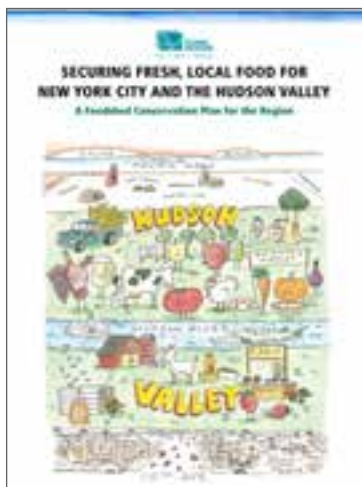


# Local Food Pathways

## HOW HUDSON VALLEY FOOD REACHES NEW YORK CITY NEIGHBORHOODS



Local food reaches New York City in many ways. Urban farms and gardens provide some fresh produce, but the majority of local food comes to New Yorkers from nearby farms. NYC's farmers markets and farm-to-table restaurants are a familiar sight, and local food is increasingly acquired through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, food pantries, community centers and grocery stores. Hudson Valley farms, just to the north of NYC, provide many healthy food choices for residents to cook at home, eat in schools and order in restaurants, but farmers markets and CSAs must expand into more low-income neighborhoods; wholesale distribution of local food must expand to supply institutions with affordable local options; and the farmland that produces local food to New York City must be protected against real estate pressure. **This report examines some of the many pathways that deliver local food to New York City residents. Perhaps by drawing attention to the work already going on, New York City and Hudson Valley leaders will be encouraged to take additional steps to secure the supply of local food.**



Clockwise from top left: farmer at Hearty Roots Community Farm; 125th Street Fresh Connect Market; NYCCAH's Bronx CSA



## Introduction

New York City and the Hudson Valley form a tightknit “foodshed” where economic and social relationships channel nutritious food downstate to feed New Yorkers. This foodshed is similar to the city’s watershed in the Catskills that supplies all five boroughs with safe drinking water. Just as NYC protects the purity of the watershed, so, too, should it protect the foodshed. Scenic Hudson’s Foodshed Conservation Plan provides a strategy for NYC and its partners upstate to secure the farmland that makes local food possible.

New Yorkers rely on the city’s local food system to get fresh food from nearby farms onto their plates. Since it began, the local food movement has increased awareness about the benefits that come from eating wholesome food. Today, farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs and farm-to-table restaurants are commonplace, and they grow in number each year. Still, there is an estimated \$866 million of unmet demand in regionally produced food each year.

To meet this demand, farmers markets and CSAs must continue expanding into neighborhoods that have few supermarkets and limited healthy food choices. Meanwhile, wholesale distribution of local food must scale up to compete with the centralized conventional food system on retail shelves and in institutional kitchens.

### **As the nation’s largest city, and with its history of progressive policies, NYC is poised to become a leading voice in the future of local food systems:**

- Grassroots food activists have worked with non-profit organizations to develop programs that increase access to local food in underserved communities and empower some of the city’s most disenfranchised citizens, distributing hundreds of thousands of pounds of nutritious Hudson Valley food each year.
- Federal, state and municipal programs have coordinated to reach record levels of food assistance to help NYC’s low-income residents leverage benefits to buy fresh, local food. Wholesale distributors, meanwhile, are changing their operations to sell local food at affordable prices.
- Local law 50 encourages city agencies, which serve 260 million meals to the public every year, to buy more of their food from New York State growers. Local law 52 tracks agencies’ successes and failures to take advantage of local agriculture.

The unique geography of the Hudson Valley supports a network of independent farms that are well-suited to meet the city’s changing needs. With some of the most fertile soil in the nation, the future of the Hudson Valley/NYC foodshed shows promise to connect more individuals to their food and their farmers, but steps must be taken to secure and strengthen the foodshed against pressure from development.

- ▶ The unique geography of the Hudson Valley supports a network of independent farms that are well-suited to meet the city’s changing needs.
- ▶ Many communities in New York City have partnered with local farms to take back control over their food choices.
- ▶ The region’s farmland, the foundation of the local food system, must remain intact.

Farmland, the foundation of the local food system, must remain intact. Public and private investments can keep farmland affordable through the purchase of development rights (PDRs). They also can support the pathways that provide New York City with access to local food. Many such pathways already exist.

**Farmers markets**, central to the local food movement, have grown tremendously since the first Greenmarket opened at Union Square in 1976. These markets vary in frequency and size, but all are crucial to increasing access to healthy food by bringing local farmers into city neighborhoods where they can sell their products directly to residents. Each transaction connects customers not only to their food but to the farms that grew the food. Farmers markets reflect the hard work that goes into growing food and allows New Yorkers who rarely get to leave the city to connect with their surrounding farms. These experiences teach customers that local food is more flavorful and nutritious, and help them appreciate that fresh food is weather-dependent and tied to the seasons.

