10 Things to Know About Local Food Systems

#1. Defining local food
According to the USDA (2008 farm bill), a product can be marketed as locally or regionally produced if its end-point purchase is within 400 miles from its origin, or within state boundaries. However, most retailers, restaurants or food services often define local to be on a smaller scale (within 100 miles, within 150 miles, etc.). Others include non-geographic values in their use of the term "local," such as humanely raised, naturally grown, ethically produced, etc. However, these values are not always included in the definition of "local," so be curious and ask questions!

#2. Buying local supports your local economy.
Food dollars stay in your community when you buy local food. A northeast Iowa study found that in a hypothetical scenario where the population’s diet was based on local production involving fruits, vegetables, grain products, dairy, and meats, 408 jobs would be regionally supported (only 55 or so would have been farm-production related).

#3. Local foods bring new markets and economic opportunities…
…for beginning farmers and food entrepreneurs. A 2014 study conducted by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture reported that at least 171 new jobs were created in 2013 as a result of the local foods sector.

#4. Eating local food leads to healthier eating habits.
Locally grown produce is fresher. Produce starts losing nutrients as soon as it is harvested. What you buy at the supermarket may have been harvested days or weeks before reaching the retail shelf. On the other hand, produce bought from a local producer has often been picked within 24 hours of your purchase. Locally grown produce can be more nutrient dense than produce shipped from across the country.

#5. Local or organic?
Local and organic are two different things; "local" food is produced and processed geographically near its point of sale. "Organic" food is produced following a defined set of standards set by USDA. To label a product as "USDA Organic," producers have to go through a certification process. Getting certified organic can cost a lot of money, and may not be worth it for small-scale farmers. However, many local food farmers use organic practices, and use their direct relationships to consumers rather than labels to 'certify' their products. By knowing your farmer locally, you have the ability to become familiar with their production practices regardless of label.

#6. Children are reconnected to food by growing and eating local.
Farm to school activities provide healthy food options, nutrition and food-based education to influence healthy eating behaviors and lifestyles in children. Studies show that children are more inclined to eat new kinds of food if they know where it comes from (see www.farmtoschool.org). Visit our website for information and resources on the Iowa Farm to School Network.

#7. Local food systems can enhance food security.
Iowa imports up to 90 percent of its food from out of state. What happens when our national food supply chain is disrupted, by natural or human activities? More local production will increase Iowa’s food security.

#8. Local food and food justice
A critique of local food systems work is that it can create spaces that exclude people who cannot afford to "buy local," ascribes value to ethics and language that are defined by specific populations, and skews the reality of who is growing food. When defining your food system and the changes you are hoping to see, it is vital to create an inclusive space that takes into account your community’s diversity, including race, class, gender and more. Visit our website for resources on promoting equity in your food systems work.

#9. Federal support for local food
Despite missed opportunities (nutrition assistance and farm to school programs in particular), the 2014 farm bill illustrates the support for local and regional food systems by the federal government. The Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion Program, the Value Added Producer Grant program and community food projects all received increased funding.

#10. You can play a part!
Everyone can play a part in supporting local foods systems, from our decisions as consumers or as community citizens. Visit our website to learn how to get more involved!

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References:
1. Estimating the Production and Market Value-Based Impacts of Nutritional Goals in NE Iowa (Swenson D, 2008); http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1124&context=leopold_pubspapers