

Is a California Tomato Good Enough for New York? Defining “Local”

Keynote Address by Will Stevens

I'd like to begin by thanking NOFA-NY for inviting me to say a few words at this great conference. I also want to say how flattered I am to have been asked to give a co-keynote address. I'm not a published author, a nationally recognized figure, nor much of a public speaker. I don't own or run the biggest organic farm in Vermont, nor have I been doing it the longest. I'm a guy who decided to farm it back in 1981, because I couldn't see earning my living as a blacksmith. I don't know how you got my name, and I applaud you for your bravery. I do have a lot on my mind, however, and I hope I don't disappoint.

The subtitle of this conference is, “Is a California tomato good enough for New York?”

After giving this question a lot of thought, I come bearing sad news: for a lot of New Yorkers, a California tomato is good enough. Not only that, but it's good enough for a lot of Vermonters, New Englanders, Northeasterners, Midwesterners, and probably Canadians as well! What's more, not only is a California tomato good enough for many of us, but so are Walmart, McDonalds, Coca Cola, HMO's, Windows operating systems, and a whole slew of other mass-merchandized, depersonalized marketing concepts the system has determined that we need—assuming we are in the right demographics, of course. A lot of these things we might not approve of or like, but go ahead and make use of anyway. This is not to say that we accept or buy into that paradigm, and I assume that most of us here don't. The reality is, that to some extent or another, we are all faced with making choices or decisions about things beyond our control that influence what we do, and help define who we are, every day.

I suspect that to some extent, we're all a bunch of hypocrites. It's not that I have a problem with hypocrites, since I am one myself in some way or another. For me the issue is, what level of hypocrisy is acceptable? And of course, the answer is personal—to each his or her own. I had a vegan friend once who had a weakness for Snickers. Another time my wife and I were enjoying a falafel from a new health food booth at the county fair, when a couple of organic market-gardening friends happened to walk by. I raved about the delicious falafel and some of the other healthy options available, but they just laughed and said, “Ah, we eat that way all the time at home... we're headed for the fried dough!” And you know, the falafel didn't quite taste as good after that!

To my mind, there is a huge and significant difference between choice and decision, and the degree to which we practice one or the other will have a real impact on the level of hypocrisy we are able to live with or to tolerate. If, on the one hand, we are content to merely select from the options others present to us, that is a matter of choice, and leads to passive involvement (which is an oxymoron) and mind numbness. If, on



Will Stevens fields questions after his Keynote Address

the other hand, we seek out information and educate ourselves well about the situation or matter at hand, then we are able to make intelligent decisions about what path to take.

So, in my mind, the real question behind the California tomato question is, how do we subvert the dominant paradigm? Or put another way, how do we muddle forward into the 21st Century, in the face of, and in opposition to, the forces of homogeneity and standardization? By the way, a friend of mine has taken to referring to these present times, this current epoch, as the “Homogocene Era”, which, in several hundred thousand millennia ought to fit right in there with the Pleistocene and other significant eras.

I found my inspiration for the answer to that question in some of those famous quotes from the seventies: “Small is Beautiful,” “Act Locally, Think Globally,” “You are what you eat,” and “What goes around comes around.” They all make sense, and they're all still true! Now you have to understand that I'm just a reclusive woodchuck running a small farm in a small state, which gives me a perspective that may not even be relevant to many of you, but I'll ask you to bear with me for the next few minutes. I want to share with you some ideas and experiences I've had over the last 20 years of making my living as a small-scale market gardener, in the hopes that everyone here can take home at least one thought or idea, and nurture it and let it flourish in your own environment.

Let's start with the idea of local. It's a hard term to define, even though some are determined to. In Vermont, “local” is officially put at 40 miles, and the Hannaford Supermarket chain's produce buyer considers it anything delivered within 24 hours of harvest. Elliot Coleman has even given it a new name—“authentic.” Personally, I think it's more of an emotional state of mind than a matter of time or distance alone. We probably all have different concepts of what it means, and I did a little word association to help me get to the core of it: Local—Community—Home—“Home is where the heart is”—Heart—Love—Truth—Honesty—Respect... “Local” becomes a pretty interesting concept!

Let me give you my sixty-second biography, because in order to know where I'm going, it would be helpful for you to know where I'm coming from. My wife Judy and I moved to Shoreham and started Golden Russet Farm in 1984, after 3 years of market gardening in another town on rented land. Ever since the very first year when everything we grew went to the

Burlington Farmers' Market, our goal was to provide quality food for people at reasonable prices. And while our markets have changed, our mission hasn't.

Twelve of our 82 acres are used for vegetable production in any given year, with the balance in rotation, or rented out for hay or pasture. I won't go on about production methods, except to say that we've been organic since the beginning, certified organic by Vermont Organic Farmers (NOFA-VT's Certification committee) since 1987, and have no plans to change our practices much in the future, except for the better. (And I'll have more to say on the national Program later).

