

Winter may not be the season when most people think of fresh local produce, but Shannon Brines is growing it. He has his spinach, fancy lettuces, Asian greens, and *hakurei* turnips on sale Saturdays through the winter at the Ann Arbor Farmers' Market. Brines may not grow a lot—his typical weekly harvest is twenty-five to seventy-five pounds—but he is motivated. “I like good food and wanted to try and produce good food in a sustainable way,” he says. “My end goal is to offer the best-tasting produce that just so happens to be carbon neutral when the customer buys it.”

Brines has degrees in physics and computer geographical information systems, and he earns his living as a systems analyst at the U-M School of Natural Resources and Environment. But he also farms on a ten-acre lot in Webster Township, where he grows his cold-tolerant crops in an unheated but well-insulated hoop house—a method he enthusiastically promotes on his website, brines.org. Though he admits that he had to give up in last February's subzero temperatures, he expects that this year he will be able to match the previous two years' record of twelve-month crops. He expects to sell out every market day, too.

Brines calls himself an “eco-food junkie”—and along with his customers,

Meet the Locavores

Eating mostly locally grown food takes a lot of work, especially in January. Yet some Ann Arborites wouldn't have it any other way.

by Vivienne Armentrout



MARK BIALEK

(Left) Old West Sider Kim Bayer buys fresh greens at the Farmers' Market in December—grower Shannon Brines expects to produce the cold-tolerant crops all winter in his well-insulated hoop house. (Above) A sample of what locavore Dan Marano is eating these days.



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he's part of Ann Arbor's newest food subculture. Adherents are sometimes called “locavores,” because they so ardently seek out locally grown foods.

“Local food is the new organic,” says Ecology Center director Mike Garfield. “It has developed the panache that organic had a few years back.”

Locavores like knowing where their food comes from. They often use the term *sustainable*, because small, local farms are more likely to raise crops organically, treat livestock humanely, and use energy sparingly. But they say that a lot of the attraction is the food itself.

Kim Bayer is one of Brines's steady customers. Sitting at a table on her patio in

late-summer sunshine, surrounded by trellised fruiting vines and the fragrance of a sauce made of this week's vegetables simmering in the kitchen, Bayer explained that she was first initiated into the taste of really fresh fruits and vegetables when visiting her grandparents near Flint. She noticed how good all their homegrown food was, compared to the Velveeta-and-Campbell's-soup diet she normally got at home in San Diego.

Now the information specialist has converted the entire backyard of her Old West Side home into a tightly landscaped but very productive vegetable garden. She also shops regularly at the Farmers' Market, has a produce “share” at a community farm, and

seeks out local sources of just about everything she eats. And she's become an online booster for the movement. She has her own blog, thefarmersmarketer.com, and also produces the website for Slow Food Huron Valley (slowfoodhuronvalley.com), part of a global movement that promotes food made in traditional ways, from local food and unprocessed ingredients.

“People say they don't have time to make real food—but I think that's not true,” Bayer says. “I'd rather cook than spend the same time watching the Food Network.”

Bayer had a transforming experience when she read Michael Pollan's book *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, which describes the way food is produced on an industrial scale, including livestock raised in large confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs). At the same time she saw a video showing how beef and chickens are usually kept before slaughter. “It is evil to treat creatures that way, even if they are livestock that have been developed as meat,” she says. “I think animals have a right not to be tortured.” Now Bayer buys grass-fed beef (from pastured cattle) and

Amish poultry (less confined, with a vegetarian diet).

She also has environmental concerns. Reading about the ecological collapse on Easter Island during the 1700s made her conscious of how human beings can have disastrous effects on the environment. Her efforts to use as much local food as possible are part of a larger commitment to environmental responsibility, along with her rain barrel, solar panels, composting, and recycling. “It's about doing what is right,” she says, “even if it's inconvenient and even if it costs a little bit more.”

Kyla Boyse, a web content developer for the U-M Health System, also is concerned with the long-term effects of the current food system. She, too, has read *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and says that part of her motivation in eating local food is to reduce her carbon footprint. (Pollan writes that the food industry consumes 20 percent of the oil used in the United States.) “We are spoiled by low food prices,” Boyse says. “We don't realize how many dreadful costs are hidden in those low prices.” But she also says that local food tastes better, is probably more nutritious, and provides “a better connection with what you're eating.”

Julie Weatherbee, a U-M information systems training specialist, is fiercely supportive of local businesses. She buys almost all her food locally; she says it is “better for the environment, better for my local community, better for the state economy, and the food tastes better because it

is fresher.” Like Bayer and Boyse, she makes exceptions for such essentials as olive oil, spices, coffee, and tea, and she buys the occasional exotic fruit.

Dan Marano grew to appreciate the cultural importance of locally grown and prepared food while living in New Mexico. A self-confessed “foodie,” he likes the idea of artisanal food “made on a human scale” and buys very few processed foods. Marano is also concerned about the impact of industrial farms and crop monoculture on the environment and on the quality of food, as well as the consumption of fossil fuels—all “hidden costs buried within your typical purchase at a supermarket.” Like other locavores, he buys locally grown produce, meat, milk, and eggs, grows what he can, and makes most everything he eats from scratch.

