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Dirt in Your Soul: An Exhibit Plan

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Dirt In Your Soul:
An Exhibit Plan

Presenting Vermont’s Changing Food System Through Qualitative Documentation of Grassroots Food and Agriculture

Created by Shannon K. Esrich for the Vermont Folklife Center in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Food Systems at the University of Vermont

March 1, 2016
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All images in this report come from the @vtfoodroots Instagram account and have been taken by members of the Vermont Folklife Center research team, unless otherwise noted.

Cover image adapted from Thompson (2009).
Thank you to my academic advisor, Dr. Teresa Mares, for serving as my mentor through two degrees, four years of life, and countless major decisions – I could not have done it without you!

Thank you to my advisor at the Vermont Folklife Center, Dr. Andy Kolovos, and others at the VFC who made this project possible. I have learned so much from you opening your world to me. (00:00:10-00:00:15).

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Why Vermont? Why Now?

Vermont is gaining national attention for its dedication to supporting agriculture, its programs created to fight statewide hunger, and the growing interest in sustainable food systems (Bastian 2015; Carter 2015; Fox et al. 2013; Housekeeper 2015; Mountain Times 2015; Peck 2015; Perez 2015; Pollak 2015; Rose 2015). Food festivals abound, farmers markets flourish, and farm to table restaurants and school lunch programs continue to grow. Behind these national headlines, however, are the people at the heart of Vermont’s food movement who are dedicated to creating, processing, distributing, and eating the state’s bounty.

It is important to note that despite Vermont’s reputation as a leader in the national food movement, it is not immune from the problems our national food system struggles to overcome. Vermonters face problems with food security. One in five Vermont children struggle with hunger, and 13% of all Vermont households are food insecure (Hunger Free Vermont 2014). Vermont agriculture is not always environmentally beneficial. Lake Champlain, the sixth largest fresh water body in the nation that provides approximately half of Vermont’s western border with New York, is increasingly battling pollution as a result of farms’ phosphorus runoff from fertilizers and animal manures (Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation 2015). Vermont currently depends on a Mexican immigrant labor force that often faces unfair wages, unsafe working conditions, and social isolation despite the state’s dairy industry depending on their labors (Freidberg 2009:234; Holt-Gimenez 2014; Jackson 2008; Mares et al. 2013; Radel et al. 2010; Russell 2007). The Vermont food system, as with the national and global food system, is imperfect. It is critical to acknowledge these shortcomings early so as not to put Vermont agriculture on a pedestal.

This project is based on the Vermont Folklife Center’s research documenting grassroots food and agriculture in Vermont. The Library of Congress Archie Green Fellowship generously funded this research. Over the course of approximately 18 months, the research team traveled across Vermont to conduct 22 qualitative interviews with a cross-section of Vermont’s food system stakeholders. Additionally, the team dedicated 6 site visits to capturing photographic, audio, and video content from a variety of food producers. The ultimate goal of this research is to create a traveling exhibit featuring the story of Vermont’s modern, changing food system.

Purpose Statement

This report is designed to help inform members of the Vermont Folklife Center and others involved in their work about the potential and recommended approaches to executing an exhibit for their Archie Green Fellowship project. The intention is for this report to become a resource for all involved with the Archie Green Project.

This document contains a compilation of analysis and suggestions from over twelve months of data analysis and five months of strategic planning for the exhibit. While the logistics of executing the exhibit are likely to change as the exhibit comes to fruition, the hope it is that this report will offer guidance in the most efficient strategies for creating a successful exhibit.
Figure 1

Model of a Food System

Image: (Nourish 2014).
Defining the Food System
A food system is a complex group of processes, actors, and the interactions between them that contribute to the production, processing, distribution, consumption, and disposal of food. This includes the economic, environmental, social, and agricultural aspects of food, demonstrated in Figure 1. The nature of a food system, as with any system, is to at once encompass both the specific and the abstract. No single attribute or issue within a system can be examined without considering the system as a whole. For example, increasing rates of obesity in the United States can be isolated and examined through any number of lenses – health, policy, economics, etc. However, a more complete evaluation of the interactions among these different dimensions of society allows for a more nuanced and well-rounded understanding of the systems in place that perpetuate obesity. Taking this whole-systems approach when studying food creates room for continuous questioning and reevaluation of modern and historical challenges in the food system. It also mitigates the disciplinary and siloed approach so often relied upon in research.

This project focuses on practices and changes in the modern Vermont food system, but food systems lie on a wide spectrum of scale. At the largest end of the spectrum is the global food system, consisting of all nation states, international trade, and the world’s natural resources. The smallest scale food system might consist of one school or a single town. Scale defines the parameters of a food system, but it is critical to remember that all food systems contribute to and are a product of the global food system. Figure 2 demonstrates one conception of where Vermont falls in relation to the global food system.

Inside the Report: What’s Next
To understand the motivations behind the creation of this project, it is necessary to engage with the broader literature on museum theory and food systems exhibits. This project’s Vermont-specific narrative is framed by the concepts of place and cultural landscapes and anchored in the context of community-based research. To situate this project within the national discourse on food and farming, it is important to identify how agriculture and food systems are typically represented in museum exhibits and public displays. An exploration into the theory of exhibit-based learning, with a particular focus on how exhibits translate academic research to the public sphere, provides background for the recommendations concerning this project’s future exhibit.
Figure 2
Where Vermont Fits In: The Global Food System
Methods

Data
This report is based on 22 qualitative interviews conducted by the VFC research team over the course of 18 months from 2014-2015. The interviewees consisted of a cross-section of Vermont’s food system stakeholders, including people who work both directly and indirectly with food and agriculture. Each interview was hand-coded, using both a priori and emergent codes. The final code list is provided in the form of the suggested themes in the Exhibit Narrative section. Additionally, the VFC research team dedicated 6 site visits to capturing photographic, audio, and video content from a variety of food producers across the state. Included in this report are images unique to and reposted by the Instagram account @vtfoodroots, discussed in more detail in the Community Outreach section.

Acknowledging the Author’s Role
As the lead coder involved in this project, it is critical to acknowledge the strengths and limitations of holding this position. Because I have personally listened to each interview while transcribing, coding, and summarizing them, I have come to know the stories of each speaker in great detail. It is also this responsibility, however, that may limit the outlook of this project and the suggestions for the exhibit’s future. Consciously and subconsciously, I brought my perspectives, beliefs, and values to my work and have influenced which details are considered important enough to be included in this report. Similarly, the themes suggested as options for the final exhibit portray the narrative of the Vermont food system as understood by a student embedded in food systems research and discussion on a daily basis. My comfort with certain topics or ideas may have led me to overlook them in my analysis, whereas someone else may have highlighted them. Still, I believe this report represents the interviewees and the larger project as accurately as possible.
Project Framework:
A Literature Review

Introduction
The concept of a food system is not new to the literature, but the surge in research and public attention drawn from these fields necessitates a reevaluation of how best to present findings and ideas concerning these topics. Nationally, there is a lack of a systems approach in communicating food systems and agricultural knowledge in community-based research. This report considers community-based research as those projects that originate from the interests and issues of the researcher’s community. The community members are partners and drivers of the project, helping shape the direction of research and the dissemination of results. In this process it is important to leave room for creativity in producing the exhibit to better attract the public and increase community engagement. In order to bridge the gap between researchers and exhibit visitors, it is crucial for this project to coherently communicate findings in a manner equally accessible to academics, professionals, and community members. In this sense, a successful exhibit is a medium through which visitors engage with and understand the complexities of the food system based on their own interpretations of the presented information.

Exhibit Theory
There are several theories and methods that aim to increase the accessibility of exhibits to the broader community. The ultimate goal of any exhibit is to have information not just passively communicated, but also understood and retained by visitors. Achieving this requires moving beyond historical exhibit theory that views the museum as the ultimate source of knowledge, instead recognizing individuals as unique and capable sources of information. In this model of thinking, museum visitors are as much responsible for creating knowledge about the exhibit’s topic as the researchers who created the display.

Exhibits as Art and Constructivist Theory
Though often imagined by the archetype of objects in cases and plaques on walls, museum exhibits can be as aesthetically pleasing as paintings or sculptures. Exhibits can express a sentiment as nuanced as a photograph captured at just the right moment. To explain, Leslie Bedford (2014) proposes a theory that considers museum exhibitions as an art:

Exhibitions as a medium are a kind of art form, though not in the classic meaning of the term – Art with a capital A – but as the experiential, imaginative expansion of meaning that aesthetic experience can inspire...Exhibitions are both education and art (Bedford 2014, 15).

Additionally, Bedford views museum exhibits as “interactive, emotional, embodied, [and] imaginative experiences” that engage viewers on a deeper level than educational plaques and conversations with curators can accomplish on their own (2014, 15). The historical museum theory favors a more structured museum environment that believes “the museum can determine the visitor experience” (Bedford 2014, 15). Bedford (2014) opposes this view. Her argument against instructional exhibits aligns more with participatory experience and free-choice learning. This perspective...

...Claims that what matters isn’t what the museum owns or displays but how the visitor interprets it. Personal experience becomes as legitimate a source of meaning as curatorial knowledge, which, according to this point of view, is also contextual and interpretive rather than unassailable truth (Bedford 2014, 26-27).
Creating a space where visitors feel they have room to interpret and interact with the information presented to them is crucial to their exhibit experience. This theory also strongly differs from the earlier museum practice of presenting expert information that non-expert visitors were then expected to accept at face value. In the interpretive model, visitors make themselves the expert in understanding and thinking through presented concepts.

Another way of interpreting the theory of exhibits as art is through constructivist theory. Championed by John Dewey (1933), the foundation of constructivism is the belief that...

...all knowledge is constructed by the learner personally or socially rather than existing outside the learner. Constructivism insists on the active nature of the learner’s mind; learning is not the incremental absorption of knowledge by an essentially passive mind, but the active and ongoing construction and transformation of knowledge by an individual (Bedford 2014, 28-29).

