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Farm-to-Chef Connections, COVID-19, and Local/Regional Values-Based Supply Chains: Strategies for Resilience

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Farm-to-Chef Connections, COVID-19, and Local /Regional Values-Based Supply Chains: Strategies for Resilience

University of Vermont

Closed as of 06/30/2025

Project Director

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Performing Department

Code Name

1670 Nutritional Sciences

Org Project Number

Prefix Number

VT -H02806

Results	Amount	Fiscal Year(s)	
	3	2022 - 2024	▼

Funding Source

Research Capacity Fund (Hatch)

Primary Critical Issue

Long term Viability of Vermont Agriculture, Food and Forests

Start Date

11/03/2021

End Date

09/30/2024

Submitted Date

09/01/2021

Initial Approval Date

11/03/2021

Accession Number

7000956

DUNS/UEI

Not Provided

Non-Technical Summary

This study focuses on **short supply chains**, or the sourcing of agricultural products from the Northeast region by Vermont restaurants. This short supply chain, also called farm to table (or **farm to chef**), is crucial to the viability of a regional food system, as restaurants can offer more consistent and larger scale purchasing commitments for farmers compared to individual consumer purchases. In this study, we are interested in the *resilience* of the farm to chef model (here seen as consistent and stable purchases) as a means of supporting short supply chains. Of particular concern are how changes in practices required during COVID-19 tested the ability of restaurants to serve as an intermediary between producers (through the consistent and robust purchases of agricultural products) and consumers (through the transformation of these products into foods for purchase by consumers). This research project has potential significance for addressing current issues (especially analytic and empirical gaps in elements of food system connection and interdependence) in scholarly research on short supply chains, social embeddedness, and food systems resilience and for developing a meaningful set of ‘lessons learned’ for farmers and chefs. Thus, the results of this research project will have both theoretical and applied significance.

There are several innovations of this research project that will translate into benefits for food systems stakeholders:

- Focus on understudied chef-farmer relationships and the use of case studies across the spectrum of types of operations.
 - Recommendations on ‘lessons learned’ for a system under ‘shock’ in order to solidify future commitments with farm-to-chef model and short supply chains
 - Opportunity to identify areas for cooperative relationships (e.g., farmer marketing) that allow scaling up and increase resilience
 - Opportunity to further food sustainability scholarship through a deeper understanding of the impact of chefs’ skills, knowledge, and social capital in local and regional food systems

This will result in recommendations for future policy and business interventions in order to maintain vibrant regional food systems.

Project Information

Methodology

We will use a mixed-methods approach to determine the association between the resilience of restaurants during the height of the pandemic (March 2020-July 2021) and their level of embeddedness with farms, farmers, and agricultural products from the Northeast region.

To start, we will use the results of a quantitative survey on the impact of COVID-19 on food businesses to create a baseline of conditions. There are questions related to purchases, engagement with government entities and overall financial well-being between March 2020 - July

2021. This survey will go out to a broader array of food service operations than restaurants, including hospital food service, caterers, and specialty markets. We will focus on the responses by owners of independently owned restaurants or small franchise restaurants. There are two close-ended responses (related to supply chains and business operations) and two open-ended responses (new business relationships and access to government programs) that are particularly relevant to our investigation of short supply chains, farmer to chef relationships and food systems resilience. We will work with our collaborators to extract these responses, analyze the total response amongst all the food-related businesses surveyed and then do a specialized analysis of restaurant respondents.

Next, we will develop two linked qualitative research studies using the survey data as a baseline, therefore creating three robust data sets that can be triangulated (see Berg and Lune 2012). As Berg and Lune point out, by combining multiple research methods, “researchers obtain a better, more substantive picture of reality (ibid; 6). Thus, the results of this survey data will be triangulated by using two qualitative research methods: one, short, structured interviews with a representative sampling of types of farm to table restaurants (n=20) and two, several extended case studies (n= 3) for lessons learned and future scenarios to facilitate resilience.

The research hypotheses for the project are as follows:

H1: The COVID-19 pandemic and the associated changes in access to traditional restaurant experiences (indoor dining, social events with many different households) compromised the ability of restaurant operations to maintain supply chains and social commitments to small and medium farms and regional food systems.

1. Assess the stress points in the commitments (as measured by purchases of products, marketing/media representations of the farm to table connections, and degrees of social embeddedness between producers and restaurateurs/chefs)
2. Create case studies of 3 restaurants that best represent the spectrum of resilience as defined by breadth and depth of relationships with farmers (and other purveyors of local products), consistency in level of purchases of local ingredients and foods, and communications as to these commitments to the consumer.

H2: The COVID-19 pandemic and the associated changes in access to traditional restaurant experiences (indoor dining, etc.) revealed the ‘action points’ needed in order to create long term resilience as defined by commitments to local supply chains and socially embedded relationships.

1. Develop an on-going research strategy for assessing the long-term importance of the restaurant sector in maintaining small and medium farms and regional food systems.
2. Generate a definition of food systems resilience based on the farm to table/farm to chef model.
3. Provide case studies that can be used both within Vermont and in the broader region in order to understand the role of chefs in facilitating economic, social, and ecological sustainability.

H3: The intervention of COVID-19 related government programs and the subsequent organization of a subsidized mechanism in order to support farm to table commitments and alternative value

chains facilitates a more resilient regional food system.

1. Research the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020-May 2021) as a unique “moment” in two ways: creating a heightened series of stress points and providing a new level of government engagement with restaurants in terms of new policies and subsidies.

We will create case studies of 3 restaurants that best represent the spectrum of resilience as defined by breadth and depth of relationships with farmers (and other purveyors of local products), consistency in level of purchases of local ingredients and foods, and communications as to these commitments to the consumer.

Research Effort Categories

a. Basic

50 %

b. Applied

50 %

c. Developmental

0 %

Animal Health Percentage

0 %

Classification

Knowledge Area	Subject of Investigation	Field of Science	Percent
803 - Sociological and Technological Change Affecting Individuals, Families, and Communities	6099 - People and communities, general/ other	3000 - Anthropology	100 %

Integrated Activities

Is this an integrated research and extension activity (AREERA Section 104, 105, and 204)?

No

Multistate Activities

Is this a multistate activity (AREERA Section 104 and 201)?

No

Assurances

Are Human Subjects Involved?

Yes

Is the project exempt from federal regulations?

No

IRB Approval Date

Are Vertebrate Animals Used?

No

This performing organization agrees to assume primary responsibility for complying with the Animal Welfare Act (7USC, 2131-2156), Public Law 89-544, 1996, as amended, and the regulations promulgated thereunder by the Secretary of Agriculture in 9 CFR Parts 1,2,3, and 4. In the case of domesticated farm animals housed under farm conditions, the organizations shall adhere to the principles stated in the Guide for the Care and Use of Agricultural Animals in Agricultural Research and Teaching, Federation of Animal Science Societies, 1999.