



Friday, April 11, 2014

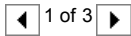
Farm-to-table food trend spurring business opportunities in the Mountain State

by **Caitlin Cook**, Staff writer



CHRIS DORST | GAZETTE

Terry Hudson works in one of the high tunnels on his micro farm in Big Chimney. Hudson runs a food co-op where it supplies fresh produce for area residents and organizations.



When Terry Hudson bought his Big Chimney property in 2000, the only living thing on it was the overgrown grass. The small space nestled between two hills and a creek served as a junkyard, spotted with old delivery trucks and metal debris.

Today, Hudson's land is home to a micro farm, part of a growing trend into of farm-to-table food systems that's sweeping through West Virginia.

"Charleston is a growing market for local foods," said Kelly Crane, an outreach coordinator with the West Virginia Food and Farm Coalition. "The hole in the supply and demand is on the supply side. I think people are interested in learning the production side so they can meet these really obvious market gaps."

Crane also works with the West Virginia University Extension Service office in

Kanawha City, which connects local residents with farming resources.

"West Virginians communities have a really strong sense of community," Crane said. "So something like a local foods economy that directly builds community connections and local economies is something that really resonates with West Virginians."

Crane and Hudson capitalized on their own connection and formed a Kanawha Valley Community Supported Agriculture food co-op, which connects producers and consumers through a subscription program. People who subscribe to the CSA receive a share of the goods produced at Hudson's farm.

Last year they had 25 subscribers. This year they're selling 50 shares. They've also expanded enough to hire one more worker at Hudson's farm.

"Last year the demand was so high I put one post on Facebook and all 25 shares were sold in 48 hours," Crane said.

With two high tunnels, vertical growing systems and raised soil beds without frames (known as hugelkultur beds) filling the less than two-acre space, there are no signs left of the junkyard Hudson said it took four years to clear and make ready for farming.

The high tunnels work like greenhouses but are cheaper. Metal or plastic rods make the skeleton of the tunnels while plastic is draped over the top.

High tunnels are a way to extend the growing season. The farm's raised beds and vertical growing system help the Hudson maximize his space.

It's about using the space efficiently and conserving resources on small farms, Hudson and Crane said.

"You can fit a surprising amount of stuff in these things," Crane said in the vertical growing trellises.

Hudson admitted without Crane's help there wouldn't be much of a business. "I'd still be giving everything away," he said.

Diversifying space is also key. "If we used the space just to grow potatoes we wouldn't have any money," Crane said. "We have to grow things that we can provide different products and services."

The chickens, lavender, herbs, tomatoes and other items allows them to turn a profit but "not a big one," Crane said.

Hudson also teaches a lot of educational classes on the farm. He works with special-needs children on growing techniques.

Several organizations are working together to cultivate the agriculture entrepreneur opportunities in the

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Mountain State, Crane said.

She hopes the growing number of farmers and farmers markets help fill food gaps in the state.

"When you think of food deserts you usually think of inner cities but West Virginia has vast swaths of rural food deserts," Crane said. "West Virginia suffers from a lot of rural food deserts."

The West Virginia Food and Farm coalition granted \$1,750 to seven farmers markets throughout the state in 2012 and 2013 to form outreach programs for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, commonly known as food stamps, said Elizabeth Spellman, the coalition's executive director.

"These markets saw increases in SNAP sales, especially those markets that promoted SNAP through a SNAP match program," Spellman said. "This program doubles the purchasing power of SNAP customers. For every \$1 spent by a SNAP recipient, the market gives another \$1 to that recipient."

Spellman said there are more farmers markets than ever in the state this year.

Also, the Charleston Area Alliance continues its SAGE (Sustainable Agriculture Entrepreneurs) program, which helps refine growing skills like resource conservation, irrigation systems and soil building.

The SAGE program started as a one-year class, but program director Cullen Naumoff who runs the program said an additional year was added and class sizes were cut in half to better serve the students. The program works on a micro farm on Charleston's West Side.

"Making those business connections is more about instilling confidence," Naumoff said. "But that's both within production planning and business development."

The program provides food for at least five area restaurants. Naumoff said other restaurants have called about the program.

The West Virginia Food and Farm Coalition helped develop West Virginia's road map for the food economy that looks at gaps and growth in the local food market. The report works with a variety of groups ranging from small farmers to potential financiers.

Buddy Davidson, communications director with the West Virginia Department of Agriculture, said the department is working to develop a new generation of farmers.

"There is a huge opportunity for farmers to be involved and tap into a domestic market that's already here," Davidson said. "If people would realize the potential in farming."

A lot of West Virginia farms are "lifestyle" farms, Davidson said. The farms serve as a second income.

The department is trying to encourage local farmers to do business with area schools.

"The production is simply not there," Davidson said. "We need to encourage people that are interested in farming as a business."

Davidson feels the farm-to-table healthy eating trend is here to stay.

Because of the on-going drought in California and water supply issues in western states, Davidson said the time now for people to act.

"We can keep more of our agriculture dollars in state," Davidson said. "We've got a lot of young people that have an opportunity to become entrepreneurial farmers."

The department is also leasing some of its land to farmers.

"We're looking to build the agriculture capabilities for the state," Davidson said. "It's important because when you look at the financial shape our state is in and we're sending \$6.5 billion out of our economy annually."

Reach Caitlin Cook at 304-348-5113 or at caitlin.cook@wvgazette.com.



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Kelly O'Neill Crane · Project Coordinator at West Virginia Farmers Market Association

Thanks SO MUCH to Caitlin for writing this article! We really appreciate the attention to all the work that's being done here in WV. In case any of you are interested, you can read more about the Kanawha Valley CSA and/or apply for membership here: <https://sites.google.com/site/kanawhavalleycsa/kanawha-valley-csa/apply-to-be-a-member>

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Guy Land · Chief of Staff at Appalachian Regional Commission

That was a terrific story! Congrats, Kelly. I've passed the link along to several folks at ARC, and reminded them that you helped put our WV food system tour together last year.

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Tiffany Steele ·

I would like contact information on grants and such. Im a small farmer on about 5 acres located in Charleston. I have started to raise bees, have chickens, and pigs and a small green house along with a garden. Trying out raised beds this year and would like to look into expanding some. Any help or information would be great thank you.

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