This impact is even more pronounced in neighborhoods that lack healthy food choices. In places where reasonably-priced produce is hard to find, farmers markets are a lifeline to public health. Existing federal, state and city programs encourage local food consumption among the city's most vulnerable residents. USDA's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) supports the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program to help low-income seniors buy local produce. New York State's Fresh Connect initiative awards grants to farmers markets in underserved communities and distributes Fresh Connect Checks, which provide an additional \$2 rebate for every \$5 of SNAP benefits spent on NYS produce. NYC distributes Health Bucks that work the same way.

Historically, grassroots urban farmers and gardens have taken on the lack of healthy food choices as a food justice issue. Their work has drawn attention to the inequality of food access for low-income neighborhoods and set the stage for community-led farmers markets. These markets are best suited to identify the critical needs of their communities and have a great impact restoring dignity to the basic right of food access.



Union Square  
Greenmarket

**Community Supported Agriculture** programs similarly connect consumers to those who grow their food, but instead of purchasing bunches of carrots and baskets of apples on a weekly basis, customers sign up for a share of the annual harvest at the beginning of the growing season. CSAs offer several benefits. In addition to accessing nutritious, local food, CSA members save money by purchasing their food in bulk and can provide feedback to farmers about what types of crops they want to eat next year. Deliveries come to a convenient location on a regular schedule, and shares can be split among friends if they provide more food than a single household can eat.

CSAs are a relatively new form of food distribution that came out of the local food movement. Since the mid-eighties, CSAs have become a common way for people in cities to access food from surrounding farms. Hundreds of CSAs now operate within NYC. Many are so popular that they quickly sell out of shares and keep waiting lists for when space opens up. Recently, food justice organizations have recognized the potential for CSAs to help low-income communities and have begun experimenting with flexible payment options that support both farmers and city residents.

**Food pantries**, too, have recognized the advantage of partnering with local farms to supply emergency food assistance to their programs. Working with non-profit organizations that help with logistics and funding, these pantries are able to get a full season's worth of produce to the city's most vulnerable people. By relieving their immediate food needs, food pantries hope to give them the opportunity to get back on an even footing, into steady employment, and on their way to a healthier and more food-secure life. To help achieve these goals, these programs often couple food distribution with cooking demonstrations and nutrition education in order to create a lasting effect with their clients.

Some non-profit organizations help pantries subscribe to farm shares that operate much like a typical CSA, but on a larger scale. Other organizations are focused on gleaning high-quality, unsold food at the end of farmers markets and from supermarket produce departments that can be diverted from landfills and donated to food pantries. Meanwhile, wholesale distributors that work with local farms are also working to supply food to these programs at affordable prices. Wholesale distribution is essential for institutional buying that has the potential to reach millions of New Yorkers.



CSA member Sam distributes fruit at the Bronx CSA

**Institutions** such as public schools, community centers, hospitals and prisons also provide local food to city residents. The quality of the food that makes up these meals directly impacts the health of those who eat them. City agencies have the ability to improve public health tremendously while scaling up the local food system, but food procurement standards vary between agencies. Facilities that serve multiple purposes—such as a community center providing meals to children, women and seniors—must coordinate their food buying through the Administration for Children’s Services, the Human Resource Administration and the Department for the Aging. By redesigning the way that institutions can buy food, NYC will move one step closer to reaching its goal of bringing more local food to its “public plate.”

**Building upon the success of these established pieces of the local food system will strengthen the relationship between Hudson Valley farmers and NYC residents, and increase access to local food for all New Yorkers.**

Many communities in New York City have partnered with local farms to take back control of their food choices. As a partner in the New York City Food Forum, Scenic Hudson has had the opportunity to learn from, and share our work with, a number of groups focused on increasing food access to low-income communities. These programs, at all levels, are vital to reaching underserved communities.

As an organization working to secure the supply of fresh, local food to the Hudson Valley and NYC by conserving the farmland where it is produced, Scenic Hudson is committed to supporting and raising awareness of these partnerships while advocating for the capital resources needed to protect the regional foodshed. To date, Scenic Hudson has invested \$22 million of its own funds, and leveraged this amount to secure an additional \$17 million, to carry out regional farmland preservation. These efforts have protected 12,588 acres of agricultural land from development. The Foodshed Conservation Plan calls for private and public partners to make strategic future investments in farmland preservation over the next 10 years. Working together we can secure a critical mass of nine priority areas in the Hudson Valley that are crucial to securing NYC’s regional foodshed.

