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## **Local Food Tourism Networks and Word of Mouth**

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**Abstract:** This article draws from surveys of three key components of local food tourism networks: farmers, restaurateurs, and tourists. Key informant interviews were also conducted to complement survey data. Results indicate that word of mouth is central to forming and maintaining local food tourism networks because it links farmers and restaurateurs. Also tourists become aware of tourism opportunities primarily through word of mouth. For these reasons, Extension educators must consider word of mouth when promoting local food tourism. Word of mouth requires time to form "naturally." Therefore, practitioners must create opportunities to link the different hubs in local food tourism networks.

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### **Introduction**

Small and specialty farms are often less able to compete in global markets than large commodity farms, but recently niche markets like community supported agriculture, farmers' markets, and agricultural tourism have emerged to fortify many small farms. Additionally, on-farm gourmet meal programs connect nature, cuisine, and agriculture in innovative ways. Another recent alternative development strategy for rural areas is culinary tourism—tourism based on a desire to experience unique and/or culturally specific cuisine (Green & Dougherty, 2008). Local food tourism networks are a growing component of culinary tourism.

Despite their growing popularity, there is little information available to practitioners about how these local food tourism networks form and develop. To this end, we conducted mail surveys with agricultural producers, restaurateurs, and tourists in Door, Crawford, and Vernon Counties, Wisconsin. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with restaurateurs in Door County. We administered the tourist survey to patrons at local food festivals in Southwest Wisconsin. Across the three counties, we sent out 182 restaurateur surveys and received 71 responses. We mailed 140 surveys to farmers and received 74 responses. We conducted surveys among 330 tourists. One of the key questions that motivated the research and the question we answer in this article is: how do these disparate community institutions—restaurateurs, farmers, and tourists—establish interrelationships that foster local food tourism?

## Local Food and Local Food Tourism Research

A growing body of research examines local food systems, although very little of it incorporates producers, restaurateurs, and end consumers into the analysis. Current work generally falls into the following categories: (1) barriers to linking farmers, restaurateurs, and end buyers; (2) attitudes toward local food systems; and (3) policy implications/benefits of local food systems.

The barriers literature is perhaps the largest of the three categories. Two significant barriers to creating local food systems are a lack of communication between farmers and restaurateurs, and a lack of information on the part of restaurateurs about farmers and vice versa (Curtis, Cowee, Havercamp, Morris, & Gatzke, 2008; Krieger, 2006). Some research finds discrepancies between production quantities and purchasing needs to be a significant barrier (Green & Dougherty, 2008; Gregoire, Arendt, & Strohbehn, 2005; Johnson & Stevenson, 1998; Starr, Card, Benepe, Auld, Lamm, Smith, & Wilken, 2003). Inconsistency of appearance is a significant barrier for producers as well (Gregoire et al., 2005). Quality and freshness, particularly for upscale dining, are key criteria that favor local producers (Starr et al., 2003; Curtis et al., 2008).

Attitudes toward local food systems are varied. Some farmers resent retailers for sourcing from purveyors or for insisting on low prices (Starr et al. 2003). Farmers also perceive a lack of interest on the part of buyers (Gregoire et al. 2005). In other cases, retailers feel an obligation to source locally when possible (Green & Dougherty, 2008).

Another theme in the literature involves policy recommendations for developing and fortifying local food systems. Community-based food systems can be facilitated through collaborations among diverse stakeholders (Conner, Cocciarelli, Mutch, & Hamm, 2008). Creating horizontal links between producers helps build markets and marketing (Che, Veeck, & Veeck, 2005). Farmers' markets, direct marketing, and cooperatives can enhance local food systems (Gregoire et al., 2005; Starr et al., 2003). David Timmons, Quingbin Wang, and Dan Lass (2008) present Extension professionals with a model for estimating the thickness of local food networks in the hope that they will estimate local food capacity in their areas.

Yet, despite the growing body of literature around local foods, analyses generally fail to incorporate the three main network hubs (producers, retailers, and end consumers). The literature either emphasizes direct marketing, thus eliminating food retailers and restaurateurs, or it focuses on links between producers and restaurateurs thus ignoring end consumers.

## Word of Mouth

Word of mouth (WOM) is direct and informal communication between individuals who possess a social relationship, but the meaning of the phrase "word of mouth" has expanded since its inception. Because of the range of communications technologies today, WOM information is no longer passed necessarily between mouths. Text messages, emails, phone calls, etc., all qualify as media through which WOM can be distributed.