If learning is achieved by doing, then it is imperative for museum visitors to have an opportunity to “do” the exhibit. This could mean something as simple as the visitor pressing buttons or walking through different doors that trigger a certain set of information to be shared. It could also be more hands-on, such as manipulating an experiment with provided materials. The key to constructivist theory is that visitors must be engaged, ideally physically, in some aspect as they move through an exhibit.

This project’s proposed exhibit must draw on its ability to connect visitors with the personal stories of participants. Not only is information received in story form “more easily absorbed and remembered,” but also “museum visitors most readily connect to history through the personal stories of others” (Bedford 2014, 60). This project may be limited in creating a physically interactive exhibit for visitors, but it can excel at presenting the personal stories of the Vermonters interviewed through central narrative themes. In this way, the exhibit’s interaction comes from the recordings, images, video, and text mediating the stories of Vermonters to exhibit visitors.

**Cultural Landscapes and the Concept of Place**

This project aims to capture a snapshot of the modern Vermont food system by attempting to understand the state’s cultural landscape. Cultural landscapes include both “tangible and intangible expressions of culture” such as “cultural traditions, intergenerational use and continuity [of the landscape], socioeconomic systems, and the natural environment” (Mitchell 2008, 25). Additionally, location, setting, spirit, and feeling may be considered aspects of a cultural landscape (Mitchell 2008, 26). Critical to understanding cultural landscapes is their natural plurality: “Landscapes begin in the human mind” – they are defined, imagined, and realized differently across individuals and groups (Albers 2000, 221).

Albers (2000) provides an in-depth account of the history of Vermont’s cultural and other (geologic, economic, linguistic, etc.) landscapes. One example of a cultural landscape is a plot of Vermont land stewarded by the Western Abenaki people since 9000 BC (Albers 2000, 48). The Abenaki used the land for dwelling, food procurement, and spiritual traditions, among other aspects of daily life (Albers 2000, 52-63). After two centuries of war and colonization beginning in 1609 (Albers 2000, 67), European immigrants would later turn this plot into pasture for the Merino sheep boom of the mid-nineteenth century (Albers 2000, 145-149; Allbee 2013, 2).
Following this, the soil-bare land may have been turned over again into hay fields, dairy pasture, and forests of various successive growths (Albers 2000, 206-223). These changes could have developed as a multigenerational farm family changed their business from sheep to dairy farming and then worked to include maple and lumber production to improve their income during poor dairy years (Albers 2000, 281-284; Working Lands Enterprise Initiative 2015). Of course, even this is just one version of a cultural landscape’s transformation; every place has its own unique story.

The cultural landscape that these stories and their physical settings create is continuously changing and developing to include more diversified farms and food businesses throughout the state (Albers 2000, 281-284; Working Lands Enterprise Initiative 2015). It is because of these changes that this project places particular value in documenting what it means to be a part of Vermont’s food system in the early twenty-first century. Vermont is not unique in its changing landscape, as other areas in the country with a history of intensive agricultural production parallel Vermont’s story. The plan for the exhibit strives to create an opportunity for the greater Vermont community to take stock of the state’s modern, diverse food system.

Critical to this analysis and understanding of Vermont’s evolving cultural landscape is recognizing that “agricultural production in Vermont has never been insulated from larger regional, national, and international economic forces” (Allbee 2013, 2). Vermont’s food system has always been entwined within larger and more complex systems, resulting in a broad range of cultural landscapes throughout the state. Hunting grounds, recreational areas, and residential centers are all connected to the historic and modern cultural landscapes of Vermont (Albers 2000; Working Lands Enterprise Initiative 2015). Interactions, uses, values, and beliefs about the land can vary across individuals in the same geographic area and time period. This creates multiple dimensions in every cultural landscape. It is therefore important to note that one cultural landscape is really many.

Fundamental to the cultural landscape is the idea of place, a concept “profoundly basic in the world of human existence” (Carbaugh and Cerulli 2013, 5). Place, like cultural landscapes, can be tangible or intangible – the farm of one’s childhood, or the memory and time period of the farm’s existence. Providing a window into the complexity of how humans create a sense of place, Carbaugh and Cerulli (2013) offer the following explanation:

Place is profoundly basic and specific as we learn and study who and where we are. The concept takes us...to concrete and contingent circumstances which serve as the grounds of our existence, our experiences and lives. By losing sight – or touch, or feel, or smell – of our places, we risk being unsettled in our thoughts, floating about and beyond our immediate circumstances, where we indeed live. As Mahatma Gandhi (1982, 5) put it, ‘To forget how to dig the earth and tend the soil is to forget ourselves.’ And those who tend and toil with utmost care know their place, their self, and to know it well is to learn from its own particular ways, and to speak knowledgeable about that (6-7).
How people see themselves reflected in a place through their connection to it, and vice versa, is only one conceptualization of place. This definition of place is especially fitting, however, when discussing the many farmers involved in this project. By tending the earth and entwining some of themselves with their crops and animals, the farmers reflect the places in which they live and work through their products and their impact on the land.

**Exhibits and Community Engagement**

A critical pillar of this project is that it comes from and is created for the Vermont community. It is the goal that this project will reflect the values and beliefs of participants, rather than presenting the opinions and values of the researchers. The intent of this approach is to generate an exhibit that allows the greater Vermont community to understand their neighbors’ conceptualizations of the Vermont landscape (cultural and other). From this perspective, the goal is “empower[ing] people to take an active role in consciously shaping the landscape and working toward a desired future, rather than reacting to someone else’s proposal” (Erhart 2007, 22). Ideally then...

...community engagement should involve not only the education of facts and data but also the sharing of an entire way of thinking...[it] needs to reflect community language, values, and attitudes (Erhart 2007, 22).

Using a grounded approach, this project has the potential for capturing Vermont’s cultural landscape and Vermonters’ sense of place in the twenty-first century.

**Exhibits as Interactive Learning**

Current methods of traditional and non-traditional museum exhibits vary greatly in their attempts to present agricultural and food systems knowledge to the public. It is also important to note how nationally, science museums omit explicit connections to agriculture in their exhibits (Feedstuffs 2015). In a survey of twenty-nine science museums in cities across the United States, researcher Katie Stofer found that “none of the facilities included the word ‘agriculture’ in an exhibit title or description,” despite approximately 45% of the 316 exhibits being related to or suggestive of agriculture (Feedstuffs 2015, 5). Agriculture is the backbone of modern human sustenance, and indeed humans have coevolved with their agricultural practices (Beja-Pereira et al. 2003; Sokolov 1991). Agriculture is a constant aspect of nearly all human life and the ability to survive as a species worldwide. Thus, it is particularly important to bring agriculture to the forefront of this project. It is not enough to allude to agriculture or the processes connected to it in the food system. Agriculture must be addressed head-on in museum exhibits if visitors and the public are to understand the value, importance, and broad reach of what the term entails.
Farm Shows and Agricultural Fairs

Museum exhibits are just one viable method of presenting information and knowledge concerning agriculture; agricultural fairs and shows successfully attract hundreds of thousands of visitors across the country annually. These agricultural fairs place farm technology and animals on display while encouraging visitors to learn about agriculture from producers’ perspectives. For example, an interactive exhibit in California walked children through the process of obtaining a bank loan and purchasing seeds all the way through marketing their products, paying off debts, and earning a profit (Kirby 2008). Live aspects such as a petting zoo, yarn-spinning activities, a chance to observe and operate farming machinery, and food offerings from a local barbecue stand complemented the exhibit (Kirby 2008).

At the 2011 Pennsylvania Farm Show, “Today’s Agriculture” presented a 10,000 square-foot exhibit featuring regional agricultural practices (Wireless News 2011). It showcased animals raised for commercial meat consumption including “finishing floor pigs, broiler chickens, caged layer hens… feedlot steers, dairy cows, and veal calves” (Wireless News 2011). To demonstrate on-farm tools for conservation, plots of soybeans and corn mixed with cover crops and forested buffers complemented the animals (Wireless News 2011). There were also demonstrations of farm machinery and uses of Global Positioning System (GPS) in agriculture (Wireless News 2011). Demonstrators and volunteers were on hand to answer questions and provide insight to the farm show’s visitors.

One of the non-profit partners in the production of this event explained the importance of this show to educating the public about agricultural practices in Pennsylvania:

By showing the public our production practices, we hope to eliminate the biggest argument anti-agriculture groups have today – that we won’t allow the public to see how their food is produced…. We’re excited to open our doors, let people look around, and answer their questions (Wireless News 2011).

As seen in these exhibits from Pennsylvania and California, educating the public about the “typical” life of a farmer is critical in creating a public that understands, chooses to engage in, and supports agriculture. In other words, these exhibits strive to promote agricultural literacy among visitors (Frick et al. 1991).

In 2001, the Oklahoma State Fair featured agricultural exhibits with “MTV-style pop flair” (Colberg 2001). The focus of these exhibits was the ‘AGtropolis Adventure,’ a “whimsical, futuristic city encompassing 26,000 square-feet of interactive activities and animal exhibits focusing on agriculture’s impact on every day life” (Colberg 2001). Education and interaction were key goals of this exhibit: projections that brought animal characters to life engaged visitors and asked for their help in understanding different concepts or in collecting information about a special topic in the exhibit (Colberg 2001). Finally, on a scale more than one million square-feet large, the Pennsylvania Farm Show (which hosted ‘Today’s Agriculture’ in 2011) averages an annual crowd of 350,000 visitors (Martin 2003). Its exhibits and activities, like those previously mentioned, focus on livestock viewings, educational displays, and the image of agriculture as it impacts the Pennsylvania region (Martin 2003).
What all of these farm shows and exhibits share is their appeal and ability to draw a large number of visitors through interactions with animals and self-guided educational exhibits where visitors feel they are in control of their learning. These events are successful at disseminating information about large-scale animal husbandry and the finished products of farming, but they lack a broader connection to the complexity of food systems and those involved in agricultural work. For example, the exhibit leading children through the process of getting a bank loan to turning a profit fails to communicate the many layers of complexity and risk in attempting to run a farm business. These other dimensions include labor costs, weather conditions, self-marketing, and earning a viable income. Pens of commercial-grade livestock transfer information about a certain type of farm animal, but what about animals raised outside of pens, cages, and feedlots? Without being exposed to multiple or alternative perspectives of farming and agriculture, consumers may quickly make assumptions about what agriculture always is or always should be.