We have three children, ages 15, 13, and 10, who attend three different schools in Shoreham and Middlebury this year. Striking the balance between farm and business needs and family matters is one of our greatest challenges at home. In addition to running the farm, which includes skills such as bookkeeping, personnel management, payroll, mechanic, publicity and promotion (including advertising and graphic design), marketing, purchasing, inventory, as well as crop and pest management, production oversight, and quality control; we also now run a taxi service for our children's numerous outside interests! Addressing the needs of a busy family life has helped bring our business activities closer to home, and I'll speak about that in a minute.

Our marketing strategies seem to change every year—we've done it all, from direct wholesaling and belonging to a wholesale grower's cooperative, to farmer's markets and CSA—and our general direction now is back towards retailing. We have a small farmstand, which is very busy during the bedding plant season, tails off during the main summer and picks up again for the Christmas season, when, up until last year, we made and sold wreaths. We've been vendors at the Middlebury Farmers' Market for the past ten years. Middlebury is a college town of about 8000 people about 12 miles east of us, and is the only major town in the county. Our only remaining wholesale account is the Middlebury Natural Foods Co-op, where last year we sold over \$27,000 worth of produce.

We started a CSA program in 1996, and last year it grew to 69 households. We could grow to 100 members without having to make major changes to our labor or production situation, and while we would like to see more members, given our rural location, that might be hard to attain.

We began selling at the Ticonderoga Farmers' Market last summer, after we got a call from the head of the New York State Farmer's Markets program in June, looking to establish a market there. He was calling over to Vermont because none of the growers, except one, in the Ticonderoga-Crown Point area were interested in taking part in a Ticonderoga Farmers' Market. There were a lot WIC and Senior Nutrition Program coupons, or checks, being distributed in southern Essex County, which is one of NY's poorest counties. It also happens to be right across Lake Champlain from us. For those who don't know, the checks are only redeemable at farmers' markets, and since the nearest one of those was in Elizabethtown, many Adirondack miles away, there was no practical place to redeem them.

We have a similar program in Vermont, called the Farm to Family program, which I happen to think is one of the greatest

concepts going for promoting a local food supply system. Since it's inception in Vermont in 1986 or 87, it has become more top heavy with administration, which is a pain, but it's still a great idea. One of the reasons I like it so much is that it gets some of those folks for whom a California tomato IS good enough, to discover, in a friendly, non-threatening way, a totally new type of food quality and delivery system, which can lead, over time, to who knows what kind of changes and benefits for them and their families.

Anyway, we gave the Ti Market a go, and I have to say that while it was only marginally worthwhile last year, we'll probably do it again, if I'm allowed to carpetbag that is...if more "local" growers want to join in, I'll be happy to go back and stay on my side of the lake! Speaking of local, if I take the 10 minute ferry ride across the lake to Ticonderoga, NY, it's a 9-1/2 mile drive from our farm. Middlebury, Vt. is a 12 mile drive away, in the other direction. Is one more "local" than the other, simply because of a political boundary?

Prior to last season we gave up our wholesale accounts in Burlington (Vermont's largest city, 42 miles to our north. Some of these accounts date back to 1984, and most of them we had been selling to for about ten years. There were restaurants, health food stores, and a co-op, and annual sales were typically anywhere from \$16 to \$22,000. Delivery involved an hour round-trip twice a week for either Judy, me, or one of our 4 employees. A combination of things, including downward price pressures over the last several years, caused us to begin to focus our efforts on keeping as much of our food as possible right in Addison County. Above all else, however, was our desire to continue to enjoy farming. We had finally started to add up some of the personal and emotional costs we'd been incurring over the years, which weren't showing up on the balance sheet, and we decided that in order to continue to farm, we needed to change. We wanted to strike a better balance between our business and our personal life, and in order to do that, we decided to tighten up and bring things closer to home. No amount of money could take the place of matters of the heart; it had to be family before business. For us, building our business—our monument, as Traugher Groh might say—had come first for too many years. Did the business suffer because of it? Well, our gross of \$127,000 was off \$8500 from the year before, and our net of \$22,800 was actually \$600 higher. Maybe it was a fluke; check in with me in a couple of years...

That said, I view marketing as the necessary evil that underwrites the farm. Neither Judy's nor my temperaments are well suited for negotiating sales and prices each week with buyers who have their own set of issues, so we decided to spread our risk from a few produce managers and chefs to a large number of retail customers and CSA members. Our talents, interest and passion are in production, sharing information, and community building, so we played to those strengths, and to some extent let the marketing take care of itself. Financially it was a risk, but the alternative seemed riskier.

