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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

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

University of Vermont

APPROVED as of 06/30/2025

Final Result

## Project Director

Amy Trubek

## Primary Critical Issue

Long term Viability of Vermont Agriculture, Food and Forests

## Fiscal Year

2024

## Project Start & End Date

11/03/2021 - 09/30/2024

## Organization

University of Vermont

## Organization Project Number

VT-H02806

## Accession Number

7000956

## Funding Source

Research Capacity Fund (Hatch)

### **In 2-3 sentences, briefly describe the issue or problem that your project addresses.**

Our mixed-methods study endeavoured to answer two large questionsL first, what happened to the chef-farmer relationship in Vermont as the COVID-19 pandemic simultaneously tested global and local food supply chains; and second, how can a close examination of the disruption caused by the pandemic to the regional food system provide lessons we can learn about building resilience and sustainability across the wider food system?

### **Briefly describe in non-technical terms how your major activities helped you achieve, or make significant progress toward, the goals and objectives described in your non-technical summary.**

We explored the role of social commitments between chefs and producers in the decision making

of independently operated restaurants across Vermont during the crisis. In our interviews and analysis, we considered the ability of the chef-farmer relationship to act as a deep lever for sustainability and resilience in a localized food system. We found that relationally informed exchanges, facilitated by geographic proximity and personal relationships – and considered in our study as the building blocks for social sustainability – were crucial not only to the long-term viability of the individual businesses, but also to the resilience and sustainability of the local food system. The survey further confirmed the importance of chef-farmer relationship and the commitment to sourcing local ingredients. It also highlighted several circular (zero-waste) practices that chefs and/or restaurant owners considered important but also raised questions about barriers to adopting other practices.

The first phase of our study, which we provided detailed summaries for in previous reports (2023 and 2024), involved twenty short, semi-structured interviews with chefs and/or restaurant owners about their experiences. All those interviewed owned or worked in individually owned (thus not a corporate franchise) food service businesses across ten counties<sup>[1]</sup> of Vermont. In the case of the chefs and owners that we interviewed, the connections to farmers, the commitments to local purchasing, and their embeddedness in the community appeared to immediately inform how they responded to a situation over which they had very little control. It is also important to note that while we did not ask questions about government assistance during the pandemic, many participants alluded to the importance of the targeted aid to restaurants (e.g., Vermont Everyone Eats) that simultaneously supported people across the food system, including foodservice workers, producers, and consumers. An emergent theme from the semi-structured interviews (n=20), the apparent commitment to sustainable practices despite the disruptions, prompted the second phase of our study, which involved the design and dissemination of a survey tool to try and understand the importance of these practices.

The second phase of our study involved the design and dissemination of a survey tool that aimed to capture more nuanced data on what drives menu design and planning for these chefs / restaurant owners. The survey was sent to the culinary members of the Vermont Fresh Network (n=200), the same population that was sampled (using purposive sampling) for the first phase of the project. The requirements for participation were that respondents should be responsible for the procurement of ingredients and menu design at an independently owned and operated food business in Vermont that was open prior to 2020. Respondents were offered a \$25 gift card for participating in the survey and had to provide an email address at the end of the survey if they wished to receive a gift card. In total, 60 responses were received, and 50 responses were included in the analysis (10 responses were incomplete or ineligible). 6 respondents chose not to include an email at the end of the survey, opting out of the gift card incentive. The survey included a mix of 17 demographic questions (personal identification and food-business related) that represent the independent, or *causal*, variables for analysis, and 20 3-point Likert Scale statements that represented the dependent variables and formed the basis of the “Menu Design and Planning” sustainability practices. While the first phase of this research focused on the role of social

sustainability in the localised farm-to-chef model, in this second phase of the research sustainability refers to practices in a food business that promote circularity, i.e., low to zero waste.