These examples provide a contrast between how modern exhibits and farm shows typically present agriculture with what this project proposes. There are multiple ways to share information, and interactive animal exhibits are only one version. Vermont offers neither the geographic size nor the population to construct a farm show such as those in Pennsylvania or Oklahoma. Vermont’s history of an agricultural economy and changing farming practices, however, lends itself to a public interested in food systems (Albers 2000; Working Lands Enterprise Initiative 2015). If this project is to identify a “public” of likeminded people, it must rely on the Vermont community already engaged with the exhibit to promote and support the exhibit throughout its execution.

Experimenting with Innovation

With multiple theories of exhibit learning and art forms to draw upon, it is important to circle back to a central tenet of exhibit engagement: the information is only as useful to visitors as their ability to retain and apply it in their respective lives. The Festival of American Folklife is a highly successful example of an alternative exhibit encouraging visitor participation coupled with applied education (Heyman 1995). The Festival occurs every summer on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. (Heyman 1995). In this no-wall exhibit, conversations are as much a part of the exhibit as cooking demonstrations, musical performances, and many more activities. The Festival of American Folklife highly encourages visitors to actively engage in the information presented rather than passively reading it on a sign.

Innovation in creating engaging exhibits can also go beyond the open-air living exhibit design of the Festival of American Folklife. A research team at Newcastle University in England has recently developed a live-action play as both a collaborative method and result of their studies. The play’s storyline parallels the researchers’ questions, and the audience is actively engaged to share their thoughts and direct the outcome of both the play and the research process (Normans Media Ltd. 2015). The goal for the Newcastle project…

...is to make academic research more democratic, accessible, and relevant to communities. Using a play in this way means the audience is both the co-producer of the theatre and the research (Normans Media Ltd. 2015).
Another highly creative approach to research proposes the inclusion of virtual reality to convey the people and settings involved in field research to outsiders (Green 2007). These types of exhibits suggest that the goal is “not to teach, but to inspire” an otherwise unengaged public around a topic of interest. From soil science to town planning and other topics that impact a community broader than the researchers’ sphere, an inspired public means continued inquiry for researchers (Megonigal et al. 2010, 706).

Why are different museums and research groups spending more of their energy in redesigning and rethinking their exhibit and information communication methods? These newer methods of presenting information are working to shift the museum paradigm of teaching the public to an audience capable of making its own opinions by interacting with the presented material in its own desired way. When researchers and the public collaborate in creating and communicating information, that research becomes valuable to those evaluating it. When participants recount their recorded stories to a live audience, or when students work backwards from an exhibit to learn more about those people interviewed and photographed, multiple levels of learning occur (Crothers 2002).

It is in these moments that the shared information becomes meaningful and hopefully useful to those engaging with it, and when community-based research best maintains its roots. Eco-museums provide an exemplary model of the complex yet interconnected nature of research on communities:

The concept of an eco-museum is one more of process than a type of museum; it relies on an agreement with the community to preserve, interpret, and manage their heritage resources for ‘sustainable development’. The goal is to foster a dynamic process for broader community involvement and shared responsibilities, for heritage becomes closer to the idea of ‘place’ – where the history of the inhabitants and the physical objects, buildings, and environment are infused with the intangible memories and aspirations. It is a strategy for place-based development that honors[s] local networks/relationships, and it plays a role in fostering social capital at the local level (Dewhurst 2014, 250).

As this project works to capture images, videos, and stories from those involved and impacted by grassroots food and agriculture, the final exhibit presents an opportunity to foster both the intangible and tangible concepts, places, and practices that create Vermont’s modern sense of place and its food system. The goal is to reflect what Vermonters already see happening around them to present a collaborative concept of the future of Vermont agriculture. These ideas are derived from the community, and will cycle back into the community through the exhibit. The exhibit is only the medium for the story of the Vermont food system – the participants in its creation and those who interact with it are the actors.
Community Outreach

Key to popularizing the exhibit are community outreach and marketing across the state of Vermont. Without community support and enthusiasm behind the exhibit, its content would be irrelevant. The following are outreach efforts either completed or in progress as a result of this project. These methods are meant to serve as a jumping off point, rather than limitations, of how best to engage the greater Vermont community.

**Instagram: @vtfoodroots**
The primary method of advertising the project includes the co-created Instagram account @vtfoodroots, which went live beginning September 2015. The account features photos and videos highlighting Vermont’s diverse agricultural practices, foods, events, and the people creating Vermont’s food system. As of January 1, 2016, @vtfoodroots had 112 followers and 78 posts, with the #vtfoodroots used 82 times (4 times by other handles).

The @vtfoodroots account offers a primary mode of communication with people on social media. As of 2014, approximately 53% of Instagram users nationally are under the age of 30, and 68% are under the age of 50 (Duggan et al. 2015). If these parameters can be generalized to the Vermont population, then the @vtfoodroots Instagram campaign captures a majority of young and middle-aged adult Internet users.

**The University of Vermont Food Feed Blog**
The UVM Food Feed blog publishes weekly posts connecting readers with topics on social, economic, environmental, and health aspects of the food system. Updates on the blog are sent to approximately 550 email inboxes per blog post, in addition to existing online as a standalone blog. Authors and subscribers range from students to faculty members, community people, and those employed across the food system.

An announcement went out on October 9, 2015 through the UVM Food Feed blog to spread awareness of the Instagram project @vtfoodroots. The story was tagged under the “Social” and “UVM” topic categories on the blog. The update for this post was sent to 547 email inboxes, with 200 people opening the email. Of those 200 people, 83 specifically opened the @vtfoodroots announcement.

**The University of Vermont Food Feed Twitter**
To maximize the connections between the UVM Food Feed and the @vtfoodroots account, the @vtfoodroots Instagram account was linked with the UVM Food Feed Twitter account shortly after its creation. This means that for every post on Instagram by @vtfoodroots using #vtfoodroots, the UVM Food Feed Twitter account publishes the photo and caption as a Tweet.

The third aspect of the social media campaign to connect the UVM Food Feed Blog with the Instagram account included the Food Feed’s Facebook presence. Due to technical difficulties related to ownership of the accounts, these could not be connected.
Participatory documentation of grassroots food and agriculture in Vermont: @vtfoodroots

Posted by Guest Author | October 9, 2015

by Shannon Esrich

@vtfoodroots is a partnership between the UVM Food Systems Graduate Program and the Vermont Folklife Center to document and share emergent and historical grassroots farming and food in Vermont using Instagram.

We are in the midst of an agricultural renaissance in the United States, one that emphasizes smaller scale farming, locally grown and locally distributed agricultural products, and the manufacture of specialty food items crafted for local and regional consumption. This broader movement, framed by Tanya Denckla Cobb as “the grassroots food movement,” seeks to re-localize agricultural output and consumption, and represents a fundamental shift in long-standing agricultural practice and policy in the United States.

Vermont is one of the states at the forefront of these national efforts to reinvent farming, food production and distribution. Farming has held a central role in the culture and economy of Vermont since the colonial period. The current explosion of grassroots agriculture in the state draws on this long history, mixing a legacy of methods and philosophy with contemporary ideas, needs and goals.

Join the revolution and share your pictures on Instagram using #vtfoodroots!
The University of Vermont Food Systems Newsletter
On October 19, 2015, the @vtfoodroots Instagram announcement appeared in the inaugural University of Vermont Food Systems Newsletter, emailed to 722 inboxes. Of those emails sent, 463 people opened the newsletter, and 19 recipients viewed the full @vtfoodroots article. Although it was not the headline story in the newsletter, the announcement was included as a spotlight on the UVM Food Feed blog.

The University of Vermont Food Systems Initiative and Graduate Program Webpages
Although it is not connected to an email listserv or blog, the University of Vermont Food Systems Initiative and Graduate Program webpages offer a central place for information about UVM’s food systems programs to community members, faculty, and prospective and current students. On October 9, 2015 the @vtfoodroots Instagram announcement was placed on both websites, expected to have a similar viewership to the University of Vermont Food Systems Newsletter and Food Feed Blog.
Figure 3

Dirt In Your Soul and @vtfoodroots: By the Numbers

Instagram announcement in UVM Food Feed Blog sent to 547 email inboxes.

- **200** recipients opened the email.
- **83** people read the announcement.

Instagram announcement in UVM Food Systems Newsletter sent to 722 email inboxes.

- **463** recipients opened the newsletter.
- **19** people followed the link to the @vtfoodroots blog post.

As of January 1, 2016, the @vtfoodroots Instagram account had **112** followers.

- **82** Instagram posts included #vtfoodroots, including 4 posts made by other handles.
- **78** posts generated by @vtfoodroots.