We were redefining local for ourselves; we were bringing it even closer to home. In 1990, most of our produce was going into Boston through Deep Root Organic Truck Grower's Co-operative. Eleven years later, about 95 percent of it stayed right

in Addison County, with its population of around 36,000— same acreage, by the way, just a different mix of crops. During that time, our reputation for credibility and integrity was growing locally, along with our circle of support. It really seems old-fashioned, in these days of instant gratification, but these are things that take some time, have nothing to do with marketing, and yet have everything to do with sales. Word of mouth has been our best form of advertising, and that has been paid for by consistency, quality, and honesty—which is not too much of a price to pay!

“Local” has been a relatively easy concept to relate to in Vermont, since the state was founded on the premise of local control and a “hands off” approach to government. Some say things started going the other way once the Democrats started winning statewide elections in the late 60s, but before you make the wrong assumption about my politics, let me just say that Republicans aren’t what they used to be, either—ask Jim Jeffords! Anyway, “small” and “local” are more than synonyms to me, they are goals, in the same way that “big” or “global” are to the power brokers. Fortunately, they are also relative terms, which gives us all the freedom to define them the way that best suits us. Thinking and acting locally gives us greater flexibility to respond quickly to, and even manage, change, because many of the variables affecting a situation are more easily identified.

I’m pretty sure it was Tip O’Neill who said, “All politics are local,” and I think he was referring to constituent service, the type which is more than simply “bringing home the bacon (or pork)!” It involves listening and caring about your neighbors and the community you live in, and using your strengths, talents, abilities, and connections to make your part of the world a better place. And that’s not a concept only limited to politicians. As producers, buyers, and consumers of organic foods, serving our constituents is something we do every day, and through that service we begin to see the world in different ways.

I’ll tell you a story: back in late June of 1997 our season ended abruptly because of a misapplied aerial application of herbicide on a neighbor’s corn field. The type of herbicide used belonged to a new family of herbicides called sulfonylureas, which are extremely potent: these were applied at a rate of less than one tablespoon per acre.

Some of our plants died outright, some were ruined, and some were merely stunted. Word got out about the incident—newspapers, television, the whole nine yards—and we began to get a lot of calls and letters from friends and well wishers, many of whom we didn’t even know. Let me tell you, it really meant a lot to us. Anyway, we got a card from a woman who had worked for us the year before, who was able to put what we do for a living into a brand new perspective for me. She’d gotten some starter plants for her garden from us that spring, and she wrote to let us know that we would be with her all season long through those plants, And not only in her garden, but in gardens and yards all over the county and beyond, all that we did would live on and be nurtured by all who supported us and what we do. Talk about Community Supported Agriculture!

Up until that moment, I had never given any thought to the fact that what we were doing could actually be meaningful to others; we just knew that we enjoyed doing it! Her message was

what we were doing as organic farmers was not simply a matter of personal interest, but also an issue of social responsibility! Here was a person who had shared some good times with us, and was letting us know that she would not only share the bad, but would help with the healing as well.

The outpouring of affection and support for us that year culminated with a barn party in October which was attended by more than 250 people and raised over \$14,000. 1997 was our 16th year of market gardening, and up until that time I never would have guessed that we would find ourselves in the position of being so loved and needed. It was amazing to think that a couple of crunchy granola back-to-the-landers such as ourselves, doing what we wanted to do with our lives, could work our way into being such a necessary and predictable part of other people’s lives.

This is the point I’m trying to make: everyone of us needs to be aware that we can thrive in that symbiotic place of depending on, and simultaneously supporting, our community of friends, despite the odds, and despite the forces of standardization and commercialization which pull us as a culture and society away from what is noble, fair, and good, in the same way that the Sirens’ songs lured sailors to their doom.

Every Spring, we send out a newsletter to about 450 customers and friends, and two years ago, this is what I wrote:

Happy Spring!

I recently had the privilege of being invited to speak at two college seminar classes on agricultural and environmental sustainability, which has inspired me to reflect yet again on our farm’s role in our community, and to devote this year’s “Food for Thought” letter to this topic.

When asked by a student if I would prefer to buy “local” (but not organic), or “organic” (but not locally grown) produce at the store, my answer may have seemed ambiguous to him. I responded that my first choice would be for everyone to grow their own food, and enough of it so that it could be enjoyed year-round, be it fresh, frozen, pickled, canned, or otherwise preserved or stored. I contended that the choices he presented were too limited, and suggested that all too often we tend to limit ourselves to choices over which we have little, if any, control. Allowing ourselves to think only in terms of what others offer us means that we may miss out on opportunities to re-frame our lives and relationships.

From this, I have developed the model of a “ladder” of food priorities which could lead to both healthier individuals as well as a more secure role for agriculture in our communities. Briefly, it goes like this: Grow it yourself. If you won’t do that, get it from us. If you won’t get it from us, search out somebody nearby who you are willing to get it from directly. If you won’t do that, go to the produce manager at your favorite store and ask them to obtain food (which you promise to buy) which has been produced according to your personal criteria—which could include production methods, seasonal availability, or bio-regional considerations, to name but a few.

