

Eating Cooperatively and Locally: The Oklahoma Food Co-op

Inside an Oklahoma City church, pandemonium has broken out. Boxes of frozen beef, buckets of wheat, and bundles of produce carom up and down hallways and in and out of rooms. Cooler lids bang open and shut; shouting voices contend to be heard.

It seems like a revival gone wrong, but it's actually a revival going heartwarmingly right – a revival of local food in Oklahoma. This scene of seeming chaos is the monthly delivery day for the Oklahoma Food Cooperative.

People hearing about the Oklahoma Food Co-op for the first time almost always need to have it explained a couple or three times before it begins to make sense. It's an original, home-grown take on the cooperative concept, shaped in such a way as to deliver Oklahoma food to Oklahoma consumers (or, as the Co-op calls them, “co-producers”).

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– Kathy Tibbits, Stilwell



Farmers like peach grower Susan Bergen (end, right) and customers alike pitch in on delivery day.

Each of those co-producers ponies up \$50 for the cost of a membership in the Co-op. Unlike a traditional farm supply cooperative, the Oklahoma Food Co-op has plenty of room for members who don't farm for a living. And in contrast to food buyers' clubs, there are plenty of farmers among the members.

Partners in Homegrown Goodness

The Oklahoma Food Co-op counts farmers and “co-producers” alike among its members, as equals. It plays the role of an agent facilitating the ordering, delivery of, and payment for Oklahoma foods.

The Co-op's connection between its farmer and co-producer members springs into being once each month. In a single day, food travels from its farms of origin all over the state to a central distribution



Co-op "founding fathers" (l-r): Robert Waldrop, Walter Kelley, and John Herndon.

point in Oklahoma City. There, it's sorted into individual orders, and routed out to pickup points in different cities and towns around the state.

The Co-op's success has surpassed anyone's expectations.

When it ran the first order cycle, in November 2003, it had 36 orders, for a total of about \$3,200 in sales.

By October 2006, the membership had surpassed 800, and monthly sales were between \$22,000 and \$24,000.

From a cumulative base of over \$430,000 in sales since it began operating, those revenues have enabled the Co-op to be almost entirely self-sustaining financially since the beginning.

The Oklahoma Food Co-op grew out of one man's attempt to buy as much of his food as possible from local sources. That one man – Robert Waldrop, the Co-op's current president – went a good distance toward meeting that goal, but it involved a hectic

schedule and not a little driving: an hour in one direction for bison steaks, two hours the other way for organic flour, and so on.

Whether to transform his quest into a form that more people would be willing to participate in, or just to save on gas, Waldrop hatched the idea for the Oklahoma Food Co-op.

Originally, he thought of running it as a cooperative grocery store in Oklahoma City, stocked with all-Oklahoma foods. But as more people joined the brainstorming, overhead costs made the grocery-store idea seem like a longer-term goal.

In the interim, thought Waldrop and his growing band of local-food conspirators, why not organize a monthly ordering and delivery service for the Oklahoma-grown foods they craved? After a series of meetings around the state to recruit interested farmers – and co-producers – that's exactly what developed.

The Nuts and Bolts of Eating Local

The Co-op's order cycle opens on or about the last Thursday of each month, when producer members post their inventory of available products on the Co-op's website.

While farmers' share of the food dollar averages 19 cents nationwide, every dollar spent with the Co-op sends 95 cents straight into the pocket of an Oklahoma farmer.

Customers, or co-producers, have two weeks to place their orders. (Most do so via the website, though some prefer e-mail, telephone, or the good old-fashioned post office.)

On the third Thursday, trucks and cars roll from all over the state into a central distribution point in Oklahoma City, carrying Oklahoma-grown foods from far-flung origins like Waynoka and Westville.

Within hours, a corps of volunteers has hustled the orders off the inbound trucks, sorted them into individual orders, and placed them in other vehicles – including some of the same trucks that brought the food in – destined for delivery points around the state.

During its first two years of operation, the Co-op had nearly 2,000 different Oklahoma-grown or -processed products in its inventory at one time or another. These included staple foods like meat, vegetables, and eggs, prepared or processed foods like cake and coffee, and non-food items such as soaps and music CDs. In October 2006, there were about 1,300 different products for sale.

That variety, and the freshness of the products, bring in customer members. "I always order eggs," says one satisfied co-producer. "Once you've had a farm-fresh egg, grocery store eggs aren't even palatable."

Other customers are drawn to the Co-op as a source

of food security for themselves and their communities. "When I see all the chicken in the store coming from one company, I ask why," says longtime co-producer Kathy Tibbits, of Stilwell. "The Co-op idea was interesting to me because I saw that there was essentially a monopoly on retail food."