Many studies over the years have documented the integral role of WOM in decision-making. Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld (1955) found that WOM was seven times more effective than print advertisements in influencing decision-making regarding household goods. Not only is WOM effective for marketers, it is also effective for consumers. Glenn Ellison and Drew Fudenberg (1995) found that receiving information via WOM tends to lead people to make correct and "socially efficient" choices. Information is communicated via WOM through both strong and weak network ties. Weak ties bridge subgroups, but strong ties are those that transmit referral information, and information conducted through strong ties is that which is generally acted

upon (Brown, Reingen, & Reingen, 1987).

In the case of local food tourism networks, WOM is not only a tool for marketers, but is the key medium that links agricultural producers with restaurateurs, restaurateurs with end consumers, restaurateurs with producers, and producers with direct end consumers. In short, WOM is the bonding mechanism of local food tourism networks. The next section illustrates the role of WOM in these networks.

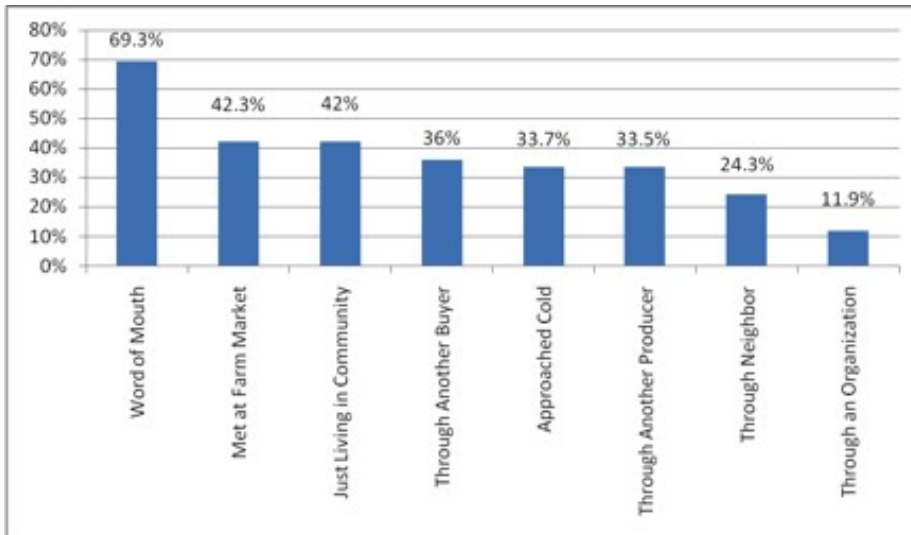
## Local Food Tourism Networks and Word of Mouth

WOM is the most important way that producers meet buyers and is also key to connecting buyers with producers. WOM is also the most significant method of advertising and promotion practiced by producers, and it is the main way that tourists learn of local food tourism opportunities.

Both individually, and in aggregate, farmers in the three counties surveyed reported that WOM was the principal way they met local restaurateurs and other buyers. In Door County, when asked about common ways producers met buyers, 55% indicated WOM as the primary means. The next most important means, with 44% of respondents, was "just living in the community." The most formal means of getting to know buyers, "through an organization," was only considered important by 13% of those surveyed and ranked last in the list. In Vernon County, 80% of producers elected WOM, and 60% identified "through another buyer who buys from me" as the second most important way of meeting local buyers. As in Door County, "through an organization" was the least important means with 11%. In Crawford County, 73% of respondents elected WOM. The second most important means was "meeting at the farm market," (42%), and, again, "through an organization" was deemed least important with 11.5%.

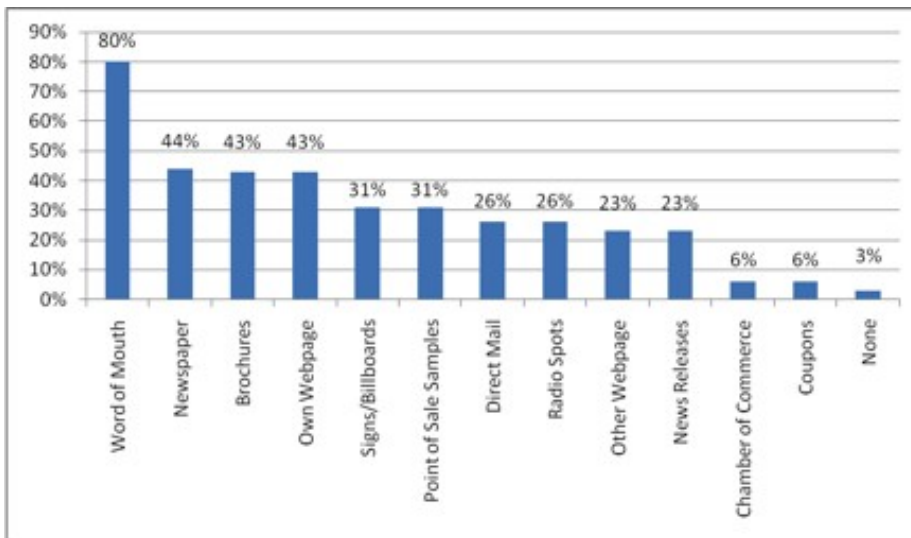
In aggregate, 69.3% of respondents across all three counties selected WOM. Effectively tied for second place were the responses "met at the farm market" and "just living in the community." "Through an organization" ranked last across all three counties (Figure 1). Like WOM, "met at farm market" and "just living in the community" are responses that indicate informal social processes. Further, the importance of these responses, compared to "approached them cold" or "through an organization" suggests that local food systems depend on long-standing, locally bound, social ties. The fact that "through another producer" was relatively low on the list suggests that producers involved in local food systems don't "cross-pollinate" to the extent that they should.

**Figure 1.**  
Producer Means of Meeting Local Buyers



We also asked producers in Vernon and Crawford Counties about their most common forms of advertising. Again, WOM was the most important form of advertising available to farmers. Eighty percent of respondents selected WOM, while the next most popular form of advertising, the newspaper, was only important to 44% of those surveyed (Figure 2).

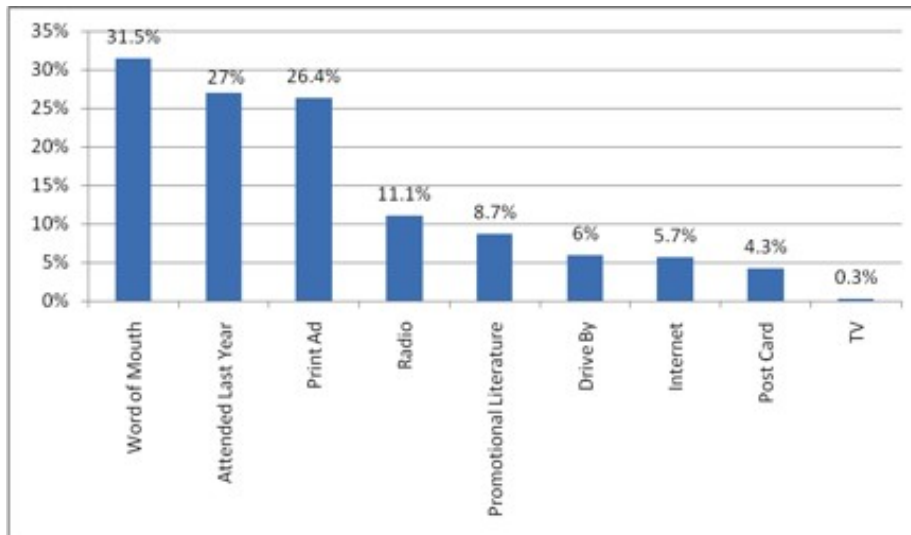
**Figure 2.**  
Most Common Forms of Advertising



The results of the tourist survey further underscore the importance of WOM for facilitating local food tourism networks. Thirty-two percent of tourists identified WOM as a principal way of hearing about a particular local food event. "Attended last year," which relies on individual perceptions in the same way that WOM does, was the second most significant source of information for local food tourists (Figure 3). The survey also asked respondents to write in other sources of information that were not included in the closed-ended question. Most write-ins stated that they had heard about the event they were attending from

friends and family. Some indicated that they had previously lived in the area, and others commented that they knew someone involved in the event. Each of these responses also reflects WOM and/or social ties. As was the case with farmers, local food tourists depend on social ties. Eighty-nine percent of those surveyed were day-trippers. Of the 11% who intended to stay overnight, 50% were staying with either family or friends.

**Figure 3.**  
Tourists' Sources of Information on Local Food Events



Open-ended interviews conducted with restaurateurs confirm the importance of WOM. One woman, the general manager of a Door County restaurant, commented,

When you know somebody that buys locally, they will give you a name. It's a lot of word of mouth ... and even our employees who buy at local at the local market ... they will always come back to us and say, 'if you're interested, then so and so has this.' So it's basically it's a lot of word of mouth.

Similarly, the owner of a venerated Door County inn and restaurant stated,

That's how we get a lot of our produce is that people just come to the back door with, you know, fresh basil. Or people will call us and ask us if we are in need of ... that's how we buy our morels ... we grow a lot of our own herbs too.

The general manager of a third Door County restaurant put it this way:

When we first started working here all produce was bought from a produce company, and that was it. And, you know, over the years we started to meet these folks, and then we were able to buy a lot more stuff from them.

The interviewer followed up on this statement by asking, "How did it happen that you got to know people?" The interviewee responded,

One farmer came to eat here, and he liked it, and then he started working here. And then the same thing—I had another guy—working in another farm—come here to work, and then we just got to know different local farms that grew different types of things.

Twenty-eight percent of restaurateurs indicated that they acquired new people, advertising, and promotional skills through their participation in local food tourism networks, and 83% indicated that transitioning to sourcing raw foods locally means an increase in the number of suppliers they do business with. Therefore, as the quotes above demonstrate, involvement in local food tourism networks is more relationship-intensive than operating in the conventional restaurant market. Furthermore, a commitment to buying locally implies working with a range of small farmers in a more piecemeal approach to stocking the kitchen.

Like restaurateurs, farmers indicated an increase in their numbers of buyers accompanying the transition to local foods. In aggregate, Crawford and Vernon County producers dealt with an average of four local buyers and 1.2 extra-local buyers. In Door County producers dealt on average with four local businesses and three non-local businesses. Sixty percent indicated an increase in the number of buyers accompanying the transition to producing for local consumption.

## Conclusion

WOM is important for alternative agriculture and adding value to rural resources. For example, it is the primary means by which people learn about community supported agriculture programs (Brehm & Eisenhauer, 2008). The research reported here has demonstrated the key role of WOM in inter-linking the components of local food tourism networks—farmers, restaurateurs, and tourists. These networks, which emphasize unique, culturally important, and/or geographically specific foods, are growing in popularity and may offer an effective response to waning economic vitality in certain rural areas. Local food systems enhance health, economic development, and appropriate land use (Connor et al., 2008).

WOM is the binding agent for these systems. Therefore, when designing programs to promote local food systems and local food tourism, one must take WOM channels into account. However, WOM relationships develop and ossify "naturally" as a function of time and civic life. Therefore, practitioners must create opportunities for those relationships to form. Internet technology, grower's groups, local delivery services, and farmer-restaurateur forums are four possible approaches.

Internet technology can be an important and low-cost way to generate positive WOM for small scale-tourism (Litvin, Goldsmith, & Pan, 2007). It is important not only for individual businesses to have their own websites, which are highly visible to search engines, but regional and network-specific websites are important as well. Additionally, social network sites and wikis, where different users can edit the site, can be very helpful. This way, farmers and buyers can update the site to reflect immediate changes in their quantities, prices, or purchasing needs.

A lack of formal institutions linking farmers, restaurateurs, and tourists inhibits the development of local food tourism. Only 33% of the farmers surveyed stated they connected to local buyers through other producers. Research demonstrates the value of linking producers together to expand markets and enhance marketing (Che, Veeck, & Veeck, 2005). For this reason, Extension educators looking to promote local food tourism may want to consider establishing growers groups or collectives to promote "cross-pollination" among farmers. In the survey, 51% of producers indicated willingness to form a grower's group.

One of the most significant barriers to developing local food tourism networks is the lack of centralized ordering and delivery services for local food. Whereas large food distributors deliver the amounts ordered at the times specified, as one interviewee put it, "Local farmers will drop off orders when they have a reason to

be in town. They're not going to drive twenty miles to drop off some greens and spend five dollars in gas." Centralized ordering and delivery services that link local producers and food buyers may complement WOM-driven systems by formalizing local food tourism networks.

Further, inadequate communication between farmers and restaurateurs is a major barrier to creating local food systems (Curtis et al., 2008; Krieger, 2006). Thus, it is also helpful to establish forums through which farmers and restaurateurs can meet and learn about possible synergies. It could be productive to create easily accessible databases that include farmers' names, products, and prices and buyer's names, sought items, and quantities.

Extension professionals are well placed to help develop the infrastructure of local food tourism networks using the approaches described above. These approaches seek to formalize markets by complementing WOM-driven processes. These efforts can be valuable, particularly in places where the preconditions for strong WOM relationships are not present. However, these approaches will be more effective if they are strongly linked to the informal informational mechanisms that generate word of mouth.

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