

Invoices on scraps of paper: trust and reciprocity in local food systems

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Abstract One of the many claims about the value of local food is that local food exchanges generate trust between producers and consumers. To what degree is this actually the case and how does such trust develop? Drawing on interview and fieldwork data in one local food system in the Northeastern U.S., I show how local food participants (particularly farms and food retailers) build trust and reciprocity with one another in order to mitigate the challenges imposed by the conventional system. This trust and reciprocity builds primarily through three mechanisms: reliable, positive relationships; demonstrations of good will toward one another; and a shared understanding of the value of locally-oriented food. Through these mechanisms, local food operators are able to build a healthy, stable local food system, able to better resist the pressures of the conventional system in which it must continually operate.

Keywords Local food systems · Trust · Farm-to-retail · Economic sociology · Power

Abbreviations

CSA	Community supported agriculture
DTR	Direct-to-retail
DTC	Direct-to-consumer
FDA	Food and drug administration
GMOs	Genetically modified organisms
LFS	Locally-oriented food systems
USDA	United State Department of Agriculture

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Introduction

One claim regarding the growing popularity and development of locally-oriented food systems (LFS) is that such systems allow consumers to have greater trust in their food (c.f. Allen 2006; Izumi et al. 2006; Norberg-Hodge 1998). They know where their food comes from, so the argument goes, and they know (or are able to know) how it was produced. Yet little is empirically known about the mechanisms by which LFS might develop that trust or even if such trusting outcomes actually exist in any meaningful way. While the direct relationships often associated with LFS surely facilitate certain kinds of trust, there is no guarantee from this scenario that trust *will* develop or that (if it does) it is not really some other process that generates the existence of trust. How is trust associated with locally-oriented food systems and how does that trust develop? This is the question this paper seeks to answer.

Since trust is inherently a dyadic process (involving both a trustor and a trustee), I approach this question by focusing on locally-oriented farms and food retail outlets.¹ Doing so also helps broaden our focus from individual consumers to systemic factors, such as institutional purchasing arrangements. In this paper I argue that trust is indeed a significant factor in the operation of local food, but as a precursor to the development of such systems, not as an outcome. This trust builds along three key dimensions: the ability to establish reliable, positive relationships with other local food participants, the expression of good will between those participants, and a recognition of the importance of the work the other parties do (building especially on a

¹ Food retailers are organizational consumers and re-suppliers of food, including restaurants, grocery stores, value-added food processors, and the like.

shared understanding of the value of local food). Of course, this is never a static element, instead remaining a dynamic, continual process, in the same way that the forces of the conventional system provide an ever-present backdrop against which these locally-oriented systems still operate.

I begin this paper by outlining some of the characteristics behind the development of local food and its increased popularity as well as some of the theoretical mechanisms surrounding the development of trust generally. Following this background, I describe the particular local food system that comprises my case and the methods employed to gather data on this food system. I then draw on empirical data to show how these mechanisms of trust formation play out in this locally-oriented food system. I also highlight a few possible ways such trust formation might be limited or mechanisms by which trust may break down and briefly discuss the role that uneven power dynamics play in these limitations to trust. I conclude by considering some possible future directions for this research, particularly with regard to how we might further theorize the operational dynamics of local food systems.

The turn to local food

There are numerous reasons people turn to local food, almost all of which can be understood as a lack of trust in the conventional food system (Bildtgård 2008; Meijboom et al. 2006). Absent closing oneself off completely, everyone in the U.S. exists to some degree or another in the context of the conventional food system. The conventional food system refers to those sets of interdependent actors and chains that bring food from its sources of production (often large-scale farming operations) into the hands of U.S. consumers, typically passing through various processing and manufacturing steps along the way and often traveling very large distances (Heiss et al. 2015; La Londe and Masters 1994; Marsden et al. 2000). The only real avenue for trust in the conventional system today is what Möllering (2006) would call institutional-based trust: some social structure provides the backing or credential for the exchange in a formal manner. We can see examples of this through the USDA and FDA in their various certification schemes (food safety, organic, etc.) and the ways in which food companies and grocery stores vouch for the safety and quality of products (see also Thorsøe and Kjeldsen 2016).