- **53** grants and private foundations reviewed.
- **22** audio recorded interviews synthesized and coded.
- **16** Vermont groups and venues contacted to host the exhibit.
# Primary Contacts for Potential Exhibit Venues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Venue</th>
<th>Contact</th>
<th>Email/Phone</th>
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<tbody>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chair of Exhibits Committee</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asst. to Dean of Libraries for External</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relations; Library Associate Professor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vermont History Museum</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vermont Historical Society</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public Program Coordinator</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assistant State Curator</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Burlington City Arts</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chief Curator and Director of Exhibitions</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelburne Farms</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Director of Community Programs</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The Hardwick Town House</td>
<td>Shari Cornish</td>
<td><a href="mailto:Shari.cornish@hardwickvt.org">Shari.cornish@hardwickvt.org</a> <a href="mailto:shar@sharicornish.com">shar@sharicornish.com</a> 802-472-7163</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Northeast Kingdom Arts Council for the</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Hardwick Town House</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shelburne Museum</td>
<td>Office of Administration</td>
<td><a href="mailto:director@shelburnemuseum.org">director@shelburnemuseum.org</a> 802-985-3346 ext. 3155</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>FoodWorks Director</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Market South End Location</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Director of Community Engagement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen Day Art Center</td>
<td>Nathan Suter</td>
<td><a href="mailto:director.helendayartcenter@gmail.com">director.helendayartcenter@gmail.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Executive Director and Curator</td>
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The University of Vermont Bailey/Howe Library
Located on the University of Vermont campus in Burlington, the Bailey/Howe Library is the hub of student life on campus second only to the Dudley H. Davis Center. The library is recommended above the student center because of its interior spaces designed specifically to display small-scale exhibits. Historically, the Bailey/Howe has displayed work from a broad scope of student and faculty research projects. These include “Working the Landscape: Vermont’s Fields, Trails, and Forests”, “Growing Fields”, and “The Golden Cage: Mexican Migrant Workers and Vermont Dairy Farmers” (The University of Vermont Libraries 2009; 2013; 2014). The Bailey/Howe is also a long-term partner with the Vermont Folklife Center, as they were partners in producing the “Golden Cage” exhibit in 2009 (The University of Vermont Libraries).

Prudence Doherty, the Public Services Librarian at the Bailey/Howe Library, has recommended the Folklife Center propose the exhibit as available to rent out to the Bailey/Howe, as the library has done in the past with the Vermont Folklife Center. The library’s budget for renting external exhibits and providing support typically remains between $500-1,000. Additionally, the library suggests including a digital companion with the physical exhibit which can be integrated into the library’s website and archives. Finally, it is important to consider the configuration of the exhibit space. Smaller in scale than many galleries, the exhibit space is also split into two major display areas. If possible, a natural division in the information or narrative of the exhibit would be best for this location.

The library believes the topic of this exhibit strongly matches the mission and goals of the University of Vermont to integrate food systems topics into the curriculum. Fall 2016 would be the optimal time to have the library install the exhibit, as more students are on campus during the traditional academic year than in the summer months. The exhibit would remain in the library throughout the fall 2016 semester (end of August through December).

The Bailey/Howe would be excited to serve as the inaugural location for the traveling exhibit, and is willing to engage in outreach strategies to attract students and faculty from across the University, as well as community members, to the exhibit. Additionally, Bailey/Howe would expect a partnership in implementing a public program that features the exhibit several weeks after its installation. Programming events in the past have included special guest lectures from scholars within and without the University, as well as events particular to the topic of interest. The latter has included community bike rides, film screenings, and skill demonstrations. Communications surrounding the possibility of the Bailey/Howe renting this exhibit are recommended as early as possible.

Ideally, the exhibit would reach as many community members in the Vermont region as possible, but certain limitations must be taken into consideration when selecting potential exhibit locations. Because funding supporting the longevity of the exhibit is currently uncertain, the following list contains only those places that could offer a space either at no or very low cost to the Vermont Folklife Center. These locations also include sites known to attract people to their location, either during the suggested event or on a regular basis. The following list is by no means exhaustive, but represents the best options available to the project based on the aforementioned limitations. Venues are listed from the most highly (first) to moderately (last) recommended.
**Vermont History Museum**

Curated by the Vermont Historical Society, the Vermont History Museum’s central location in Montpelier provides a more accessible exhibit location for the Vermont population living outside Chittenden County. As the capital, Montpelier also offers a high level of foot traffic from locals and tourists alike. The Museum can offer a hallway gallery space ideal for panel or photography exhibits. Their next availability for a new exhibit is July 2016. There is a six-month minimum exhibit commitment for this gallery.

**Vermont State House**

Located in the heart of the state’s capital, the Vermont State House provides an opportunity to display the exhibit from July through October 2016 in the Card Room. This space serves as the hallway between the State House and the adjoining cafeteria. The legislature will not be in session at this time, but the popularity of tours during the fall season promises a high level of foot traffic for the exhibit. September in particular brings the greatest number of tourists and locals alike into the State House.

Due to the Card Room’s naturally elongated shape, hanging banners and wall-based displays work best rather than objects placed on display in cases. The slideshow of photos and video proves more difficult in arranging some kind of technology safely locked into place, but State House curator staff does not consider this aspect of the exhibit to be impossible.

**Chittenden Emergency Food Shelf**

The Chittenden Emergency Food Shelf is the largest direct service emergency food provider in Vermont, serving more than 12,000 people annually (“Chittenden Emergency Food Shelf” 2015). It is a program of the Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity. The Food Shelf has hosted outside events in the past, but they have difficulty offering a space for more than one Saturday or one evening. While the cafeteria is the most suited place for an exhibit, the high-use of the area by multiple programs would create difficulty in hosting the exhibit in the cafeteria during normal hours of operation.

**Of Land and Local**

“Of Land and Local” is an “annual multidisciplinary, statewide exhibition designed to initiate a dialog about issues surrounding art and the environment that relates to the Vermont landscape” (Burlington City Arts 2015). Only in its third year of production, this event culminates in October with special viewings, discussions, and receptions focusing on the season’s artistic themes of exploration across the state. While data from the Dirt In Your Soul project does not directly focus on the series’ 2016 “Water” theme, conversations with DJ Hellerman, Curator and Director of Exhibits for BCA, indicate that future years of the series may be able to host parts of this exhibit. Particular venues of interest for the VFC include the BCA Center in downtown Burlington and the Shelburne Farms campus. The Of Land and Local series has hosted many multimedia displays in the past, and it is free to participate. Additionally, the BCA has offered to work as a partner in finding other potential venues to show the final Dirt In Your Soul exhibit once further details concerning the layout and content are established.
Figure 4

Where in Vermont?

Burlington Cluster:
Exhibit Venues (Cont.)

Shelburne Farms
Shelburne Farms is a 1,400-acre working farm, forest, and National Historic Landmark that strives to be a leader in environmental education and sustainability (Shelburne Farms 2015). Across their large campus lie many buildings that are particularly popular spots for visitors, such as the Farm Barn that houses Shelburne Farms’ cheddar cheese operation. Shelburne Farms’ emphasis on education and connecting people to the land lends itself to hosting the Dirt in Your Soul exhibit.

The Hardwick Town House
The Hardwick Town House has been newly restored to host community events such as musical and artistic performances, movies, lectures, and meetings (Northeast Kingdom Arts Council 2015). In the heart of Hardwick, now often referred to as “the town that food saved”, the Town House is open to new events that will attract community support and breathe life into the building’s time of restoration (Northeast Kingdom Arts Council 2015). The Town House offers the easternmost potential exhibit location.

Shelburne Museum
Reaching across rolling hills and beautiful gardens, the Shelburne Museum draws thousands of visitors to its campus each year. Unique in its inclusion of historic buildings as the basis for other museum artifacts and artwork, the Museum invites visitors to expand their conception of what it means to go to a museum. Due to its campus, the Shelburne Museum is already accustomed to creating and curating exhibits in unconventional spaces. This, and its frequent partnerships with the VFC, makes Shelburne Museum a highly-valued potential partner.

Middlebury College
Located just down the street from the VFC, Middlebury College offers a similar audience to UVM’s Bailey/Howe Library, but with a different set of young adults and educational opportunities. Middlebury College is recommended despite its closeness to the VFC based on the assumption that there is a distinct difference between those people most likely to interact with the VFC on their own accord and the students and campus community who could engage with the exhibit on the college’s campus. Middlebury College (along with the VFC) would serve as the southernmost exhibit location.

City Market, South End Location
City Market is currently the highest grossing single-store food co-operative in the United States, generating $38 million in annual sales (City Market, “Annual Report” 2014:6). This level of sales means a large number of people from the greater Burlington area who are coming into City Market on a daily basis. Due to its high level of success and popularity, coupled with the city’s desire for a grocery store in the South End, City Market is now working with the Burlington community to develop plans for their new South End location. With the expansion expected to reach completion by spring 2017 (City Market, “We’re Growing” 2015), the Vermont Folklife Center is in an excellent position to begin discussions with City Market management now about integrating the exhibit into their new location.

If the new location will have outdoor and indoor seating areas similar to the current location, these spaces could be utilized for banners, images, and potentially electronic and multimedia exhibit features. At the time of this report, City Market is currently in a 6-12 month period of “due diligence work”, after which they will be engaging the public for input concerning the building plans. City Market will provide “plenty of notification about when and where these opportunities will take place” (City Market, “We’re Growing” 2015).
Figure 5

Exhibit Locations by Criteria

1. Chittenden Emergency Food Shelf
2. City Market, South End Location
3. Helen Day Art Center
4. Middlebury College
5. Of Land and Local
6. Shelburne Farms
7. Shelburne Museum
8. The Hardwick Town House
9. University of Vermont Bailey/Howe Library
10. Vermont Folklife Center
11. Vermont History Museum
12. Vermont State House
Helen Day Art Center
Located in the heart of downtown Stowe, the Helen Day Art Center receives large numbers of locals and tourists alike each year. The Helen Day Art Center is accustomed to a variety of exhibit types, including wall panels, object cases, and multimedia displays ("Exhibitions" 2015). Additionally, the Center conducts frequent public programming to connect the northern Vermont community with the visual arts ("Exhibitions" 2015). Helen Day is more generally focused on artistic exhibits rather than text-heavy museum exhibits, but their expressed interest in this project qualifies the Center as a potential exhibit venue.