The information in this report brings attention to the hard work of grassroots organizations and hopefully will lead to more support for continuing and expanding their programs. Meanwhile, in the Hudson Valley, this report will inform farmers about potential new markets for their goods and help contribute to growing interest by private investors. We understand that all of these parts must move together to scale up local food distribution, which will make local food more available and more affordable in the future.

This will take time, but there is already so much momentum to build upon. Scenic Hudson and its land trust partner organizations can provide a voice for the fundamental part of the local food system: the land. Moving forward, Scenic Hudson will continue to foster relationships with all foodshed stakeholders and endorse mutually-beneficial policies.

Local food ties together community resilience, public health and environmental justice. This report highlights examples of how Hudson Valley food directly impacts New York City residents. These examples show not only what we stand to lose if we cannot protect the foodshed, but what we stand to gain by strengthening the local food system. The benefits that come from connecting Hudson Valley farms to New York City neighborhoods are clear. Investing in the regional foodshed, and fostering relationships between New York City and its local farmers, will create more pathways for local food access, help the city reach its procurement goals and improve the rural economy.

## PROFILE: La Familia Verde, a Community-led Farmers Market



Claudio Gonzalez, an Orange County farmer at La Familia Verde Market.

Farmers markets have become synonymous with New York City summers, offering a small oasis of country life during the hot months. The first Greenmarket opened in 1976 on 59<sup>th</sup> Street and Second Avenue. Now, through GrowNYC, Just Food, Harvest Home and the continued support of the city, more than 150 farmers markets pop up citywide every week. Most are seasonal, but some (such as Union Square's), operate year-round. Hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers walk from their apartments to buy produce that was still growing in a field less than 24 hours earlier. Markets like these are an essential tool for getting nutritious food into neighborhoods that don't have access to many healthy food choices.

They also provide important opportunities for individuals to become active participants in their local food system. Bringing customers face to face with farmers turns each sale into a social interaction that reaches back to the soil where the food is grown. When shoppers ask for advice on how to prepare an unfamiliar variety of vegetable, they develop a relationship with their food and find there is something irreplaceable that comes from buying ingredients directly from the person who grew them.

This is even more important at the grassroots level, where community-led markets empower residents by partnering with farmers to increase access to local food while promoting environmental justice and providing volunteer opportunities and jobs.

Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than on Tuesday mornings at La Familia Verde Market. "We really are like one big family," says urban farmer and community activist Karen Washington when describing the group of volunteers, employees, farmers and shoppers who have made this Bronx market an oasis of food, education and laughter since 2002. As a recently retired physical therapist, Karen continues to dedicate her life to her community.

La Familia Verde began in 1998 as a collective of community gardens with the mission of uniting Bronx neighborhoods around land rights issues. The organization aimed to grow a grassroots movement to protect urban farming from the threat of development. As their work continued, it expanded to include other community issues like voter registration and census education.

Starting a neighborhood farmers market felt like a natural extension of their mission to build community resilience. Karen recognized that a key component was access to nutritious food and education about what foods to eat. When she first brought her idea to the NYS Department of Agriculture & Markets in Albany in the early 2000's, even though farmers markets had been operating in the Bronx since 1987, state officials questioned whether there would be demand sufficient to support such a program. Undeterred, Karen returned home. She organized a community survey to see for herself if her neighbors would support a farmers market.

Overwhelmingly, the responses were positive. With proof in hand that there was sufficient demand for fresh food, Karen connected with Just Food, a non-profit food justice organization that facilitates community-led action. They supported La Familia Verde through their City Farm Markets program. Since 1995, this program has provided training to community garden groups and covered provided access to market insurance and offered other services such as cooking demonstrations. It continues to expand into new neighborhoods.

- ▶ 3 million New Yorkers live in neighborhoods with few healthy food choices.
- ▶ Just Food's Farmers Market Network supports 27 community-run farmers markets in New York City that support urban growers and regional farmers, and serve low-income communities.
- ▶ GrowNYC connects City residents to 230 local farmers through 54 Greenmarkets, where low-income residents spent over \$1 million worth of food assistance benefits in 2013.<sup>1</sup>

Community-led farmers markets require participation from the neighborhood before getting off the ground. This is only possible if the market organizers are in touch with, and address, the community's specific needs. As a result, community-led markets empower participants to regain control over their food choices and restore dignity to food access in low income neighborhoods.

With Just Food's support, Karen approached the city Parks Department about finding a location and settled on Tremont Park. Around this time, she also met Ray Rottkamp, a fourth-generation farmer on Long Island. He understood what she was trying to start and signed on. Rottkamp Brothers Farm has been supplying her market with produce ever since. Over time, Karen recruited farmers David and Veronica Haughton of Trinity Farm, and Claudio Gonzalez.