"I think we're losing something if we put all of our hopes in the industrial food system. What if the complex, transportation-dependent national way of doing things were disrupted?" she asks.

Standard of Quality

For many, other appealing aspects of the Co-op are the health and environmental benefits of local, sustainably grown foods.

The Oklahoma Food Co-op does not permit products raised in confined-animal feeding operations, nor those including material from genetically modified crops.



In a single day, food travels from its farms of origin all over the state to a central distribution point in Oklahoma City. There, it's sorted into individual orders, and routed out to pickup points in different cities and towns around the state.

Some producer members are certified organic, others grow organically without certification, and others do not comply with organic standards. Most, though, are at least a notch or two above average on the sustainability scale, and Waldrop says he's noted that most new producers tend to move in that direction.

One reason for that may be that, since each producer member has his or her individual product page on the Co-op website, customers can pick and choose amongst products to select those produced in a way that most suits their own personal preferences.

While the Co-op doesn't officially recognize any product categories other than organic/nonorganic, the producers' online descriptions of their products, backed by visits from the Co-op's Producer Relations committee, help to maintain customer confidence.

"I like to have certified organic food, but that doesn't mean I won't eat non-certified organic," says one Oklahoma-City area Co-op co-producer. "It's incumbent upon the producers to maintain a high standard of quality."

Cooperating to Feed the Community

There are many benefits for community food security to be anticipated from a business model built on local foods, and the Oklahoma Food Co-op doesn't disappoint. It's a boon to farm and rural economies, opening statewide markets to individual farms.

Moreover, while farmers' share of the food dollar averages 19 cents nationwide, every dollar spent with the Co-op sends 95 cents straight into the pocket of an Oklahoma farmer. [1]

The Co-op has also tried to qualify to accept food stamps, as a means of making its selections of Oklahoma-grown bounty more accessible to persons of limited means. So far, that effort has yet to bear fruit.

In the meantime, the Co-op is making strides in the same direction by "selling," alongside its food merchandise, donations to subsidize memberships for lower-income people.

About ten percent of the membership has joined the

"Once you've had a farm-fresh egg, grocery store eggs aren't even palatable."

Co-op though a "payment plan" - \$5 down, then \$5 a month until the \$50 price is paid up - while the Co-op has provided free memberships to a dozen or so of its members.

While sustaining farms and increasing access to local food within Oklahoma, the Co-op has also stimulated similar developments in neighboring states. The Oklahoma Food Co-op has hosted visitors from Arkansas, Colorado, Nebraska, and Texas, and received inquiries from Missouri, New Mexico, and even Washington.

Such a record of success may seem surprising to those who pooh-pooh the economic potential of locally grown food, but Robert Waldrop takes it in stride. His enthusiastic monthly emails describing Co-op products always end with his trademark, "Y'all bon appetit, you hear!"

Town and Country: Kim Barker's Grassfed Beef and Lamb

Most of the Oklahoma Food Cooperative's customer base may live in Oklahoma City and Tulsa, but the Co-op's benefits are mutually shared between urban and rural areas of Oklahoma.

Just ask Kim Barker, who direct-markets grassfed beef and lamb through the Co-op from his ranch near Waynoka, in Woods County, just east of the Panhandle in the far northwestern corner of the state.

A native of the area, Barker ranches on land as near as a mile from his great-grandfather's homestead. "I've been farming since I got out of college, about 30 years," he says.

"We're just trying to figure out how to produce good food and how to sell it. The more people we can get doing that, the better."