Other Potential Community Partners
More locations were contacted than are able to or interested in hosting the Dirt In Your Soul exhibit. Two groups, however – the Intervale Center and the Center for an Agricultural Economy – have offered to help promote and/or support the exhibit in its later stages.

The Intervale Center consists of 350 acres around the Burlington section of the Winooski River. It is home to 11 farms, the Intervale Food Hub, and many different educational gardens and programs. With many established media outlets for the Intervale’s own promotion, it is considered a key partner in helping to advertise the exhibit and create public interest in it. In Hardwick, The Center for an Agricultural Economy (CAE) has also expressed interest in possibly helping to promote the exhibit as it does not have an appropriate space to physically host it. The CAE continues to gain regional attention for its efforts in revitalizing the local economy through food- and agriculture-related endeavors, and could potentially utilize their connections to highlight the exhibit. Both the Intervale Center and the Center for an Agricultural Economy, as with all previously identified partners, request further conversation as the exhibit planning process progresses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Partner</th>
<th>Contact</th>
<th>Email/Phone</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intervale Center</td>
<td>Joyce Cellars Community Relations Manager</td>
<td><a href="mailto:joyce@intervale.org">joyce@intervale.org</a> 802-660-0440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Center for an Agricultural Economy</td>
<td>Sarah Waring Executive Director</td>
<td><a href="mailto:sara@hardwickagriculture.org">sara@hardwickagriculture.org</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The economic viability of the exhibit must be factored into long-term goals for the project, including creating, maintaining, and transporting the exhibit. The project was originally funded by the Library of Congress Archie Green Fellowship. To ensure the longevity of the exhibit, however, the following provides several options in seeking funding for its production and procurement. 53 foundations and grants were included in a primary review of funding opportunities. This has been narrowed down to the following 10 possibilities based on their relevance, award amount, and preferences in applicants. The recommendations are listed in order, with 1 being the most highly suggested and 10 being the least. Basic requirements for each award have not been listed if they are met or exceeded, such as the applicant being a 501(c)(3) or a New England/Vermont-based group.

1. **Vermont Arts Council Project Grants ($500-3,000)**
   - Deadline: May 2016
   - Preferences:
     - “Art activities that enhance the quality of life for Vermont’s citizens, attract visitors, and help stimulate local economies.”
     - Exhibits with a strong community outreach component.
     - “Creates or strengthens collaborations between the arts community and other community organizations and schools.”

2. **City Market Co-Op Patronage Seedling Grant ($500-7,500)**
   - Deadline: June 2016
   - Preferences:
     - Work that strengthens the local food system.

3. **Vermont Humanities Council Programs for the Public Grant (Up to $5,000)**
   - Deadline: September 2016
   - Preferences:
     - Lecture series, museum programming, and community projects that are free and open to the public.

4. **Windham Foundation Grant ($5,000-10,000+)**
   - Deadline: Ongoing (Quarterly)
   - Preferences:
     - “Projects which enhance the unique qualities of Vermont’s small town life, support its natural and working landscape, sustain Vermont's social, cultural and natural resources or preserve Vermont's history and traditions while enhancing day-to-day community life.”

5. **Hemenway and Barnes Jane’s Trust: Arts and Culture/Environment Grant ($50,000-150,000)**
   - Deadline: July 15, 2016
   - Preferences:
     - “Increased access to artistic expression and education in the arts for underserved populations.”
     - “Impact of artistic and cultural exposure on communities.”
     - “Meaningful and innovative contributions to protection of critical or historically significant rural and urban natural resources.”
Alma Gibbs Donchian Foundation Grant ($25,000+)
- Deadline: Ongoing (Quarterly)
- Preferences:
  - "Organizations that promote partnerships and collaborative efforts among multiple groups and organizations."
  - Pilot initiatives or new program models.
  - "Programs or agencies engaged in the furtherance of fundamental values, such as: self-reliance, respect for tradition, the value of work."

Claneil Foundation Special Project Fund ($30,000-100,000)
- Deadline: December 1 (Annually)
- Preferences:
  - "Cutting-edge approaches that are timely, demonstrate potential for significant impact, and can serve as a model for others."
  - "Organizations committed to improving the health of families and communities through…a sustainable food system."
  - Activities that work to “alleviate hunger, increase access to, and consumption of, nutritious food, and to advance reforms in the food system.”

New England Grassroots Environment Fund Grow Grants: Food Issue Area (Amount not stated)
- Deadline: Ongoing
- Preferences:
  - Creative approaches to creating a resilient, healthy, safe and equitable regional food system.”

The Vermont Community Foundation Walter Cerf Community Fund ($500-5,000)
- Deadline: June 7, 2016
- Preferences:
  - "Proposals that encourage cooperation, collaboration, and community building."

National Endowment for the Humanities Collaborative Research Grants ($15,000-300,000+)
- Deadline: October 2016 for optional review of draft proposal, December 7, 2016 for complete application
- Preferences:
  - Interpretive humanities research undertaken by two or more collaborating scholars.
  - "Research that significantly adds to knowledge and understanding of the humanities.”

Recommendation: The first four grants are considered the most appropriate and feasible to fund the future exhibit. Options 5-8 are included as likely though more general matches for the project. Grants 9 and 10 should be considered reaches in terms of the foundations’ missions or grant guidelines, but are not considered irrelevant and have thus been included in the final recommendation.
Exhibit Narrative

Introduction
Critical to engaging the exhibit’s audience will be creating a narrative in which common themes from the interviews are seamlessly woven together to create a cohesive image of Vermont food and agriculture. The following eight themes are intended to be a starting point rather than a prescriptive outline for the exhibit. These themes and key examples from the interviews have been chosen after careful consideration of the data, but are listed in no particular order. The analysis to reach these themes included evaluating the different interview styles of the two interviewers for this project, as each tended to focus on different areas of personal interest in their questions. This narrative therefore contains themes taken from interviewee’s responses, rather than strictly following the interviewers’ question patterns. The section maintains quotation marks to ensure interviewees’ words are easily identified.

Key Themes
1. Diversified Systems of Production
2. Identity Work
3. Adaptability and Resiliency
4. Economic Balance
5. Community
6. Connection to the Land
7. Support for Local Food
8. Optimism About the Future

Diversified Systems of Production
A diverse system of food production means one in which the people involved and the products they create are unique, resulting in a composite array of foods and food production practices in the region. The people interviewed for this exhibit hold a wide range of positions, including:

- Butchers
- Vegetable farmers
- Grain growers
- Fruit farmers
- Syrup makers
- Dairy farmers
- Food hub workers
- Meat and poultry producers
- Community leaders
- CSA-based farms
- Wholesale-focused producers
- Chefs
- Institutional food service staff

Among these people there is often overlap between two or more of these categories, indicating varied on-farm and business practices throughout Vermont’s food system.

Producers are consistently aware of both the challenges and rewards of running a diversified farm or food business. Lifelong farmer Bill Wilson Clark, of Clark Brothers Maple Syrup Company, reflects on his farm business’ success:

“People say, what’s your number one product? And I say our number one product is diversity. We sell more diversity than anything else.”

Exemplifying the challenges of growing many different crops, Jon Satz of Wood’s Market Garden expresses the complexity of running a diversified farm:

“Part of what I love is the diversity of it. Part of what I hate is the diversity of it. It’s the bane of our existence – it’s the fun and challenge of it. It’s part of the most difficult things – it’s hard to not get scattered and hard to do a really good job on all these different things.”
The type of food grown or produced is only one version of diversity in agriculture. There are also different methods of growing food and raising animals. Some of the most common umbrella terms for these methods include conventional agriculture, organic agriculture, and the less frequently mentioned biodynamic agriculture. The latter is a method with very specific homemade inputs (fertilizer, compost, etc.) that follow specific seasonal and lunar calendars in their application. Regarding his introduction to agriculture through a biodynamic farm, Satz continues:

“I see nothing but incredible vibrancy on the farms that follow biodynamic practices. There’s quite a few hybrid groups out there [too]. I think when I was younger I used to think of [biodynamic] as more than organic; I no longer see it as black and white. [The founder of biodynamic practices] has a very strong influence on approach towards agriculture just as any of the many versions of organic agriculture that are out there, or conventional. And I honestly have learned as much if not more from a lot of conventional farmers as I have from organic. There’s a lot more similar than there is dissimilar.”

Satz highlights a critical point in understanding different farming practices when he recognizes the abundance of overlap, rather than dissimilarities, across agricultural methods. Understanding the challenges and advantages of each type of agriculture, as Satz expresses, is important in creating a food system in which producers respect one another’s practices. The array of farming methods currently practiced in Vermont and elsewhere creates the backbone of Vermont’s modern food system.

Identity Work
When people believe their profession or daily actions are a product of who they are, and vice versa, those actions are considered identity work. Identity work includes an individual’s life perspective, morals, and beliefs about what is valuable and important. Those interviewees who farmed most clearly defined themselves according to their work, and expressed how their occupation reflects themselves. Explaining the inseparable feeling of accomplishment and success in his family growing 90% of their own food during his childhood, Carl Cushing of Vermont Livestock Slaughter and Processing recalls:

“You could look back over your work, and there’s a reward that you get and you can’t explain that to somebody. When you look over what you’ve done, and the way that it looks and the way that you were taught to do it, and that it meant that something was going to come back to you tenfold – there was a reward that you just can’t explain, yet, it’s a sense, you have to feel it. I’m glad I had that.”
Cushing’s pride in his family’s food production led him to continue working with food as a butcher, much as other producers knew their life would always be defined by their connection to agriculture. Michelle Bates of Wellsmere Farm knew that despite life changes, she knew her calling was to be a farmer:

“You always get drawn back – it’s who you are, it’s born into you. I mean I think you have dirt in your soul or something. They say ‘ashes to ashes, dust to dust’; I think in our case it’s dirt to dirt. It’s just what you do.”