Karen Washington at La Familia Verde Market; photo: David Hume Kennerly

Now, every Tuesday, La Familia Verde picks up Rottkamp's produce from Hunt's Point Market in the Bronx while David and Veronica truck their produce from Clintondale, in Ulster County, and Claudio brings his crops from Pine Island.

For these farmers, attending the weekly market is worth the hours of driving, even though it means sleeping less and keeps them from their fields. La Familia Verde provides a reliable customer base. David recognizes many of the shoppers who come to his stand and estimates that more than 90 percent of his sales go to repeat customers. Both David and Claudio believe that closing the food gap, which keeps underserved communities from healthy food choices, is part of being a farmer.

On market days between June and November, tents are up by 8 a.m. and tables are overflowing with seasonal produce. Farmers have driven down from the Hudson Valley. Presenters from the NYC Department of Health set up cooking stations to demonstrate how to prepare

affordable meals with seasonal produce. They also explain the city's Health Bucks program, which incentivizes healthy food purchases by issuing \$2 coupons that can be used at the market for every \$5 worth of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits used.

Return customers, who know how popular this market is, line up to get the best selection of goods and go straight for their favorite varieties of fresh food. Sometimes, if Karen has convinced them to try something new the week before, they will report back on whether they liked it or not. If they did, Karen suggests they buy more. If they didn't, she'll get them to try another vegetable.

Passersby are easily converted to new customers. When a woman pushing a stroller comes off the sidewalk and glances at bunches of green onions, Karen catches her eye and rolls into her sales pitch: "They're two dollars a bunch." After a moment's hesitation, Karen offers, "How much is it worth to you? One fifty?" Sensing that the young mother is interested, Karen points out that La Familia Verde accepts WIC (a supplement to SNAP benefits that gives additional assistance to women, infants and children), and the deal is done.

La Familia Verde is a bridge that connects growers to the communities that need them the most by helping customers utilize food assistance programs like EBT, WIC and Health Bucks. At La Familia Verde Market, more than 90 percent of transactions use food assistance to bring fresh food into low-income kitchens.

It takes a lot of work to run this market. Someone has to get the produce from Hunt's Point to Tremont Park. It takes several people to sell produce, and several more to keep everything running smoothly. Karen knew that she wanted to hire employees rather than rely solely on volunteers. This would make the market a job source in addition to a food source. La Familia Verde's staff is made up of nine employees, including high school students who work during their summer breaks.

Support from staff, volunteers and Just Food, along with food assistance programs, make it possible for La Familia Verde Market to meet the specific needs of its community. This support gives Karen the flexibility to bargain with customers and allows her to focus on her mission to increase healthy food choices for all people, regardless of income level.

She believes that community-led farmers markets are the first step to restoring dignity to food access in poor neighborhoods. She hopes that connecting her community to fresh, local food will change how the entire South Bronx looks at food so that more corner stores carry fresh produce and more food jobs that pay a living wage are created.

At the market, families mill around the vendors' tables, looking over the produce and filling their shopping bags. Behind the produce, jokes carry over from week to week and David shares a watermelon with the staff. Ms. Emily is cooking fish and preparing a fresh summer salad for lunch. Will is getting advice on what electives to take at school next year. Karen is holding court, listening to everyone and reassuring them that they are doing important work. She takes it all in and keeps an eye out to offer lunch to anyone walking by who looks hungry.

Karen is a natural born salesperson. She knows her customers, she drives a hard bargain and she makes sure that no one goes home empty-handed. The thing that sets her apart is that she's selling community resilience and health. The fact is, La Familia Verde Market would not exist today if not for her tenacious spirit.

When a middle-aged man passing by is disappointed that the spinach he stopped for turns out to be kale, Karen isn't flustered. She knows that as La Familia Verde continues with its work, sometime down the line—in a couple of weeks, months or next season—she'll convince him to get excited about kale.

## PROFILE: NYC Coalition Against Hunger Bronx CSA

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs provide their members with regular deliveries of fresh produce throughout the growing season. Members purchase shares of the annual harvest in advance, paying the full cost of their shares before the crops are planted. Buying in bulk often lowers the price of the food and saves members' money, but both parties benefit from this direct-sale relationship that brings food from fields to plates.

While customers receive a steady supply of local food, their investment allows the farmer to purchase seeds and other supplies or make capital improvements without having to take out expensive loans. CSAs also reduce the uncertainty that goes into being a farmer. Pre-selling their harvest takes away the risk of having leftover crops and protects farms from crippling debt that can come from crop loss in the event of a natural disaster.