There is no downside to this approach, because at every rung of this “ladder” you are now playing a more active role in the food production and distribution network. You are becoming more knowledgeable about the sources of the food you eat, and the steps involved in getting it to your table. Growing it yourself means that you are making a real commitment to food safety and security, since you are taking on that responsibility. Buying direct from the grower means that you support what they do, not just financially, but emotionally as well (which can be a huge benefit for farmers, who tend to be socially isolated). Talking with the buyer lets them know how you feel about your food supply, and gives them a reason

to care about where and how it is raised, in order to secure your business.

You are what you eat, and now you're eating smarter. Being smart about what you put in your body means taking the time to care about yourself. Taking care of yourself opens up new opportunities for you to share your time with others, which has a positive effect on the community. Discovering shared interests and working for common goals are what make people neighbors instead of strangers, and neighbors are what make communities strong. This is the vision of "sustainability" our farm is here to promote.

As always, we look forward to seeing you again this year, and hearing your thoughts on these and other issues. We thank you again for your continued support, advice, and encouragement.

Yours for good food,
Will and Judy

The folks for whom a California tomato is indeed good enough need to begin to realize that there are other ways to define "good enough." We have a role to play here, since we are uniquely suited to use a local, personal approach to lead them to this discovery. Let's educate them about the ladder of food priorities that I just mentioned above. Lead by example, and take small steps to make the local economic circle more relevant to people's homes and lives.

As we move forward into this century, struggling to define the level of hypocrisy we are willing and able to live with, and the choices and decisions we have to negotiate, let me remind you that we are members of the Organic Movement, with an active role to play in the larger community, albeit at the local level. As such, we need to show leadership by doing what we know how to do best: serve the people who need us (and that should be just about everyone), and ask for their support in return. Develop and participate in community and economic models based on environmental principles which rely upon, among other things, diversity, for strength, and for the efficient transfer of energy from one form to another. Here's an example. Last fall, Judy helped organize a community supper to raise money for the Shoreham town library's building fund, which featured food raised by Shoreham agriculturalists. Shoreham's Homegrown Dinner served around 170 meals, raised about \$2000 and consisted of food, about 90% of which was raised or grown within a 5 mile radius of the library. Ideas and activities such as this are not out of the reach of any of us.

I encourage you to resist the temptation to become members of the new "Organic Industry," which uses transportation systems to define food policy, and a certification program which is market driven, instead of soil, personal, and community-health driven. A couple of years ago, after the first National Organic Standards Proposed Rule came out, I was asked by Vermont Public Radio to debate Grace Gershuny on their weekly call-in current affairs show. Grace co-authored *The Soul of Soil*, was a former small-acreage Vermont grower, and was a co-author of the proposed rules. We had a lively discussion, and at the end of the show off-mike, it occurred to me to ask her that if her stated goal of providing "Joe Six Pack" with a year-round supply of fresh organic produce was met, and in the process small operations like mine were forced out of business, would she call the National Organic Program a success. Her answer was, and I quote, "On balance, I'd have to say 'yes'." I think something has been lost here, folks!

You know, California tomatoes might be good enough for some New Yorkers, but not for others. I don't think this is good enough. We need to work toward what is best for all New Yorkers, and all Vermonters, Northeasterners, Midwesterners, and so forth, and in order to do that, we need to reclaim the power and ability to decide for ourselves what is best, and to work toward that end. It is not helpful or productive to sit back and wait to be told what the choices are. Local farms play active roles in local and regional food systems, and can serve as foundations for economic and social justice, since accountability and responsibility can be more easily identified, and less easily denied. It won't be easy, because the forces that demand order and control will fight it, but there is another environmental principle which may be helpful to remember: Systems naturally tend toward randomness and disorder; to which I say, stay small, stay flexible, stay local.

If you believe in what you're doing, and if you love it—and I'm not just talking to the farmers here—then it is vital to figure out ways to continue to do it, because whether you know it or not, the people you come into contact with, the people you serve, begin to believe in you, and over time will come to depend on you; and they will feed you, just as you feed them. This is the motivation we must never forget about; the duty we must never relinquish. It does no one any good to labor alone, thinking that they aren't appreciated. Farming in particular is an isolating vocation, which needs to be balanced with getting good attention. Take your talents, whatever they may be, and put them to good use. You, what you are doing and what you believe in, are both your motivation as well as your best marketing tool. Over time this will also serve as the basis for your credibility, and the trust you will have earned as a result. Our best hope for personal, economic, and social success in the world of centralization, standardization, conformity, big-box-store mentality, and cheap food policy—is to stand up for what we believe in, and never lose sight of our goals.

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