Sona Desai, the Intervale Food Hub Manager, echoes a similar sentiment in how her life path will always be entwined with agriculture. Desai speaks from her experience having to end her trial farm business when it became clear that she could not directly support herself through farming alone:

“This is always going to be a part of me. I need to grow food in some way, I need to be around food production. I believe food production is one of the most amazing occupations or contributions to the world...Farming is such a part of your life, it’s your identity, and when you realize that that’s not what you can do for your occupation, it’s like part of your identity that is lost.”

Other farmers described their work as “a calling to help feed my community” (Scout Palmedo-Proft, Someday Farm), and “something just that completely caught every part of my being” (Jon Satz, Wood’s Market Garden). Satz continues to explain how people are reflected in their farming:

“I noticed really quickly, subconsciously or over the table consciously, that it’s a work that keeps you very honest. If you don’t go do something, it shows. If you don’t go water that, that can die. You don’t take care of that, that dies. It’s driving in and of itself, and so there’s a discipline that comes from it. If you have the goal of or the enjoyment of what the results are as being good, you’ve got to do the work.”

Satz also considered the different expressions of farming, earlier referred to as diversified agriculture, to be a result of the varying personalities of the people behind the farms:

“Nothing too fancy or mysterious about it on some level: you bring your personality and your drive to it and you get a lot of different interpretations of it.”

Many growers mentioned the pride they and their workers have for their products due to the large amount of time and energy that goes into creating a finished farm product of any kind. At the same time, Satz attempts to define exactly what his roles and responsibilities on his farm are and what it means for him to be a grower:

“I still do quite a bit of harvesting; there’s some crops that I don’t ever touch. I’m a grower, but I’m usually setting up the work for someone else or moving on to the next thing. It’s a lot of orchestrating is what I do as the manager, owner, whatever you want to call it, is keeping the whole train running. And so there’s some
things that are just by nature delegated or just done better by people other than me.”

There is also state-level identity work shaped by Vermont’s farmers. Vermont is considered an agricultural state, but this image does not create itself. Farmers and those involved in agricultural production are what turn the forests and hillsides into a working landscape complete with the iconic hay bales, barns, and cows. Tara Kelly, the Executive Director for the Rutland Area Farm and Food Link (RAFFL), describes the image of Vermont at the time RAFFL emerged:

“The Vermont Council on Rural Development had just come out with their Future of Vermont study, and…it said that same thing that we had already identified locally - That in peoples’ hearts, they want it to be a farming and agriculture state, like in essence, it’s considered part of the essence of Vermont. It’s important to the Vermont brand, and the tourism, and it’s important to the people that live here.”

The Future of Vermont Study pinpointed what the farmers echoed in describing their work as producers: with enough people who feel called to farming, the state as a whole desires to maintain its agricultural landscape and image. The work of growers reaches beyond the individual identity to shape the identity of the whole state.

**Adaptability and Resiliency**

Adaptability and resiliency are similar in that each infers a kind of change, yet they are uniquely different in their connotations. Adaptability skews more towards positivity in being flexible; resiliency tends to refer to maintaining the status quo or keeping one’s head above water despite hard times. New Englanders have long been associated with “Yankee Pride”, much of which concerns the definition provided for resiliency and self-sufficiency rather than adaptability. These terms are combined into one theme, however, to allow room for interpretation with which direction each example falls.

The period of time it takes to start a farm business can be critical in determining the farm’s future success, and thus is full of challenges. Jon Satz of Wood’s Market Garden describes what it was like running a farm by his self for the first time:

“All you can put some seeds in the ground…The rocket science isn’t in any one crop – it’s how to put it all together. And it’s still not rocket science, but it was a learning curve.”
Satz and many others fondly remember the learning curves they faced as early growers, but most admit that the learning never stops as they face new and more complex problems as their businesses grow and develop. Michelle Bates of Wellsmere Farm gives her advice for overcoming adversity in creating a successful and lasting farm business:

“You have to keep adding and changing and adapting to what’s going on around you so that you can survive, so you can keep your head above water. Even though there’s people out there trying to drown you, you gotta keep your head above water and to do that you’ve gotta work hard, you’ve gotta be diligent, and you gotta just keep chasing after what you know in your heart is right. You’ve gotta keep that dirt in your soul and not let those other people steal it from you, because they’re out there.”

“Keeping the dirt in your soul” as Bates refers to is not always easy when personal beliefs and values are tested in the face of challenge. Beth Whiting of Maple Wind Farm shares her personal evolution as a farm owner and businessperson:

“You start out as an idealist in sustainable pasture-based farming, and if you want to survive as a viable farm you really have to become a businessperson. There’s always tradeoffs that come with that. You have to make decisions and sometimes it’s not as easy to have integrity around all of your original ideals.”

Ideals are by definition only concepts of perfection, but Whiting describes the complexity in having to be malleable on both an individual and business level. The tradeoffs that she highlights may never give closure to the discrepancies between ideals and reality, but they are often necessary to stay in business.

Other producers express alternate ways in which they have found success in their businesses. Joe Bossen of Kingsbury Market Garden/Vermont Bean Crafters shares the personal philosophy he has relied upon to start and maintain his business:

“To have to make due with what you have – and with what you don’t have, to find other ways than just buying them to access it – is hugely important.”

A proponent of broadening the culture of exchange and community among growers (and people generally), Joe expresses a sentiment similar to Jack Lazor of Butterworks Farm in being as self-sufficient as possible:

“One of my goals had always been to be able to produce all of the seed that I want, that I use for my crops here. I think for us with our anti-corporate bent, whatever we were doing was to sort of not be part of the system.”
What Lazor feels is one of the founding pillars of his farm – to separate from larger systems of production – is an oft discussed ideal in small-scale, alternative food producers. It is critical to remember, however, that by nature of the global food system, each smaller system of production can never be totally separated from the larger systems. Systems are inherently complex and by nature involve many different components and actors to function. The Lazors' high level of self-sufficiency, however, is a strong example of doing whatever it takes to find success in a farm business.

Bill Wilson Clark, of Clark Brothers Maple Syrup Company, narrates what he believes to be a prime example of Vermont food and agriculture finding a way to survive in a time of transition:

“I look at Rutland and it's a pretty good story up there. When you look at that winter farmers market, when you look here for that matter...you can be pretty proud of a lot of things going on in Rutland...When everybody decided don't sit around and wait for anybody to come in and bail you out, you just pick yourself up by your bootstraps and get going, and a lot of people did, so it's very good that way.”

The Rutland Winter Farmers Market Clark refers to was the first year-round farmers market in Vermont (“Vermont Farmers Market” 2015). It was organized by several different community groups who saw an opportunity to turn the seasonal flow of money from summer markets into a year-round economic boost for Rutland County. The Rutland Winter Farmers Market demonstrates just one of many ways Vermont communities are responding to constantly evolving agricultural trends and demands.

**Economic Balance**

It is true that many interviewees felt they had a calling to work with food and agriculture, either directly or indirectly. Their passions, however, are also their livelihoods. Finding a balance between doing what they love and earning an income is therefore a key factor in many interviewees’ lives.

For some, Vermont’s small-scale markets provide enough retail outlets to provide a fairly reliable income. Vermont farm and food operations tend to be smaller due to the high price and general lack of available land, but Joe Buley of Screamin' Ridge Farm/Joe's Soups makes these limitations work for his business:
“I farm on a small scale for a reason. It’s manageable, the variety’s there, I make a viable living off of it. I’ve been offered more land – I just don’t need it.”

Spencer Blackwell of Elmer Farm elaborates on reaching a similar equilibrium with his farm:

“We are at a place where we are proud, we’re making a decent living. It’s not getting us rich by any means, but I don’t think it’s making us poorer. It’s somewhere in the middle there, between survival and declining. And our approach was not to get rich, so that’s okay.”

Finding this balance may be a constant work in progress, much like a farm itself. Michelle Bates of Wellsmere Farm explains:

“You need to pay the bills, you need to pay the taxes on the farm so you don’t lose the farm, but you’ve got to feed the people too...Everything’s a work in progress on a farm...There’s never enough money to go around to fix everything the way you want it to be. It’ll never be a showcase farm, but it’s a workable farm, and that’s all we need.”

On a larger scale, finding an economic balance can mean ensuring that Vermont farmers have viable markets for their products rooted in communities who are able to purchase Vermont food. Erica Campbell, Farm to Plate Program Director for the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, explains:

“We call it a ‘double-bind’ in Farm to Plate: how do you make sure farmers and food producers are making a living while also providing something that’s affordable and accessible to people?”

Farmers understand this delicate balance of earning a profit while selling an accessible product. Speaking from her own business experience, Cheryl DeVos of Kimball Brook Farm/Green Mountain Organic Creamery contemplates the double bind she faced when trying to sell her milk to school lunch programs outside Vermont:

“To sell my milk outside of state at that price, it just seems so crazy. I wish they would throw out profit, basically. I mean I understand profit, it’s what we do too, but there is not the local component with that whole thing. And we consider local, we are part of what was originally the milkshed. And so Vermont was a milkshed for the big markets - Boston, Portland, New York City – they’re really our local market. I don’t think we’ve dipped into that whole thing enough.”

DeVos’ interest in expanding her business into the major New England and New York markets exemplifies farmers’ search for finding their personal economic balance. Each Vermont farm and food business has a unique point at which it is economically sustainable, but many producers are subject to the same structural challenges. An example is the inflexibility of the national milk market, which many Vermont dairy farmers rely on to sell their fluid milk instead of selling to local retail outlets. DeVos describes the complexity behind why local milk costs more to retailers and earns more for farmers, but why many producers still do not sell locally:

“That’s why local may cost a little bit more. People wonder about that, but sometimes the national market can cheapen that whole product up, and you know the farmer needs to get a good price for his or her milk. I wouldn’t leave either if I was with [national retailers] and I was getting a set price and somebody came to...
me and said you know, you could sell your milk and it would be more local, you would know where this milk is going to – I don't think the economics are going to overcome that good feeling kind of thing. They've got to make money.”