Numerous recent factors have undermined the basis of that trust. The development and application of new and uncertain technologies (i.e., GMOs, highly processed foods, unpronounceable ingredients) coupled with the increased proliferation (and need) of rational, science-based, policy-backed food labels built on expert knowledge systems has driven people away from conventional food

due to its sheer complexity. A related element is the increasing distance between producer and consumer in terms of both time and space (Giddens 1981; Thorsøe and Kjeldsen 2016): people are increasingly aware of the incredible distance most food travels and the associated division and separation between the sources of food and food's final destination. In the middle of this distanciation is a recognition of the ways the conventional food system siphons money out of regional economies to some distant (and abstract and often untrusted) corporate headquarters. A growing awareness and concern over environmental impacts and the treatment of livestock has further eroded trust in this system (Trivette 2012). Last but not least, an increased awareness (and perception) of risk due to food scandals and scares (c.f. DeLind and Howard 2008) has also served to undermine consumer trust in conventional food.

In this situation, locally-oriented systems provide a crucial link in simplifying the food system and generating capacity for people (consumers and producers alike) to once again trust their food. While the notion of "local" is a sometimes nebulous concept, a key characteristic is the unification of food production and consumption within the same physical and social space (Fonte 2008; Trivette 2012). There are multiple examples of such arrangements, most notably the growth of direct-to-consumer arrangements such as farmers markets and CSAs; while direct-to-retail (DTR) arrangements are less well-documented, they are also important avenues in the development of local food systems. Examples of DTR arrangements include farm-to-table dining (in which restaurants purchase menu items directly from area farms), farm-to-school initiatives, grocery stores carrying a significant portion of locally-produced food items, and other similar food retail outlets sourcing directly from the surrounding area and marketing that sourcing as such.² While these retail outlets do represent an added step in the chain between otherwise-direct production and consumption of food, it is also important to note that restaurants, grocery stores, and similar outlets are the primary source of food for the vast majority of Americans (Allen 2006). As such, the development of such arrangements is an important component in the overall development of local food systems. Additionally, even

² Most work on DTR arrangements has focused on farm-to-school initiatives (Allen and Guthman 2006; Bagdonis, Hinrichs, and Schafft 2009; Friedmann 2007; Hassanein et al. 2007; Izumi, Wright, and Hamm 2010; Kloppenburg, Wubben, and Grunes 2008; Sonnino 2010; Vallianatos, Gottlieb, and Haase 2004) and farm-to-table dining (IANR 2003; Lawless et al. 1999; PFI 2002; Starr et al. 2003; Strohbehn and Gregoire 2003; Thilmany 2004; Thilmany and Watson 2004). However, there are signs of expanding interest in farm-to-institutional arrangements more broadly (c.f. Heiss et al. 2015; Schmidt et al. 2011; Vogt and Kaiser 2008), to which this article contributes.

including this “extra step” still shows a much shorter distribution chain (both in distance and in links) than found in most of the conventional system.

This shrinking of distribution networks—typically by limiting the physical distance food travels and linking producers and consumers with few to no intermediaries—creates the capacity for other mechanisms of trust. Importantly, it is not so much the *spatial* relationship that facilitates trust as much as the *social* relationship (Thorsøe and Kjeldsen 2016; see also Buckley et al. 2013; Conner et al. 2012; Heiss et al. 2015; Hinrichs 2000; Mount 2012). It is important to remember that market operations are highly social processes; all economic actions are embedded in broader social relations and institutions and are subject to those relations and institutions (Baker et al. 1998; Giddens 1984; Granovetter 1985; Ingram and Roberts 2000; Polanyi 1957; Uzzi 1996, 1997). Markets are themselves social spaces consisting of repeated exchanges between buyers and sellers with rules governing those relationships (Fligstein and Dauter 2007); sometimes those rules come from the state and sometimes they are more informal, but the rules are necessary for market stability (Polanyi 1957; see also Heiss et al. 2015). Contrary to neoclassical economic theory, most actors do not engage in market exchanges purely out of self-interest, seeking to maximize their preferences in a competitive environment (Beckert 2009; Fligstein and Dauter 2007). Instead, while price is important, it does not account for all relevant factors; trust in food is one such factor. But how does this trust develop and what barriers stand in the way? In the following section I outline the key theoretical mechanisms of how trust operates and then consider how these mechanisms play out in [DTR] local food relationships.