Cooking takes time, of course—and that’s the first barrier to eating more local food. In a world of fast food, fine restaurants, and grocery aisles lined with ready-made dinners, it takes real commitment to buy raw ingredients and cook daily. And a limited palette of ingredients, no matter how fresh, can be hard to sell to children accustomed to endless choices. “It’s hard with little kids,” Marano admits.

Another barrier is that most local growers are too small to fit into the supermarket system—so you won’t find a lot of local produce at Kroger. Rick Peshkin, the owner of the Produce Station, explains that many small farmers are not set up to deliver the pallet-size orders that major food retailers require. Peshkin likes to sell Michigan produce whenever he can—but rather than buy from individual farmers, he has a buyer who sources produce through Detroit’s Eastern Market, the Detroit Produce Terminal, and the Benton Harbor Fruit Market. He does like to know who the grower is, but Peshkin says he buys for quality first—he doesn’t think his customers will buy inferior produce just because it’s local.

Busch’s and Hiller’s, two regional supermarket chains, label Michigan produce when they have it. Even Kroger carries local Guernsey milk and Amish chicken. But local stores like Arbor Farms, Fresh Seasons, and the People’s Food Co-op (which advertises it’s “local to the core!”) are the ones most likely to have local foods. Arbor Farms even offers a class about eating locally; Rachel Derr, who teaches it, says the store makes an extra effort to reach out to small local growers—for instance, by buying the same vegetable from several different farms.

Tim Ellis, produce operations manager at Fresh Seasons, has a list of farmers he knows personally, and juggles his offerings according to the availability of specific items. In a pinch he’ll drive his own truck to pick up an order. “When other people don’t have the Michigan products,” he vows, “I’ll have it here.” And the C

op, according to marketing manager Kevin Sharp, sees support of local grow-



Dan Marano says he prefers food “made on a human scale.” He shops at Detroit’s Eastern Market and cooks almost everything he eats from scratch.

ers as primary to its mission, and gives preference to individual farms over wholesale distributors.

Of course fresh produce is also available through the Farmers’ Market, but buying there, too, takes commitment. Even in the peak summer season, the market is open only Saturdays and Wednesdays, it shuts down by 3 p.m., and parking can be difficult. Also, there have been controversies at the market about whether some vendors are reselling produce bought elsewhere. Weatherbee, Bayer, and Boyse are enthusiastic customers of the Farmers’ Market but stress the importance of getting to know individual farmers and buying from them steadily. Marano says the prices at the Ann Arbor market are too high—he drives to Eastern Market, where he can buy closer to wholesale.

Some locavores also take part in “community-supported agriculture.” CSA farms ask consumers to share the risks and costs of raising their crops in exchange for

a share of the season’s produce—so the initial investment can be substantial. For example, the Community Farm of Ann Arbor, near Chelsea, charges an average of \$950 per season for pickups weekly from June through November; Tantré Farm, also near Chelsea, is \$550 May–October. Our Family Farm near Manchester charges \$475 for a June–October share, designed to feed a family of four, that includes honey and free-range eggs. Weatherbee gets most of her produce from Boxelder Acres in Superior Township, which charges an average of \$27 weekly for a share July–October, rather than a single up-front payment. (The website localharvest.org has a list of CSAs in the area.)

The buy-in cost isn’t the only obstacle. Shares typically have to be picked up during a narrow time window each week, and some CSAs also require members to volunteer on the farm. MSU Extension agronomist Mike Score thinks the sheer

volume of produce in season also can be a barrier. Kim Bayer’s solution is to divide her share at Tantré Farms with another family. Food Gatherers, the local food bank, buys shares from Community Farm that it divides among low-income residents of Avalon Housing. The group’s executive director, Eileen Spring, says many local farmers also donate surplus produce for distribution to the hungry.

Many growers sell small quantities directly to the public—but they’re hard to find, since few can afford to advertise. In 2005, to bridge the distance between farmers and consumers, a consortium of governments, farm organizations, food industries, and community organizations founded the Food System Economic Partnership (FSEP). They’ve posted a map and directory on their website (fsepmichigan.org) that show where farms offering specific products can be found.

The other big obstacle to eating locally in Michigan is seasonality: fresh produce is overwhelmingly abundant in August but almost nonexistent in January. When the ground is frozen, what’s a locavore to do?

Boyse says that in cold weather she emphasizes produce that stores well—root vegetables like potatoes and carrots, the cabbage family, and winter squash. This time of year, Bayer is still working on her Tantré farm “Thanksgiving share,” two bushels of durable crops such as brussels sprouts, squash, leeks, garlic, carrots, potatoes, parsnips, onions, celeriac, and beets.

Bayer also expects to buy fresh greens all winter from Shannon Brines and the two other farmers at the Farmers’ Market who are extending their growing seasons with hoop houses. She also makes preserves (her raspberry-rose jam won first prize this year in Downtown Home & Garden’s contest) and is trying homemade beer. Dan Marano cans gallons of homemade tomato sauce every year, Julie Weatherbee fills a chest freezer with local vegetables and fruits in season, and both preserve cabbage by making sauerkraut. And all bend the local rule when they have to. Marano admits to buying mangoes, bananas, and hothouse red peppers (“My kids love them”).