Joel Berg, executive director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger (NYCCA), points out that while CSAs have become popular modes of direct-sales for local farms around NYC, they are not well-suited for lower-income communities. One limiting factor to the conventional model is that members must be able to pay for six months of produce, often ranging from \$400-600, in one lump sum. For many New Yorkers who are caught between low-wage jobs and a high cost of living, it's not possible to spend that much money at once. NYCCA developed an innovative sliding-scale CSA model to overcome this problem and connect low income communities in Brooklyn, Manhattan and the Bronx with New York farms.

NYCCA is focused on addressing the root causes of hunger while supporting efforts that improve access to food for the city's 1.4 million food-insecure residents. It believes that addressing this problem requires examining the entire food system and finding new ways to bring food justice to all citizens, including the role of local food to meet the needs of underserved communities.<sup>4</sup>

Felix Gonzalez in the fields at Happy Radish Farms; source: NYCCA



Dispelling the notion that poor people prefer processed, less nutritious meals is a hurdle for many food justice organizations. NYCCA's Fresh Food for All program provides lower-income households with nutritious food choices to show that the lack of access to affordable, healthy diets is the greatest barrier to these households eating well. While some CSAs offer scholarships for a few members, they cannot address the need felt by an entire community. NYCCA developed a program to meet the needs and resources of all community members. NYCCA's CSAs are offered on a sliding scale based on members' income, allowing those who use the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to pay for their shares on a weekly basis. Every member is required to volunteer a minimum of four hours distributing food at the pick-up site. Members who volunteer more than that and show interest in leading the CSA become Core Members. Through community outreach, NYCCA identifies neighborhoods to host the CSAs, locations that are convenient for pick up, and farmers who are interested in supporting this mission. AmeriCorps members introduce the concept of a CSA model to Core Members who then help organize the program and keep it operating throughout the season.

NYCCA's CSAs combine education and community building. Weekly bilingual newsletters offer nutrition information, various food outreach opportunities and recipes



Volunteers help distribute food at NYCCA's Bronx CSA; source: NYCCA

- ▶ More than 1.8 million New Yorkers received Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program benefits in 2013.<sup>2</sup>
- ▶ New York City Coalition Against Hunger's Farm Fresh program distributed 91,000 pounds of local produce through CSA programs in the Bronx, Harlem and Brooklyn. 78 percent of CSA members in the Bronx used SNAP benefits to access healthy food.<sup>3</sup>



► **NYCCAH** is focused on addressing the root causes of hunger while supporting efforts that improve access to food for the city's 1.4 million food-insecure residents.

► **NYCCAH's Fresh Food for All** program provides lower-income households with nutritious food choices to show that the lack of access to healthy diets is the greatest barrier to these households eating well.

► Louis joined the **South Bronx CSA** as a way to access fresh food for himself, but it quickly introduced him to food advocacy.

using seasonal food. Annual potlucks bring all members together at the end of the season. This work distributed 91,000 pounds of local food to 1,000 NYC residents in 2013. NYCCAH surveyed participants and found that 89 percent improved their eating habits during the program, and 81 percent reported that this carried over to eating more wholesome food even in the winter. In the Bronx, 78 percent of its 76 CSA members were able to participate using SNAP benefits.

Louis Vavrina is one of NYCCAH's CSA members. On a recent Tuesday afternoon, he walked down the steps into the basement of the Grand Concourse Seventh Day Adventist Temple where Felix Gonzalez of Fresh Radish Farms in Orange County had just delivered a truckload of vegetables. Like he has done on most CSA weeks for the past three years, Louis got to work signing in members and helping load their shopping bags with eggplants, onions, peppers, greens, carrots, corn and beets.

Louis first heard about the CSA when he saw a flier posted in his local library. A lifelong resident of the Bronx, Louis grew up in a family that clipped coupons and planned meals based on what was on sale at the local grocery store. Participating in the New York Botanic Garden's Children's Gardening Program made him think about where his food came from and he began to appreciate how it is grown. As an adult, Louis embraced fresh food but still struggled to find it in his neighborhood.

Louis describes supermarkets in the High Ridge section of the Bronx as large-scale bodegas, where produce is left in its case and often wilted or sprouting on the shelf. Because of this, he would seek out farmers markets, while many other community members traveled out of the neighborhood to the closest Trader Joe's, where the produce is better. Louis joined the Bronx CSA as a way to access fresh food for himself, but it quickly introduced him to food advocacy for others. Though he was already involved in education and outreach (once a teacher, Louis now is training for a career as a mental health counselor), NYCCAH's Food Action Boards, which include leadership and advocacy trainings. Its focus on the city's challenges with hunger have led Louis to volunteer at the University Community Social Services'

"Meatloaf Kitchen" and join NYCCAH in criticizing the 2013 cut to SNAP benefits. Louis drew on his own experience receiving SNAP benefits and living in a community where they are a necessity for many. He advocated that the cuts would unfairly hurt hungry families and business owners who rely on SNAP purchases to keep their doors open.