Survey respondents were distributed across the state (34 towns were represented) in 12 of 14 counties, with 4 new counties represented in the data since the first phase of the project. This means that data for the entire project (phases 1 and 2) has been collected from all 14 counties in Vermont. All the respondents indicated a high level of commitment to local purchasing. The concept of farm to chef is fully integrated within this network of culinary professionals. We can say that within this network direct purchasing from regional farms is an abiding and long-standing commitment. Within the scale responses other than direct local purchasing, other menu planning and design commitments were not as universally shared as commitments but there was a diversity of responses indicating that they were in fact relevant. The three-point scale included the following options: *important and I do this*; *important but not feasible*; and *not important*, and respondents were asked to consider the 20 statements about menu design and planning for their food business and choose the option that most closely represented their views as of the time that they were completing the survey. The goal was to remain value neutral as to what the chef/owner indicated as to the response and thus to build out a profile of the level of “circular design” among this social network.

Every respondent (n=50) agreed that sourcing ingredients locally was important. For the indicators below, a high level of importance was agreed by at least 90 percent of respondents:

- Consider portion size to reduce customer plate waste
- Plan menus around what is available and in season locally
- Compost only what is no longer edible
- Encourage customers to take home leftovers by providing containers and/or allowing them to use their own
- Avoid single use materials/packaging whenever possible
- Indicate farm sources of ingredients to customers
- Source ingredients that can be used across multiple dishes

Interestingly, 31 out of 50 people said it was not important to have a plan for edible foods that cannot be used. The majority considered that this was not feasible. This has interesting policy implications especially given the increased issues of food security in rural Vermont. Another interesting finding was that over 75% of the respondents did not think it was either important or feasible to record the amount of food wasted. All the respondents who answered yes to having participated in the Vermont Everyone Eats programme (n=19), indicated that sourcing organic whenever possible was important – from a policy perspective, this might tell us something about the role of government intervention in promoting more sustainable purchasing practices.

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[1] Study participants were located in Chittenden, Washington, Addison, Windsor, Lamoille, Caledonia, Rutland, Windham, Bennington, and Orange counties.

**Briefly describe how your target audience benefited from your project’s activities.**

In conclusion, the two parts of the study combined confirm the importance of chefs to the localisation of food systems to allow for more resilience and sustainability. The research results indicate that food systems researchers and stakeholders would be remiss if they do not more fully integrate the restaurant sector into the support of local and regional food system, including small and medium-sized farms across the state. The results of this research provides robust empirical research and concrete recommendations for action that involves an often neglected but economically and socially crucial sector of the food systems: restaurants. The results of this research will be disseminated to those that participated in the survey, the local non-profit that promotes farm to tables and a state wide integrated initiative (Farm to Plate). This will include policy recommendation and outreach efforts.

### **Briefly describe how the broader public benefited from your project's activities.**

Our focus was on the role of social commitments between chefs and producers to the decision making of independently operated restaurants across Vermont during the crisis. In our interviews and analysis, we considered the ability of the chef-farmer relationship to act as a deep lever for sustainability and resilience in a localized food system. We found that relationally informed exchanges, facilitated by geographic proximity and personal relationships – and considered in our study as the building blocks for social sustainability – were crucial not only to the long-term viability of the individual businesses, but also to the resilience and sustainability of the local food system. The dissemination of these results will hopefully translate into greater support for these crucial spaces for the delivery of food during times of crisis and a better understanding of the power of chefs to support small farmers in Vermont.

*An essay on our findings from the first phase of the project has been published<sup>[1]</sup> in an edited volume called “Chefs, Restaurants, and Culinary Sustainability” (2025).*

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[1] TALIB, S., & TRUBEK, A. (2025). Sustainability through Social Commitments: Farm-to-Chef in the Era of COVID-19. In C. COUNIHAN & S. HØJLUND (Eds.), *Chefs, Restaurants, and Culinary Sustainability* (pp. 163–180). University of Arkansas Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.22361590.14>

### **Comments (optional)**

Not Provided