And then there’s the problem of meat. Most locavores not only want meat that is locally produced, they want it from animals that have been humanely raised (no CAFOs) and fed a “natural” diet, which for beef cattle means they must be pastured and grass fed. Kim Bayer demonstrated that ideal during a field trip in August to Old Pine Farm near Manchester. Cattle drifted along a pasture fence, passing long-lashed emus and languorous pigs sprawled in the shade of a tree. Chickens dashed in and out of a picturesque barn. The farm sells beef, cattle, pork, chicken, and eggs, and the animals lead a happy life—at least up until the moment of slaughter, which is done humanely right on the farm.

But buying from Old Pine requires a real commitment, because it doesn’t sell meat the way buyers are used to getting it, by the piece. To do that, it would have to send the cattle two hours away to a

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USDA-inspected slaughterhouse—which the owner adamantly refuses to do, because of the stress on the animals. So customers have to purchase at least a quarter of an animal, and that’s more than most people can easily store.

Julie Weatherbee, with her big freezer, buys a half hog and several chickens at a time from Ernst Farms in Scio Township. Because Ernst uses a USDA-inspected slaughterhouse, it can also sell beef, lamb, and pork by the piece—but since volume is low, it sells the meat frozen, which can be off-putting for some cooks. For fresh grass-fed beef, the locavores we interviewed go to Sparrow Market in Kerrytown.

Most supermarkets now sell Indiana-raised “Amish” chicken, and several places (including Sparrow, Arbor Farms, and Knight’s Market) will order fresh Amish turkeys for customers. Weatherbee and Bayer shop even closer to home, buying turkeys from John Harnois on Whitmore Lake Road.

The complication there is that Harnois slaughters his turkeys all at once—and the preordered bird must be picked up that

evening. One local family ordering from Harnois for the first time this past Thanksgiving were surprised to learn that the pickup was a week before the holiday. Since they had a small refrigerator, they ended up eating their Thanksgiving turkey on Saturday.

*T*hough serious locavores make a point of cooking for themselves, some restaurants also are picking up on the trend. Zingerman’s Roadhouse has hosted a farmers’ market in its parking lot, and chef-partner Alex Young composts all the vegetable scraps, eggshells, coffee grounds, and fish scraps from the restaurant at his six-acre home in Dexter. In the compost—an organic gardener’s dream soil, dark and rich as chocolate cake—he’s growing heirloom varieties of tomatoes, potatoes, beans, and other vegetables. In season, he builds his menus around what his garden is producing that week.

Zingerman’s has also been supportive of the local Slow Food group, which has

about eighty paid-up members (it costs \$60 a year to join the national organization). Deli managing partner Grace Singleton is the head of the leadership team, and Zingerman’s has been generous with food and space donations. And Deli chef Rodger Bowser is president of the Agrarian Adventure (agrarianadventure.org), a nonprofit that’s trying to introduce children to the world beyond Pop-Tarts and

At Old Pine Farm near Manchester, cattle drifted along a pasture fence, passing long-lashed emus and languorous pigs sprawled in the shade of a tree.

chicken nuggets. The group runs an after-school gardening club and cooking demonstrations at Tappan Middle School, and last fall took part in the FSEP’s Farm to School program, which delivered fresh local cantaloupe to every school cafeteria one Friday. Bowser says the kids loved it: “It was like laying down hundred-dollar bills.”

There is some entrepreneurial spirit on display at the Farmers’ Market, too, with younger people starting small farm operations. Garry Kuneman, who sells buffalo and grass-fed beef at the market, says that he plans a door-to-door distribution service for local meat, dairy products, eggs, and produce. He already has an online service (eatlocaeatnatural.com); he expects sometime next year to open a brick-and-mortar store on the west side of Ann Arbor to sell only Michigan products.

Purveyors see opportunity in this new market niche—but many also enjoy selling directly. Asa Wilson, the owner of Boxelder Acres, speaks with pride of his produce—“My spinach is just the best”—and how enthusiastically his customers react. And Alex Young says he started growing potatoes as a hobby, until one day he served his freshly harvested spuds to some long-term customers. Their reaction was so strong, he says, that “I got goose bumps all over my body.” Now he and his assistant chef, Mark Baerwolf, spend mornings mucking in horse manure and straw to put those potatoes on dinner plates.

Shannon Brines’s face glows as he describes a customer’s reaction to his sweet, delicate hakurei turnips. After a woman bought a small sample, her husband was back within half an hour and bought all the rest.

Though Brines began his hoop-house farming as an experiment, it has grown into a real business. “The interest is so huge that I can’t meet the demand,” he says. He’s now putting together a business plan to expand with several more hoop houses—and hiring a full-time farmer to help. ■



COURTESY KYLA BOYSE

Kyla Boyse—in her garden last summer with daughter Yvette—says part of her motivation in eating local food and growing her own produce is to reduce her carbon footprint.