NYCCAH's CSA has also connected him to his food in new ways. Over the past three years, Louis has gotten to know his farmers and his neighbors because of the CSA. He asks Felix questions when the vegetables are delivered. Earlier this season, when he wanted to know why there were no cherries this year, he could email Hepworth Farms in Ulster County. (A hard frost, it turns out, made the fruit drop; to Louis's relief, this did not harm the trees.) And it has strengthened his connection to his community. Neighbors seeing him return home with bags of produce stop him on the street to ask where he got them. He tells them about NYCCAH and the CSA. Louis hopes this program, and others like it, will grow to reach more households across the city. He sees the change it has made in his life and in the lives of other Bronx CSA members, but knows that the need outweighs the number of shares offered. Moving forward, the food advocate in him would like to see more members getting involved in NYCCAH and it becoming more of a presence at the community level.

Joel Berg stresses that this is a pilot program. If it continues to be successful, he hopes that cities around the country will adopt this model and offer sliding-scale CSAs to low-income households. However, in order to expand programs like this to all of the city's residents, let alone across the nation, the cost of fresh, local food must become competitive with the cost of conventional produce from industrialized agriculture. Reducing the cost of local food requires improving the local food system, increasing the amount of food available for mixed-income CSAs and strengthening the distribution network for farms to deliver to the city. Farmland conservation can play an important role to reach this goal along with county and state tax breaks that make it possible for farmers to continue growing food where real estate pressure is greatest.

## PROFILE: Local Produce Link, CAMBA's Beyond Hunger Food Pantry

- ▶ 1 in 5 New York City residents rely on emergency food assistance.<sup>6</sup>
- ▶ In 2013, **Local Produce Link** worked with 8 local farmers to distribute 243,645 pounds of fresh produce to New Yorkers.<sup>7</sup>
- ▶ The **Beyond Hunger Food Pantry** seeks to break this cycle by connecting education, health services, job training and family support to the 4,300 individuals they serve each month.
- ▶ **CAMBA** enables community members to become leaders who can help their neighbors eat well.



Many food advocates have pointed out that New York City, the nation's largest and wealthiest city, faces a critical hunger problem. The immediate needs of so many people require charitable programs to provide emergency food assistance.

Just Food, a NYC nonprofit that supports community-level food justice, and United Way NYC, an organization that aims to remove obstacles for communities creating change, have partnered to create the Local Produce Link program as a strategy to reduce hunger through community action. Funded by New York State's Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP), Local Produce Link increases food access for the most vulnerable New Yorkers. It also helps create community resilience by connecting NYC Food Pantries with local farms that distribute weekly deliveries of fresh, wholesome food throughout the growing season.

### A cooking demonstration at CAMBA's Meet the Farmer event

For people who have trouble affording enough food, worrying about where their next meal will come from is all-consuming. It disrupts the ability to focus on school and work. This alone deepens the economic inequality, but additionally leads to poor health. Consequently, sick children are forced to stay home from school, losing valuable time in the classroom and missing out on free school lunches, while adults are forced to miss work and lose income. Food-insecure people are at greater risk of developing chronic ailments such as diabetes, obesity and high blood sugar. In this way, hunger creates a painful cycle that makes it harder for those who are food insecure to climb out of poverty.

As one of Local Produce Link's 48 food pantries, the Beyond Hunger Food Pantry seeks to break this cycle by connecting education, health services, job training and family support to the 4,300 individuals they serve each month. It is one of 150 programs administered by CAMBA, a local nonprofit with 60 locations around the city. The pantry works with several organizations, including Greenmarket Co. and City Harvest to collect fresh food for their clients. In 2009, Local Produce Link matched the Beyond Hunger Food Pantry with Hearty Roots Community Farm in Columbia County to give free fresh vegetables to its clients for 23 weeks every year.

Every Wednesday during the growing season, workers at the farm pack a mix of leafy greens, root vegetables and seasonal crops onto their truck. Hearty Roots delivers 240 pounds of vegetables weekly to each of five Local Produce Link food pantries in central Brooklyn. Once their food reaches the Beyond Hunger Food Pantry, it becomes part of the pantry's holistic approach to food security.

Lucila Santana, the pantry's program supervisor, believes that by offering food preparation training CAMBA enables community members to become leaders who can help their neighbors eat well. Community Chefs and Vegetable Educators are trained to demonstrate cooking and storage techniques and inspire others to seek out wholesome foods and try new recipes using seasonal ingredients. In this way, knowledge passes between friends and family members. Simple tips, such as most vegetables can be eaten raw and that uncooked vegetables are more nutritious, have a lasting effect on many households. The exchange of knowl-

edge goes both ways. Lucila describes how clients at the pantry taught her to use radish greens instead of throwing them away.