Trust in local food systems

The need for trust stems from uncertainty

Trust has been defined in numerous ways in the literature, but at its core, it is about actors being confident in each other such that both are optimistic that the other will engage in market exchanges predictably and with good will (Dyer and Chu 2011; Hart and Saunders 1997; Hosmer 1995; Lewis and Weigert 1985; Möllering 2006; Ring and Van de Ven 1992, 1994; Zucker 1986). To the extent that one side conforms to such expectations, the other party is encouraged to do likewise and therefore continue the association. Scholars have noted how trust is a common solution to provide social order in otherwise uncertain markets, especially when there exists a great need for cooperation among market actors (Beckert 2009; Cook 2001; Gambetta 1988; Luhmann 1979). Over time, trust is

typically built through close, stable, long-term relationships (Granovetter 1985; Fligstein and Dauter 2007; Heiss et al. 2015). But how and why does trust occur initially?

A reliance on trust stems from the recognition that there is genuine uncertainty in the behavior of another actor, which could result in a betrayal of that trust by providing an unwelcome outcome (James 2014; Möllering 2006). Uncertainty is the precursor to real trust and is an acknowledgement of the impossibility of developing or implementing complete safeguards against opportunism. Both sides have something meaningful at stake and are aware of the potential for betrayal or harm from the other (Bigley and Pearce 1998; Möllering 2006). The outcomes of a situation are unknowable and while each party may assume the possibility of an undesired outcome is low, that probability is subjective at best; there is no way to definitively determine it (Möllering 2006). Trust occurs, then, when an actor willingly enters into an arrangement accepting this vulnerability while assuming a positive and favorable outcome (James 2014; Möllering 2006). This is referred to as suspension, or sometimes a leap of faith (Möllering 2006).

There is uncertainty and vulnerability to be found on both ends of the farm-retailer exchange. But note that farm and retailer participants do not engage on an even playing field and building trust is at least in part about relative power and resource dependence (Fligstein and Dauter 2007). These situations create genuine vulnerability, though of a different sort and with differential impacts and outcomes. For retailers, the uncertainty comes in the form of the quality of the food and the reliability of its delivery, as well as the production practices (that the food actually is organic, poison-free, sustainable, etc.; see Thorsøe and Kjeldsen 2016). While they may lose the local-quality, they can still easily turn to the conventional system to source food if necessary. For farms, the uncertainty is whether they will have a viable economic outlet. Farmers need a market for their goods; smaller farms (which are common in local food arrangements; Martinez et al. 2010) in particular often have limited access to a variety of markets more common to larger growers, making this an acute uncertainty for such operations. Their uncertainty is whether the retailers will continue to rely on them as the retailers can return to the conventional chain at any time. They must be able to trust that a market will exist and the uncertainty rests on the fact that orders are placed week-to-week yet crops take seasons to grow (see Thorsøe and Kjeldsen 2016).³ In short, due to the ever-present existence

³ Thorsøe and Kjeldsen (2016) also note an uncertainty that comes from the precariousness of pricing, in that consumers (and retailers) want to pay a “fair” price, but producers must also not (appear to) exploit that.

of the conventional chain, the farms are at a power disadvantage relative to the retailers, making the stakes of betrayal higher for farms. This means that while both parties must learn to trust each other, it is more incumbent upon the retailers to help the farms trust them (see also Hellberg-Bahr and Spiller 2012). I return to this imbalance in more detail in a later section.

Uncertainty is managed through the perception of trustworthiness

While it is up to the trustor to suspect uncertainty and vulnerability (Möllering 2006), the trustee plays an important part here, by offering a definition of both self and situation with empathy toward the trustor's needs. This is what allows each party to become trustworthy: the one who wants to be trusted must convince the trustor that they will not betray that trust, once given (Meijboom et al. 2006). A trustee indicates trustworthiness through a reliance on moral dispositions; these moral dispositions are the mechanisms through which trust is built and help the trustor to navigate the uncertainty and vulnerability of the situation (James 2014). Moral dispositions rely on a mix of internal traits and mean the trustee will reciprocate the expectation placed on them by the trustor. When we trust we have a moral expectation that trust will not be betrayed (though, of course, it always could be) and real betrayal occurs when these moral dispositions are not enough to guarantee trustworthiness (James 2014).

In short, trust occurs when a trustor is able to suspend the uncertainty and vulnerability by seeing a trustee as trustworthy. A trustee becomes trustworthy by displaying the moral dispositions that allow the trustor to achieve suspension. While this is a directed relationship, both parties are simultaneously acting as trustee and trustor to each other. As such, each must facilitate a perception of trustworthiness, which allows the other to achieve the required suspension. There are three primary (and interrelated) mechanisms by which trustworthiness develops.