For those farmers who participate in both local and national dairy markets, the compromises of participating in the larger markets can be difficult. Anne Lazor of Butterworks Farm describes the frustration of striving for a livable income while national food distributors take a share of their products' profit:

“It makes you feel bitter sometimes, because you're really just a country bumpkin trying to make good food for people and get it out to the marketplace, and you really kind of get lost in the shuffle.”

Other types of challenges when striving for an economically sustainable operation include defining the type of business or products a farm can produce. For example, finding land to start a farm can be difficult, and for some it is this first step that signals security in their farm business. Jon Satz of Wood's Market Garden describes this process when he decided to start a farm of his own after working outside of farming for a few years:

“It was several years later before I got back into farming, but I came into it a little bit slowly knowing that I really only wanted to get involved if I could own land, or at least have that promise of having that ownership. So I did not want to – there's often not a lot of cash, or there's not lot of equity often in farming, so I saw in my own experience and in other friends where you could work for years and after, if circumstances didn't continue positive, you can kind of end up with nothing. And I had just seen enough of that to say no, you know I'd like to go towards having a farm and owning a place. So I did want to do it – I just went back at it slowly and kind of defined more what I wanted.”

In defining his goals for his new farm, Satz also envisioned a certain type of business that he felt would bring greater economic security than other types of farming:

“Over time I came to the feeling that I really wanted to have a farm stand. That just became I think, as much as a I enjoyed going to farmers markets – loved going to farmers markets – I didn't want that to be the bread and butter of the business. The setting up, the – at least when you're not doing a lot of markets in a week - I don't know if pressure is the right word, but it has to be a nice day because your business rises and falls with the weather. And it's going to do that anyway, but when you go to a farmers market it hinges on that one day.”

At the end of the day, for Satz and for others, farming is only a viable career if they can make a livable income from it. The challenges that small-scale producers face compared to the national food market and larger producers, however, leaves room for enjoyment in always searching for the best practices that will create a viable farm business. Satz reflects on the pros and cons of running a small, diversified fruit and vegetable farm:

“They're not hobbies. You're trying to make a living, you're trying to actually make an income while you're doing these things you enjoy. But it's more, it's increasingly difficult when you're doing smaller amounts of things. There's no way to get around economies of scale, and yet it's the small attention to detail work that is also enjoyable. It's kind of the little niches of what we do in a day that are fun.”
As Satz describes, finding a balance in his farm business means never losing sight of what is important economically, and personally.

**Community**

Community can be defined in a myriad of ways, but loosely can be understood as any group of people who identify as having a connection in some way. Jon Satz of Wood’s Market Garden describes the peer support network he identifies with across Vermont, New England, and New York:

“A lot of the growing community, the agr[icultural] community, is a very vigorous and friendly and social group of people, so the winter conferences you’re always meeting growers from different places... It’s not a secret to know there’s roughly, or less than 1% of the people are actually on a day to day basis growing food, so there’s that automatic brotherhood or sisterhood that your shared experience and it’s not as common as it used to be. So I think people seek out [what] little common [there] is when you do cross paths with people who do it.”

Michelle Bates of Wellsmer Farm defines her agricultural circle similarly:

“You know everybody, all the farmers, because it’s a community. They’re your neighbors, your friends, they’re your helpmates. If somebody’s in trouble, you help them out.”

Jack Lazor of Butterworks Farm echoes others’ definitions of community with his personal philosophy for building his farmer network and business:

“I think it’s all about being out there, being friendly and receptive, and it all comes to you really...it’s still the way I operate, I don’t know any other way to do it really.”

Connected to the community of agricultural producers are consumers, or the people who eat the foods produced by these Vermont farmers. Scout Palmedo-Proft of Someday Farm feels this particular community defines her career as a farmer:

“I am in part a social worker. I have a calling to help feed my community, so I’m honored to have this piece of land, but also honored that my community wants me to be here to grow food for them.”

Interviewees also identified the statewide community of all who live and work in Vermont as key to creating the food system currently in place. With many Vermont producers striving to create unique products for specialized markets, many producers feel the sentiment has been more welcoming than competitive across the Vermont food system. Bill Wilson Clark of Clark Brothers Maple Syrup Company, defines this larger-scale community and the lifestyle it produces:

“Vermont has been a land of opportunity...if you want to come up here and live your life the way you want to live it, as long as you don’t interfere with my life, it’s not my business to interfere with your life. And that’s...
kind of been a Vermont policy for a long time, and I think a lot of people recognize that.”

However people define community, mutual support and good will are continually identified as key components across the different levels of like-minded groups of people.

**Connection to the Land**

At the foundation of many producers’ call to farming is their connection to the land, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. How this relationship manifests varies from person to person, but even statewide there is thought to be a general connection between the people of Vermont and the place they live: “It’s like the land informs the people and the history of a particular town.” (Johnathan Corcoran, Co-Founder and Executive Director of the Addison County Relocalization Network (ACORN).

Scout Palmedo-Proft of Someday Farm sees her job as a joint calling to grow food and be a steward to her local environment:

“We’ve learned to utilize the lands that we’re stewarding. I hate to say the word ‘own’, because I don’t know if you can own something that’s alive! This farm is alive, so I’m not a believer in us owning plants or animals or land because the land is obviously alive if there’s plants and animals on it. But we’re stewarding it.”

Palmedo-Proft speaks from an environmental perspective, while Food Hub Manager at the Intervale Center Sona Desai identifies connecting to the earth with her sense of being human:

“I think food and farming and our connection to the land is what is transformative for me and for the whole world. I think the more that we can tap into the food and the land, the more we are able to tap into the true essence of our beings, and be happy.”

People also express their relationship to land in terms of the skills they have gained from working to grow or hunt their own food. Corcoran elaborates:

“It’s interesting to have renewed interest in putting food up, and new gardens being opened up. It’s a sign. Not that it will happen tomorrow, but it’s nice to know how to grow food, fish, hunt – skills we should pass on to our children. When you know those skills, you have a lot of other knowledge that connects you to the place you live. It’s about rooting into the land. Americans still live in their minds in the American Dream, but the time is coming and Vermont is a leader in putting roots down and being a member of the larger community, the land, critters, soils – it’s us. Until we do that we’re just visitors. Relocalization is about reconnecting and rooting down into this place we call home, and I think this is the settling of America…Other things will begin to shift. In Vermont it’s a communal value, but we’ve got to go deeper, it’s part of a bigger story.”

No matter the scale of one’s physical environment, these people believe that rooting into the land is essential to understanding one’s place in the world. Whether through farming, environmental stewardship, hunting, or any variation of these undertakings, the land that provides for these activities lies at the heart of the greater food system.

**Support for Local Food**

Local food is frequently associated with many other characteristics and moral claims (Born and Purcell 2006). It is difficult to assign general truths or falsehoods in these claims, however, because their validity is highly context-dependent. Nevertheless, the following interviewees saw local food as having
a generally positive impact on individuals and communities.

Attempting to avoid the “local as panacea” view, General Manager of the Mad River Food Hub Joshua Gibbs shares his opinion on the local food movement:

“It’s a great thing to see people growing into this new resurgence of local food and better food, and they go hand in hand. Local food does not always make it better; I mean, in other words, place doesn’t necessarily dictate quality. But, generally, a carrot that’s picked yesterday up the road is going to taste better than a carrot that’s been sitting in cold storage for a month and half before it even hits the grocery store shelf…Keep eating local food, but look for the better quality local food too because there’s some junk out there.”

Gibbs feels his job and the work the Mad River Food Hub supports is “socially responsible” because of the positive values he associates with local food. These values can change across individuals and over time, driving support for different types of foods. Farm to Plate Program Director for the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund Erica Campbell shares her understanding of these value systems:

“I see local food systems tied in with core values for people and it’s different for everybody and it’s not something that you can just go down the list [and check off].”

Executive Director for the Rutland Area Farm and Food Link (RAFFL) Tara Kelly elaborates on her staff’s decision to eat mostly local foods despite their different income levels:

“It’s not tied to that person’s individual economic circumstance necessarily; it’s tied to whether or not they have a value that says it’s worth me paying a little extra for that local food because I know it’s helping my local farmer and my local economy. It really comes back to that in a lot of ways, and making it work for yourself somehow and whether or not that’s a priority.”

Purchasing priorities are just one of many different structural systems that can impact an individual’s interest in and ability to purchase local food. At an institutional scale, the decision to purchase local food is often confounded by other variables. Diane Imrie, Director of Nutrition Services at the University of Vermont Medical Center, describes her team’s decision process when purchasing different food products:

“If there’s a distinct advantage to buying something locally, we will, but local is not our first criteria. People always say local and assume it’s healthy; health is our first criteria…Any money spent locally helps support those producers, which I believe has a long-run health impact if they are more financially viable. If they’re producing in [an] environmentally responsible way, [it] helps [the] health of [the] community…Local relationships allow us to serve a product that we know.”
Imrie connect local food with the possibilities of increasing the health of Vermont communities and the environment, but touches on the importance of not assuming these connections with all local food.

For co-founder and Executive Director of the Addison County Relocalization Network (ACORN), Johnathan Corcoran, local food means an ability to plan for unforeseen circumstances or food crises:

“It’s about getting local foods more readily available. This is not fanciful thinking, this is food security. It is wise to have food security — homeland security — having a little more control over your destiny.”