Each year clients also are given the chance to meet Ben and Lindsey Lusher Shute, who own Hearty Roots Farm. CAMBA hosts “Meet the Farmer” events in the city, while Local Produce Link offers a free trip for 50 clients to visit Hudson Valley farms. These interactions benefit the farms, and the pantry.

Ben enjoys meeting CAMBA’s clients and hosting the visitors. He believes interacting with his customers is an important part of sustaining the food system since it educates people about where their food comes from and helps them understand that the quality of the food they eat directly relates to its nutritional value. Meanwhile, Lucila says, food pantry guests cherish the opportunity to meet and learn from the farmers, who are warm and humble as they welcome people to their farm.

Hearty Roots Farm, two hours north of NYC, is a good example of the need for keeping farmland affordable in the regional foodshed. Before purchasing their property, Ben and Lindsey farmed on three-quarters of



Ben Shute at Hearty Roots Community Farm

an acre of leased land and produced enough food for a 30-member CSA. It was a good start, but they knew that to continue to grow and invest in infrastructure and capital expenses, they needed to find their own land.

After years of searching, they found that farmland near NYC was not affordable for beginning farmers. Some of our region’s most fertile farmland was being sold above its agricultural value to estate buyers without an interest in farming. Lease agreements do not provide a farmer with the security they need to make long-term investments in the land. Through persistence and a partnership with The Scenic Hudson Land Trust, Hearty Roots Community Farm found

a home on a 70-acre plot in Clermont. By acquiring the development rights of the property Scenic Hudson reduced its cost, making the land affordable for the Shutes to purchase. Today, Hearty Roots grows on 25 of these acres and the Local Produce Link pantries account for just some of their 600 CSA shares.

In some ways, Ben explains, the Local Produce Link program is better for a farmer than a traditional CSA, because the volume of the Local Produce Link deliveries along with the communication between the pantries and the farm give him more flexibility to distribute large quantities of produce that all comes to be ripe at the same time. Lucila echoes this idea of flexibility. Each year the farm takes feedback from the pantry and aims to improve the ways they can help the pantry meet the needs of so many individuals.

She points out that these programs are so important because while many of her clients want to eat healthy food, they simply cannot afford it. Without expendable cash, they are forced to choose the cheapest options. The low cost of this food usually comes as a tradeoff to nutrition. Providing alternatives to this dilemma with free local food helps de-stigmatize food assistance and offers culturally appropriate food for immigrants. Several clients of Beyond Hunger Food Pantry who have immigrated to the city are accustomed to cooking with raw ingredients or were farmers themselves.

Lucila acknowledges that Beyond Hunger Food Pantry is a large and relatively well-resourced program, but the need is so great and there are still so many New Yorkers without access to healthy food. She wants more of the 600 food pantries in NYC to distribute local food and would like to see the Local Produce Link, City Harvest and Greenmarket Co. continue and expand to help other pantries meet this goal.

## PROFILE: Institutional Buying, Lenox Hill Neighborhood House



A typical menu for Lenox Hill Neighborhood House's Seniors

In 2011, Lenox Hill Neighborhood House was busy rethinking how it could improve the lives of women, children and seniors on the Upper East Side. With support from a city grant, the 120-year-old settlement house decided to change the way it promotes healthy lifestyles for the 20,000 Manhattan residents it serves. Using a holistic approach, the nonprofit organization began to offer daily activities such as yoga classes for seniors and food education for children in its Head Start program. It also dedicated itself to serving healthy meals with an emphasis on local food.

To achieve this goal, Lenox Hill Neighborhood House hired Lynn Loflin as their new Executive Chef. Leaving a 20 year career as a New York City restaurant owner, Lynn came to the community center to use her experience to help its kitchen incorporate more local food.

Of the many ways that New Yorkers get food, perhaps the one that feeds the most people is institutional buying. Schools, hospitals, senior centers and prisons compose some of NYC's "public plate." The Food Policy Center's 2014 report, "The Public Plate in New York City," estimates that city institutions serve more than 260 million meals a year.<sup>8</sup> NYC's public schools alone are the second-largest buyer of food in the country, only surpassed by the U.S. military. Increasing the amount of fresh, wholesome food in each of these meals would improve the lives of New Yorkers by decreasing their risk of diabetes, obesity and high blood sugar. Reaching this goal, however, cannot be done overnight. Instead, it will require incrementally scaling up the local food system to increase the supply coming from local farms and improving the ability of city agencies to cook with fresh ingredients. Smaller institutions, like Lenox Hill Neighborhood House, are crucial to taking these necessary steps.