First, actors must have **reliable, positive relationships** with one another (Dyer and Chu 2011; Hart and Saunders 1997; Hellberg-Bahr and Spiller 2012; Lai 2009; Nyaga et al. 2010). This comes about via clear and open lines of communication and a certain level of transparency between them (see also Meijboom et al. 2006). They listen to new ideas, are open to change, share (rather than withhold) information, and clearly indicate their own needs and expectations. They are consistent in word and deed and make good-faith efforts to abide by prior commitments. This reliability and dependability helps strengthen a basis of cooperation and trust.

Though critical to the development of trust, communication and transparency alone will not guarantee a trusting

outcome or even the perception of trustworthiness. The second critical component in developing a trustworthy perception is for trading partners to present **good will toward each other**. This goes beyond the characteristics of positive relationships listed above in that showing good will means displaying a sense of caring about the outcomes of the other party (Dyer and Chu 2011; Hart and Saunders 1997). They must demonstrate they will not take advantage of or cheat the other should such an opportunity present itself. Going a step further, Dyer and Chu (2011) note that buyers [retailers] can facilitate trust on the supplier [farm] side by providing assistance to the supplier in times of trouble. Each party must also work to build distributive fairness between them: effort and output must be seen as even between parties (Poppo and Zhou 2014). Distributive fairness is not established via detailed rules and mechanisms, such as in a contract (that would be procedural fairness, which actually precludes the possibility of trust; Poppo and Zhou 2014). Rather, it comes from a mutual accommodation of each other's needs (or a willingness to give to the other for the mutual benefit of both) and being proactively responsible (not just doing what the rules or laws require, but living up to a particular set of shared values; Meijboom et al. 2006). It occurs when each party shows an interest in the welfare of the other. As each party adapts and adjusts to ever-changing market demands, they do so in a way that is fair to their co-participants. In these ways, trading partners are able to present good will toward each other and facilitate the development of trust between them.

Finally, the work of all involved parties must be **recognized as important** (Hellberg-Bahr and Spiller 2012). As a basic component, this step involves acknowledging the similar goals or values trading partners share. Specifically applied to local food relationships, these similar values stem from the perception among retailers, farmers, and even end-consumers that local food comes with certain positive qualities or benefits. They operate off of a shared commitment to local food and locally-oriented exchanges. Recognizing another's work as important also involves demonstrating a certain level of competence. This competence is not only in their own operation, but also in key issues and needs of their exchange partners (Dyer and Chu 2011; Hart and Saunders 1997). The more clearly they can indicate their understanding of the processes and operations of the other actor, the more clearly they show that they recognize the importance of that actor's work; this also reconnects to a display of good will, as such competence in another's operation makes an actor more likely to be flexible to accommodating the other's needs.

To understand how trust is associated with local food systems, we must explore whether and in what ways these three mechanisms play out in actual locally-oriented food

arrangements. In what ways do local food participants engage in open communication and transparency and how does this lead to reliable, positive relationships with each other? How do they engage in mutual accommodation of each other's needs so as to present the necessary good will toward each other? And how do such participants express their goals and values and indicate recognition of the importance of the work their trading partners are doing? Perhaps just as important, in what ways do these mechanisms break down and thereby contribute to the erosion of trust? Following an explanation of my data collection methods, I turn to an empirical assessment and analysis of these mechanisms as found in one local food system in southern New England.

Methods

This is a qualitative project based on in-depth interviews and limited ethnographic observations with local food operations in western Massachusetts, an area recognized nationally for its fertile farmland and awash in local food activities. While there are some ways in which farming in New England is different compared to other parts of North America (notably, New England farms tend to be smaller), in terms of local food this area is widely recognized as an active local food scene on par with places like the upper Midwest, Pacific Northwest, California, and southern Ontario, to name a few. Western Massachusetts in particular is a useful case study in the operation of DTR arrangements because of both how it has adopted the local food mantra and how this has allowed such a strong establishment of many diverse DTR operations.

I classify the local food operations in my study into two basic types. The most common type is the local farm. These locally-oriented farms are typically fairly small, most under 100 acres (and still many under 25 acres), producing a wide array of agricultural products, from produce to meat (though all of the farms in this study's sample supply primarily fresh produce). Many of these farms participate in popular direct-to-consumer arrangements, such as CSAs or area farmers markets, but many also wholesale their products to the second type of local food outlet: the local food retailer. These retailers include primarily restaurants and grocery stores, but occasionally also value-added producers (such as jam, salsa, or pickle makers), regional food distribution companies, and other institutional purchases (i.e., school cafeterias). While most retailers do not supply exclusively local food, they are generally known for their local food emphasis, and typically have noted partnerships with one or more farms in the area.

