change on these trees and being so connected with the season.

Seeing the redbuds come out at the first beginning of spring before the rest of the trees are going to blossom and just being connected with the cycles of earth and producing all this food for a public that's demanding it.

It just makes me feel very gratified.

**[MUSIC]**

Thanks for listening today, and we hope you'll join us again for our next episode. To learn more about the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and our podcast, visit [go.ncsu.edu/farms](https://go.ncsu.edu/farms). While you're there, share your thoughts. We'd love to get your ideas and to hear what topics you'd like for us to explore in the future.