When Lynn first arrived at Lenox Hill Neighborhood House, the kitchen was serving larger portions of meat along a lot of frozen and canned vegetables. The facilities were insufficient for preparing fresh food. In addition, her crew of 12 cooks was suddenly being asked to do a lot more work. Undaunted, Lynn rolled up her sleeves and began making changes.

Before she could prepare her first meal, Lynn had to adjust to the complexity of reporting to three different agencies. Each agency operates with its own goals and food standards and conforms to NYC food standards.

Next, Lynn began to incorporate local vegetables into lunches and dinners while starting a conversation with her staff. Each person had a different approach to this transition. It took some time for them to see the connection between their daily work of preparing food and nutrition that plays a role in ending chronic ailments. It also took time to develop new skill sets to work differently in a busy kitchen.

As the kitchen began to adjust, Lynn increased the menus to include breakfast and began purchasing more fresh fruit and vegetables. By shrinking portions of meat and increasing the amount of plant-based calories, Lynn was able to balance her budget and serve healthier meals. Maintaining an open line of communication with her staff helped foster an interest in preparing fresh food, and she encouraged employees to follow their interests. When one of her cooks, who was interested in baking, Lynn prodded her to learn more about the process and bought more local whole grains for her to use.

Another hurdle that Lynn had to overcome was NYC's requirement that institutions serving food submit their menus six months in advance. At first, this was difficult for Lynn because it did not allow her to make changes on the spot or to be flexible with her ingredient choices. Whereas when she ran her own restaurant she could order food based on what came in and looked good the day of a market, now

- ▶ New York City institutions, such as public schools, hospitals and community centers, serve 260 million meals every year.
- ▶ **Lenox Hill Neighborhood House** incorporates local food into 50 percent of the 360,000 meals it serves annually.

she had to plan her meals even before crops had been planted and according to what farmers expected to be available, weather depending. Soon, however, Lynn found a way to use this to her advantage.

Further, working with the seasonality of Northeast farms, the Lenox Hill Neighborhood House can pull on the Hudson Valley's rich agricultural assets, like local apples that come in a dozen varieties and, when properly stored, stay fresh for most of the year. Buying food from Greenmarket Co., the wholesale distribution arm of GrowNYC that connects 40+ regional farmers to dozens of underserved communities, allows Lynn to source up to 50 percent of her ingredients locally while serving 360,000 meals per year. In the future, institutions such as Lenox Hill Neighborhood House will be able to work with more food hub distributors to communicate with farmers before crops are planted and shift the market place to meet the growing demand for local food. Currently, two of Lynn's kitchens are being renovated. This will increase her ability to use raw ingredients as well as host more high school and CUNY Service Corps interns who rely on Lenox Hill Neighborhood House for job training.

These experiences are so important because food justice advocates have called for using more local food to achieve this goal and the City Council has responded with progressive steps such as Local Law 50, which encourages procurement of food grown in New York State, and Local Law 52, which tracks the amount of New York State-grown food that the city does buy. However, many challenges remain. Lessons learned through Lenox Hill Neighborhood House's local food procurement will inform the procurement practices of other larger agencies.

The current state of NYC's local food system is one of the greatest hurdles to achieving this goal. The region has moved away from wholesale distribution and food processing, and toward direct sales at farmers markets and CSAs.

Regional farmers will have to adjust their operations in order to grow food in the quantity demanded by NYC's largest institutions and package it to meet these institutions' needs. Scaling up operations, investing in new infrastructure and transitioning into more wholesale distribution will take several growing seasons. Long-term contracts from city agencies and reconsidering the city's food standards to accommodate more raw ingredients will help farmers take these steps.

Small and medium-sized institutions, like Lenox Hill Neighborhood House, are well-suited to help make this transition. Learning how to incorporate more local food and stay under budget takes a lot of creativity and experimentation. Because they are decentralized, these community centers are able to design their own menus and work with distributors to embrace Hudson Valley farms. This scale allows both parties some flexibility. Farms are beginning to work with city agencies and learn how to adjust their businesses to meet the city's needs. Meanwhile, the city is learning from these experiences to better understand what the future of their local food system will look like.

Lynn Loflin collecting herbs in the Lenox Hill Neighborhood House educational garden.



## Endnotes

1. "2013 Annual Report," GrowNYC
2. New York City Human Resources Administration
3. "A Food Secure NYC 2018," New York City Coalition Against Hunger
4. "The Unkindest of Cuts: 2014 Hunger Report," New York City Coalition Against Hunger
5. "A Food Secure NYC 2018," New York City Coalition Against Hunger
6. "The Unkindest of Cuts: 2014 Hunger Report," New York City Coalition Against Hunger
7. "2013 Annual Report," Just Food
8. "The Public Plate in New York City," New York City Food Policy Center at Hunter College