The study sample itself was selected from a larger data set of local food operations in the southern New England region, which I describe in detail elsewhere (see Trivette

2015). Briefly, this dataset contains information on local food operations (farms and retailers) across a three-state region, including their location, what they sell, basic business characteristics (such as being organic), and—most importantly—the other farms and retailers to which they connect. I used this relationship information (drawing on social network analysis techniques) to identify the most interconnected farms and retailers in the western Massachusetts region, making this a targeted sample of farms and retailers in the area that are *similarly interconnected within the food system*.⁴

In total I interviewed 17 operators and managers at 5 farms (all of which run general produce operations), 3 restaurants, 5 grocery stores, and 2 food processors; most interviews occurred between February and May 2011. A pilot version of this project conducted in the early fall of 2010 included interviews with student-operators in a farm and restaurant both housed within the area's university. Interview questions focused on the relationships they had with their various suppliers and/or purchasers (as appropriate), evaluations of the positives and negatives (and ease and difficulty) of participating in a local food system, reasons for such participation, and how they both conceptualized the meaning of and practiced "local." Interview participants were variously approached via email, written letters, and phone calls; though some required multiple contact attempts, none declined to be interviewed (and several were quite enthusiastic). Most interviews lasted around an hour and were tape recorded for later transcription.

In addition to interviews I also conducted limited field observations at most locations. Fieldnotes and analytic memos were written immediately after an interview (most interviews were conducted on-site) or observation session following techniques described in Emerson et al. (1995). In some cases, mainly for retailers, this involved a special trip to take detailed notes on a store or restaurant's setting. In one case I participated in a farm's weekly delivery run. During the pilot phase with the student farm and restaurant I observed two farm-restaurant planning meetings; this

⁴ In some senses this project is a case study of a single food system. While I draw comparisons between the various entities within the food system, as environmental sociology reminds us (Buttel 1987; Buttel, Larson, and Gillespie 1990; Dunlap and Catton 1994; Dunlap and Martin 1983), everything is bounded by the physical context of the region in which it is located. Comparisons across different food systems will for the moment have to remain a goal of future research. Additionally, the qualitative analysis focuses in on the most central players in this food system, meaning I have left out more peripheral players. Since my primary interest is in the overall operation of a dynamic food system, I believe this choice is theoretically justified. Nonetheless, a focus on less-central players could reveal some nuance or elements not shown here and may also be a fruitful avenue of future research interest.

included taking limited fieldnotes and recording and transcribing the conversation.

All observations and interviews were done with the full knowledge and permission of those involved. All interview participants gave direct verbal consent, in accordance with university IRB policies. Most participants showed minimal concern for confidentiality; nonetheless, all people and organizations are presented here using pseudonyms and (with the exception of the student groups) distinguishing characteristics of these organizations are veiled to protect their identities. I have made every effort to refer to the people I interviewed simply by the farm or retail outlet they represent.

After transcribing interviews and compiling fieldnotes, data analysis proceeded through several rounds of reading and coding in an effort to allow themes to emerge from the data, informed in part by the existing literature in this area (see Charmaz 1995 [2001]; Emerson et al. 1995; Rubin and Rubin 2005; Wolcott 2009). Building on these themes, I developed a simple codebook (Bernard and Ryan 2010) and a conceptual map (Corbin and Strauss 2008), which helped identify the potential links between different codes and themes and the mechanisms by which these links occur. Using the conceptual map as a guide, I analyzed each coded theme using the pile sort method (Bernard and Ryan 2010) in which I re-read all excerpts coded under this theme and physically sorted them into logical groups and relationships; this allowed for further refinement of themes, sub-themes, and my conceptual framework, as well as identifying representative quotes. Integrative memos helped me articulate the bigger picture throughout the analytic process.

The operation of trust in LFS

It is clear from my interviews and fieldwork that an incredible level of trust can form through embedded relationships between locally oriented farms and retailers. Here are just two of many examples:

When I joined Green Tree Farm's delivery run one week, the trust various retailers have in the farm became apparent. At two different stops, no one checked the delivery to ensure accuracy or quality, thought they did notice our arrival. The indication I took was that they saw the farm as reliable and competent and trusted the accuracy (and honesty) of the delivery.

The owner of Veritas, a regional food processor, showed an even more pronounced level of trust when he told me of his business' reliance on only a few farms to deliver 70–80 % of their annual produce needs (on the order of several tens of thousands of pounds of produce. