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ATTENTION: AGRICULTURE OR FOOD EDITOR

Lexington Juice Company and Cleveland County Featured in Centennial Book

Can a small Oklahoma company make it in the cutthroat world of food processing?

The answer is yes, says Jill Stichler. Stichler's Redland Juice Company, in Lexington, is featured in a new centennial book, *Closer to Home: Healthier Food, Farms and Families in Oklahoma*.

The book includes about two dozen articles about innovative people and programs in our state, says Maura McDermott of the Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture, the non-profit educational foundation that published the book.

Stichler is featured in the chapter on value-added food processing. She and her partners turn Oklahoma grapes into high-value juices sold all over the state.

The almost 200-page book covers a wide range of food-related topics, from "farm to table," says McDermott, the book's editor.

Closer to Home delves into Oklahoma's poor health standings and also the state's high rates of hunger and food insecurity.

The book concludes that the health of Oklahomans would improve if locally grown, affordable fruits and vegetables were available in every community across the state.

The resulting expansion of local markets would also benefit family farms.

This book takes a closer look at twelve counties, including Cleveland County.

These "county snapshots" are a one page look at "health and wealth" in the county.

What is the percentage of overweight and obese people? How much do county residents spend on food? How much of this do county farmers capture in direct sales?

How many farm to school programs or farmers markets exist in the county? How much are farmers making? Is the county a "food desert?"

Each snapshot answers these questions and more. In Cleveland County, residents spend \$387 million on food each year, but only \$80,000 – less than half of one percent of the total – on food bought directly from farmers.

The county is also classified as a food desert, meaning many residents do not have good access to affordable and nutritious food.

The county snapshots could easily serve as a starting point for groups who want to raise awareness or conduct more in-depth assessments of health or farm issues in their communities, says Wylie Harris, chief researcher and writer of the book.

Harris is a former Food & Society Policy Fellow of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

The book includes lists of resources for people wanting to find out more about food and farming in their home counties, and steps for action that could bring greater food security to Oklahoma in its next century.

The book explores in depth the opportunities for Oklahoma farmers to grow more of the food we eat, as well as the challenges they face in diversifying their crops and finding local markets.

The book concludes that capturing a greater share of the food dollar through direct and local sales and adding value to farm products are two important strategies that can add to farm profits and sustainability.

The book also concludes that if the state is to achieve greater health and prosperity, Oklahomans must become more “food literate”: knowledgeable about what good food is, when and where to buy it, and how to prepare it.

The good news is that Oklahoma farmers, ranchers and gardeners can contribute to that lesson, says Doug Walton, president of the Muskogee Farmers market, and a contributor to the book.

“After all, nothing beats the taste of a vine-ripened tomato or fresh-picked peach—so good and so good for you!” he says.

Two years of research and writing have yielded a book with valuable information and insight on every page, says McDermott, whose background is in journalism.

“*Closer to Home* is very ‘readable,’” she says. “We invite readers to open the book anywhere and take a look. We are confident you will learn something interesting.”

Closer to Home is available for the cost of postage from the Kerr Center by calling 918.647.9123. The book can also be downloaded free at www.kerrcenter.com.