To Jon Satz of Wood’s Market Garden, producing and eating local food generates a satisfaction unlike any other:

“It’s as important as any language. There’s a skillset to it. There’s something so phenomenally tangible. I mean what person doesn’t put on a big smile and feel really good biting into something fresh in the middle of the summer, or in winter something stored and cooked well? I mean food is such a universal language, and an important language that can be I’d say the accent of the local agriculture. And agriculture has, it is so much a part of our heritage, and it’s always going to be a part of our future.”

Local food and support for Vermont farms has changed over the years, however, even in the time Satz has been a farmer. Here he tells the story he learned from the previous owners of his farm, speaking of the highlight of the summer — corn season:

“People wouldn’t buy the corn unless it was local, not just us, but they would wait. People would wait. They didn’t go buy it in a grocery store, they wouldn’t buy it if it was shipped up from a farm in the Hudson Valley, they’d wait. The first big week was always like the first weekend in August, and she goes there’d be a line up Route 7, up past the little cabins up the road here, a quarter mile up the road of just people coming in when the corn here finally came in. That people honored it a lot more back in the day because it’s what they knew and there was a lot more pride. And, as the supermarket mentality, whether it be fresh, or frozen, or whatever, it became less special. And I think only in the last, especially like you’re saying in the last 10 years, where it’s just become sexy again to kind of pay attention to it — I don’t think it’s anything new.”

Despite the changes in support for local corn and local food more generally, Satz feels that interest in buying food locally has waxed and waned, but never died out. Scout Palmedo-Proft of Someday Farm sums up this belief and others’ support for and belief in the local food movement:

“It’s the difference between a trend and a fad. It’s no longer a fad to eat local, it’s a trend, but we’ve got to keep in peoples’ faces. And that in part is up to us farmers.”

Palmedo-Proft understands that producers need to self-advocate until interest in local food reaches a point where the public chooses to support local farms without continuous persuasion. Palmedo-Proft nails on the head the central belief driving all of these remarks about local food: it is a trend, not a fad.

**Optimism about the Future**

Often referred to as the leader in sustainable food systems, Vermont forges ahead in carving out its own place within the global food system. For some, the future of Vermont’s food system is uncertain in its exact path, but all people interviewed take on a
positive attitude when discussing it. Diane Imrie, Director of Nutrition Services at the University of Vermont Medical Center, shares the hospital’s optimistic outlook on facing the challenges that come with their decision to sign the Healthy Food in Health Care Pledge that set the medical center’s current food service into motion:

“When you think about the food system, it is so complex, and if one person were driving the bus by themselves it would not be successful...It takes a village to make change, and we declared in 2006 we would change the food system. It's a never-ending task because as you learn more you evolve more in your program. That's why we all come to work – we're not done, lots to do.”

Reflecting on Vermont’s history of agricultural production, there are many instances for inspiration in the people who live here working to create the food system they choose, rather than one they are given. Mark Boyden of Boyden Farm/Vermont Beef shares his perspective of the changes the Vermont food system, economy, and population have seen over the last several decades:

“It’s been a big change, and you can’t stop it. Years ago, this whole ‘Take Back Vermont’ thing – well, take it back from whom and to what? What are you going to do?...It's the whole ‘Take Back Vermont’ – you can't! It's changing, everything changes. Either you change or you die, simple as that.”

Part of these changes includes the increase of statewide income earned from Vermont food and agriculture enterprises. As Erica Campbell, Farm to Plate Program Director for the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, notes:

“The food economy in Vermont has grown much faster than the rest of the economy in the last few years, so that's, you know, it's a big success.”

Andy Jones of Intervale Community Farm reflects on these changes:

“It’s been exciting to see the appreciation of food and of local agriculture really change over the last 23 years that I’ve been in business.”

Part of what drives the food economy is the jobs created with each new successful farm and food business. As one of the largest dairies in the state, Cheryl DeVos of Kimball Brook Farm shares her vision for the future:

“I think the whole premise for us – and has always been – that we’re trying to stay a farm, and it’s not that easy. And we believe that the creamery being profitable will make it more profitable for Vermont dairy farms as we grow. We think we can improve the economics of the area, we think we can improve the food that the people are getting, and basically the jobs that are out there.”

Jon Satz of Wood’s Market Garden believes the local food movement has room for innovation and creativity to continue the excitement that started it:

“I think there’s a lot more sustenance and aliveness that can come out of the whole local food, I don't want to use the word economy, but that whole momentum that has really kind of regained some of its own momentum. And I think a lot of it is just people willing to listen to it.”

How Vermont’s food system is defined will be up to those who participate in it, leaving room for different sets of value and beliefs. Campbell describes the
possibilities that come with scaling up the local food movement:

“There’s a movement happening, and it will be interesting to see what happens with that…There’s a lot of opportunity to still have a grassroots movement based on values, all sorts of really important values to people, and an opportunity to grow and produce more food for people, and in doing so, help alleviate all sorts of other issues and contribute to food security and other things…People are excited about the idea, it’s revitalization, it’s community revitalization I think people are seeing it as.”

Campbell touches on the opportunity of local food systems to increase food security. Joe Bossen of Kingsbury Market Garden/Vermont Bean Crafters resonates with his belief in creating a food system that is beneficial to all:

“For anything to be a durable shift, or a wide-scale solution to anything, it’s got to be accessible to the people without the means of forging their own future.”

For Bill Wilson Clark of Clark Brothers Maple Syrup Company, there is no doubt as to the bright future of Vermont food and agriculture:

“I’ve heard people say it – my age and younger ones – agriculture’s in decline in Vermont, it’s seen its best days, it’s all done. Well, I disagree with them. Its best days are still ahead. Here’s what you need to realize: Vermont agriculture is in a period of transition right now…as far as I’m concerned, with this change in agriculture coming on, with the technology that’s out there today, and you can make a lot higher profit off the land that we have, and we don’t have a lot of land. It’s a relatively small state and a lot of it is mountainous, but what land we do have…I think there’s room for everything here. I keep seeing all these promotions out there, ‘Buy local’, ‘Keep the local economy going’, which it does, and all the reasons why you got better and more healthy food to buy local and everything else. And I said, yeah, you know but you’re missing the main point all together. The reason you need to build our agriculture, I think it’s got a very bright future. As far as I’m concerned, Vermont needs to produce all its own food – at least 10% more… Growing our own food, having our own reason for doing it, that’s the best insurance policy we could ever possibly have…I think there’s a lot of things we need to do better…but that doesn’t mean we can’t do it… Vermont has got the greatest agricultural opportunities it’s ever had since it existed right now, and I think it’s doing something with it…I think you’re just going to see it expand more… There’s things that nobody thought could possibly be done ten years ago – they’re doing them, and there’s all kinds of optimism out there as far as that’s concerned.”

How Vermonters choose to develop their food system is in the hands of the producers, consumers, and all involved in bringing Vermont foods to people across the region. There is room for many voices in shaping how the Vermont food system will thrive in the future, but as Wilson said, one thing is certain: there’s all kinds of optimism out there as far as that’s concerned.
In all research projects there are limitations, and this exhibit plan is no exception. Particular emphasis has been put on creating an exhibit representative of and interesting to all Vermonters. When attempting to reach the Vermont community, however, many subgroups may be included or excluded in this group. How these groups are defined becomes the burden of those in control of the information – the researchers (Erhart 2007; Fazio and Gilbert 1986, 37). Structurally...

...a public can be defined as two or more people with a common interest and who may be expected to react similarly to a particular situation or issue. Consequently, when a public is identified, these people will represent a more homogenous group than the total population of which they are part (Fazio and Gilbert 1986, 37).

This concept and how publics form in reality is both conducive to and hindering of this project. Identifying like-minded people interested in Vermont’s food system means this exhibit will likely have a fairly engaged audience, and this “public” will find more or less resonance with the presented topics. This homogenous group of the Vermont public, however, excludes those who may disagree with or otherwise need persuasion to be interested in learning about and discussing the Vermont food system. The interview process strove to identify people from many walks of life, whether they differ in age, gender, occupation, geographic location, income, or place of origin. The exhibit, however, will be inherently flawed in those people and sub-publics that have been missed. These other peoples' stories are not intentionally omitted, but their absence nonetheless impacts the information presented and the responses from those who choose to interact with the exhibit.

The goal of this report has been to provide a guide for immediate and future decisions concerning the Archie Green project of the Vermont Folklife Center. The literature review ideally provides a framework supporting the relevance of a museum exhibit displaying information from community-based research on grassroots food and agriculture in Vermont. This project involves critically understanding the cultural landscape of Vermont, and how this landscape continues to evolve according to changes in immigration, land ownership, and climate. Agriculture is sometimes put on display to the public, but it is often through overwhelming farm shows or in exhibits that only address a very limited interpretation of what it means to participate in the modern American food system. Similar to a photography exhibit showcasing Maryland’s farmers, we “hope to provide viewers with an opportunity ‘to see people, not just defined by what they do with their hands, but by what they do with their hearts’” (Maryland Department of Agriculture 2013).
Conclusion (Cont.)

It is true that “museums are increasingly being expected to proactively use their facilities, collections, and staff skills to address the needs of their communities and thus build a civil society” (Dewhurst 2014, 250). This is a mammoth task, but each new exhibit provides an opportunity to include community members in not just the content, but the way in which it is presented. As they have done in the past and continue to do,

museums let us know who we are, why we are here, where we have been, and where we might be going. They help us engage with others and find our way together. Heritage Centers positioned at the welcoming edge of community/visitor interface can make a difference in people’s lives (Pontius 2010, 97).

If this exhibit can accurately and effectively communicate the story of grassroots food and agriculture in Vermont, it has the potential to highlight and define what it means to live in Vermont during a time of change in the regional and larger food system. By creating a project that interests people from all walks of life through the sharing of stories that transect the Vermont experience, this exhibit serves as one step in the process of building not just a stronger food system, but a stronger community.


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