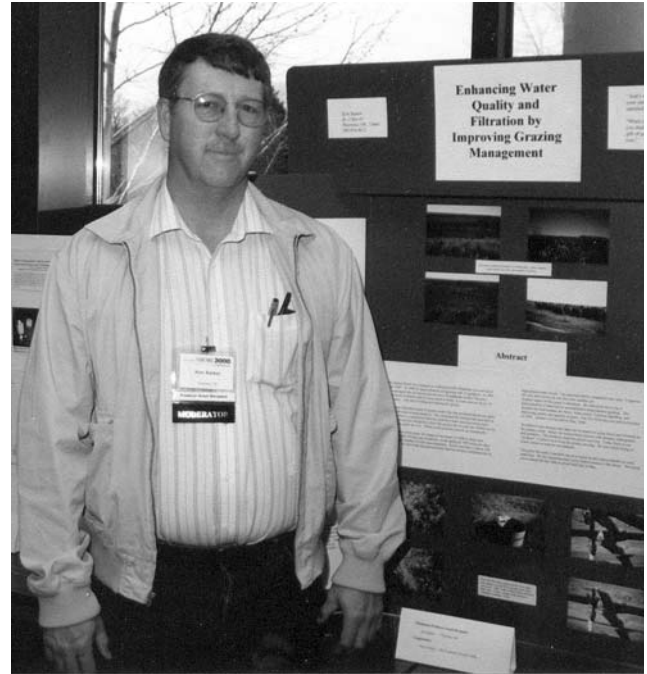
— Kim Barker

During that time, Barker has taken several steps toward improving his operation's economic and ecological sustainability. His sales of processed grass-fed beef and lamb cuts through the Co-op are the latest of those.

Unlike some others in Oklahoma, he's close enough to a USDA-inspected meat plant – just over the border in Kansas, about 50 miles away – that processing is not a major obstacle.

Of the co-op, "I think it's going really well," he reflects. "We've taken over \$400,000 out of metro areas and back to the farmers at retail prices."

Every month, Barker makes the three-hour trip to Oklahoma City with his Co-op orders, usually picking up orders from two or three other producers along the way.



Kim Barker

Returning home in the evening, he'll have three or four orders to distribute to customers along his route.

"We're making it up as we go along. We're all learning. It's a lot of fun," Barker says. "We're just trying to figure out how to produce good food and how to sell it. The more people we can get doing that, the better."

To explain the benefits he sees in involving more people in raising and eating local food, Barker looks back on last fall's unpredictable weather – not in Woods County, but along the Gulf coast.

"With Hurricane Katrina we've seen the future – what our government and our food system is like, and how vulnerable it is. A hurricane's not going to hit northwest Oklahoma, but other things can – things that would keep the food truck from showing up for a week or more," he says. "We need to be getting back to local food systems."

Balancing Trade for a Balanced Diet: Oklahoma's Farm Exports and Food Imports

For all their rapid growth, Oklahoma's home-grown local food networks may still seem like the tiniest of blips on the radar of agricultural economics. Despite their small size, though, these budding efforts contain a powerful potential for farm and rural economic revitalization, against a backdrop of increasing community food security.

Oklahoma's reputation as an agricultural powerhouse is well earned. Agriculture's \$7 billion annual boost to the Oklahoma economy accounts for ten percent of the state's gross product, and nearly 17% of its employment. [1]

Despite this economic momentum, however, Oklahoma agriculture leaves the state's residents looking outside the state for much of their food, while providing only a break-even income for many of its farmers. Such imbalances carry ties to Oklahoma's poor nutritional record, and they are also an impediment to the state's economic health.

While Oklahoma agriculture makes money on large crops of a few commodities, it forgoes a much larger potential income – as well as a public health dividend – by failing to meet its own consumers' demand for many other food items.

Ins and Outs

This situation is rich with paradox. After all, Oklahoma grows several times more of its top-grossing crops and livestock than its residents eat, leading to booming exports of these commodities from the state (see table, p.96). [2]

However, Oklahomans also eat many other foods, and in quantities that far surpass the state's own output – even though some of those same crops rank fairly high in the state's agricultural sales receipts (see table, p.96). (Many of these are precisely the foods – fruits and vegetables – that Oklahomans' diets need most.) [3]

That contrast funnels much of the money that Oklahomans spend on food each year – an estimated \$8 billion – right out of the state. [4]

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On average, Oklahoma farms turn a slim profit, but the food sector as a whole is importing its wares – and exporting the state's own economic wealth to pay for them.

Oklahoma farmers spend \$4.1 billion to raise the state's current array of crops and livestock. That's not much less than the \$4.5 billion they earn by selling them, leaving them a slim margin – about \$8,200 per farm – for income and expansion. [5] (In conditions like that, it's no wonder that one of the state's major exports from rural areas is its youth. [6])

However, farmers' spending on some inputs circulates within the state's economy.

One of Oklahoma agriculture's largest production costs is for livestock, and much of the money spent on the production cost of livestock stays in the state. That's because Oklahoma produces more farm animals – primarily cattle – than it buys in, and so Oklahoma farmers are likely to buy the livestock they need to build or replenish their herds from other producers within the state. [7]

Similarly, Oklahoma produces almost four times

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more fertilizer – another substantial farm production cost – than it consumes. [8]

But the dollars spent in Oklahoma’s food stores don’t fuel the state’s economy in the same way, because so much of what’s on the shelves is grown outside the state.

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Home-Grown Solutions

Community economic development strategists have long offered a solution for such excess imports: replace them with locally produced alternatives.

Though it sounds like a no-brainer, that idea bucks recent trends toward consolidation in virtually all sectors of agriculture. But, as Jane Jacobs asserts in *The Nature of Economies*, “economies of location often override and outdo economies of scale.” [10]

In other words, the economic efficiency of large-scale, long-range operations can be more than canceled out by their high (and, lately, rising) transportation costs, their resistance to trying new techniques, and their inability to differentiate their products to match the idiosyncratic demands – such as freshness and flavor – of local markets.

One obvious strategy for such locally-based import replacement would be for Oklahoma farms to start growing more of the crops – like asparagus, spinach, and tomatoes – that the state isn’t currently producing enough of to meet its own residents’ demand.



The more food that is grown, processed, and consumed all within Oklahoma, the larger the economic benefits to the state as a whole. Who wouldn’t trade a hard tomato for a juicy deal like that?

Oklahoma farmers could adopt these crops as part of a general strategy of diversification, with all the associated benefits. [11] Indeed, many already are. [12]

Revitalizing Oklahoma’s immense agricultural sector and rural economy one farmers’ market and CSA subscription at a time may seem farfetched. Then again, the state has yet to fully catch the national wave of growth in direct farm sales. [13]

Nor are direct sales the only way for Oklahoma farmers to put more of their own bounty on tables within the state. Other possibilities include increasing and diversifying other local sales outlets. [14] Still others flow forth when Oklahoma food processing enterprises add value to raw food materials grown within the state. [15]

The more food that is grown, processed, and consumed all within Oklahoma, the larger the economic benefits to the state as a whole. [16] Who wouldn’t trade a hard tomato for a juicy deal like that?

Growing What We Eat?

As the side table illustrates, Oklahoma agriculture does not currently meet the in-state demand for many foods (in particular, many fruits and vegetables). This is despite the fact that demand is relatively low because many Oklahomans of all ages are not eating enough fruits and vegetables to maintain good health.

That many produce items grow well here is evident at farmers' markets around the state.

Community food activists propose that if more Oklahomans had the opportunity to taste and buy locally-grown fruits and vegetables, demand for these foods would increase. And if Oklahoma farmers could meet this "demand for healthy food," they would reap the benefits at the cash register.[2]

More Than Enough: Top Crops for Export

Food /Crop	Percentage of Oklahomans' Consumption Exported Out-of-State
Rye (14)	4706.1
Wheat (2)	1738.4
Corn (11)	1210.5
Peanuts (13)	586.3
Beef (1)	443.9
Pork (3)	393.5
Watermelon (15)	392.8
Chicken (18)	302.0
Blackberries	214.2
Mustard greens	203.7
Spinach	107.3
Turnip greens	78.9
Southern peas	43.7
Okra	17.0
Eggs (8)	5.0

Not Growing Enough: Food Imports

Food/Crop	Percentage of Oklahomans' Consumption Imported from Out-of-State
Broccoli	100.0
Lettuce	100.0
Cherries, tart	99.9
Figs	99.3
Asparagus	99.2
Garlic	99.2
Apricots	99.0
Onions	99.0
Eggplant	98.8
Tomatoes	98.2
Grapes	98.1
Milk (5)	98.0
Plums and prunes	97.5
Beets	97.2
Raspberries	96.9
Honey (21)	95.8
Apples	95.5
Cucumbers	92.7
Strawberries	92.2
Blueberries	86.2
Chile peppers	81.7
Peaches (19)	81.2
Cabbage	81.1
Squash	77.6
Pears	67.8
Cantaloupe	56.3
Sweet corn	53.2
Snap beans	34.5
Lamb/Sheep (17)	30.6
Pumpkins	11.5

Crops listed are those for which USDA keeps production records in Oklahoma, and the list is not all inclusive.

The number in parentheses after the name of the crop is the sales rank of that crop in Oklahoma for 2002. For example, Oklahoma sold 17 times more wheat than it ate in 2002, and wheat had the second highest sales of any crop grown in the state. Similarly, Oklahoma imports 98% of the milk it consumes, even though milk is the state's fifth-ranking crop in terms of sales.

It's important to bear in mind that these estimates of the amount of different foods that Oklahoma imports are the lowest possible. It's possible that Oklahoma could be importing even more of certain foods than these numbers suggest.

For example, we know how much milk Oklahoma produces, and we know how much milk Oklahomans drink. Together, those two numbers tell us that Oklahoma must import at least 98% of the milk that's drunk within the state.

However, if Oklahoma exports all the milk it produces, it would have to import all the milk that Oklahomans drink. The data sources used for this report don't permit us to know when that's the case.

Importing Oklahoma's State Meal

Most Oklahoma schoolchildren can probably name the state song (“*Oklahoma!*”), the state animal (bison), and perhaps even the state tree (redbud).

On the other hand, it probably takes either a true Sooner patriot or trivia buff to know that Oklahoma has an official reptile, soil, and crystal – much less what they are (collared lizard, Port Silt Loam, and hourglass selenite, respectively). [1]

Even if you could make a perfect score on that quiz, did you know that Oklahoma also has a state meal? Could you name its ingredients? And – trickiest of all – could you find Oklahoma-grown versions of them all?

In 1988, Oklahoma’s state legislature gave legal status to the state’s official meal. Its menu includes fried okra, squash, cornbread, barbecue pork, biscuits, sausage and gravy, grits, corn, strawberries, chicken fried steak, pecan pie, and black-eyed peas. [2]

Sure enough, Oklahoma grows or raises every item in that eye- and button-popping spread. The question is, does it grow enough of them to feed the official state meal to each and every Oklahoman?

In the meat department, the answer is a qualified “yes.” Oklahoma raises many times more cattle and hogs than its residents eat – and in the case of hogs (as well as chickens), those numbers have been increasing rapidly of late. [3,4]

However, Oklahoma doesn’t turn enough of those animals into meat to meet its own consumers’ demand. Instead, it has to send live animals out of state and bring processed cuts back in. [5]

The situation is much the same for grains. Oklahoma is a major producer of corn and wheat, but again, though it grows more of those raw materials than Oklahomans eat, by and large it relies on out-of-state processors to mill them into enough flour and meal for biscuits, grits, and cornbread. [5,6]

In contrast, Oklahoma only grows half the sweet corn needed to match what its residents eat in a year. More often than not, the same holds true for the other fresh fruits and vegetables on the state meal’s menu.

Oklahoma does grow many more pecans than its people eat, and also exports surpluses of okra and black-eyed peas. But Oklahoma has to import over 75% of its squash, and more than 90% of its strawberries, from other states or countries.

The legislature meant the official state meal to reflect Oklahoma’s “cultural backgrounds and the state’s historical and contemporary agriculture,” a laudable goal. [2] But, having enlightened Oklahomans as to their culturally and historically appropriate food items, perhaps it is time to redouble support for Oklahoma farmers and processors and make the official meal a truly “made in Oklahoma” affair.

What if Oklahoma farms grew half...

... of all sweet corn eaten in Oklahoma (instead of the current 47%)?

Thirty-eight more acres would need to be planted to sweet corn, and the value of sweet corn sales would increase by \$64,000

... of all squash eaten in Oklahoma (instead of the current 22%)?

Another 442 acres would have to be used to grow squash, and the value of squash would increase by \$1.1 million.

... of all the strawberries eaten in Oklahoma (instead of the current eight percent)?

An additional 227 acres would be needed for growing strawberries, and the value of strawberry sales would increase by \$7.2 million. [7]

Food Imports and Exports

Goal: Increase the amount and diversity of foods that are grown, processed, and consumed all within Oklahoma. This should be pursued with self-reliance, rather than complete self-sufficiency, in mind:

- Grow more of the foods that Oklahomans eat
- Process more of what Oklahoma farmers grow

Public Policy Priorities:

- Survey stakeholders to find out what sort of infrastructure would be needed to grow, process and distribute more Oklahoma produce through established and new retail markets.
- Create and promote a new agricultural identity for the state of Oklahoma that reflects the current and potential diversity of crops and livestock produced here.
 - Expand the Made in Oklahoma program for foods processed within the state.
 - Expand the Oklahoma Grown farmers' market program for fresh produce and other farmers' market items raised within the state.
 - Emphasize the good taste and healthiness of Oklahoma-grown.
- Institute a "Celebration of Oklahoma Farms" high-profile event, featuring Oklahoma cheese, wine, and locally grown foods prepared by prominent Oklahoma chefs and restaurateurs. This event could include silent auctions, art, music, and celebrity speakers, with funds raised to be dedicated to further enhancement of Oklahoma's new agricultural identity.
- Sponsor tasting events at county fairs, city-sponsored celebrations and other local gatherings.



Every farm in Oklahoma used to have a pear tree. Today the state imports almost 70% of the pears eaten.

- Study the success of community-based marketing programs, such as "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" in Iowa, and institute such creative campaigns in cities and towns across Oklahoma.
- Create a new holiday centered around local produce.
- Develop a community currency for use in local produce purchases.