

Impact

Sharing the difference CSU Extension makes in people's lives and their communities.

Connecting Small Farms with Local Customers

Through CSU Extension outreach, an annual event based on 'speed dating' has expanded La Plata County's local food system and improved business relations.

Issue

Farmer's markets are an increasingly popular way for consumers to buy locally-grown vegetables, fruit, meat and dairy. However, food buyers from schools, restaurants, caterers, and grocers have a more difficult time making connections with local producers. In Southwest Colorado's La Plata County, the disconnect was due to communication gaps, pricing, production issues, and misunderstandings. In recent years, however, Durango-based food and wellness collaboratives such as Growing Partners of Southwest Colorado and Healthy Lifestyle La Plata have led regional efforts to increase access to locally grown foods and expand the local food system.

Extension's Response

La Plata County Extension plays a key role in this initiative by developing and presenting local food and production-related events using Extension's agricultural and educational expertise. In 2008, La Plata County Extension Director, Darrin Parmenter, helped develop a food networking event called *Local Food Connection* in tandem with Growing Partners of Southwest Colorado and Healthy Lifestyle La Plata.

Parmenter modeled *Local Food Connection* after similar 'Farm to Chef' programs in the Pacific Northwest and Florida. Hosted by a local restaurant, the three-hour event creates a setting for regional growers to engage in casual conversation with food buyers from restaurants, schools, and other institutions so they can explore potential business connections. This is followed by a round of five-minute sessions similar in concept to 'speed dating'. Each buyer takes a menu or ingredient list to the table of each producer to discover possible connections. If there's a fit, the grower and buyer formalize an agreement at a later time. Attendees also learn about the Mesa Verde Guide, an online resource for producers to list, and buyers to view, current availability and cost of locally grown food.



The Bottom Line

- *Local Food Connection* is helping farmers, ranchers, and buyers discover opportunities for creating new and successful business relationships that are strengthening the local food system.
- *Local Food Connection* is increasing the amount of food that is sourced—and purchased—locally.

By the Numbers

2009 *Local Food Connection* Event

- Numbers of participating farmers and ranchers: 15
- Number of participating buyers: 14
- One or more connections reported: 16

Impact

Local Food Connection is building food networks that are expanding the local food system and thereby improving the region's food security. New investment opportunities and community buy-in are increasing access to locally grown foods—and supporting the local economy.

- Tim Turner, owner-operator of the restaurant, Zia Taqueria, made a connection to source vegetables through La Boca Center for Sustainability. Then, he invested in La Boca by donating a 2,400 square-foot greenhouse that extends the growing season.
- Krista Garand, Director of Student Nutrition for Durango School District R-9, sat down with a Fox Fire Farm representative at the inaugural 2008 event and purchased 600 pounds of organic, grass-fed ground beef. The District is now buying almost all of its beef from two local ranches.

By increasing the amount of food that is locally sourced, chefs and other buyers gain more purchasing control and delivery assurance. As a result, Extension is improving the way growers and their customers do business.

County Partners

La Plata County Extension
Growing Partners of Southwest Colorado
Healthy Lifestyles La Plata

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Extension programs are available to all without discrimination. September 2010. Written by Carol Busch.*

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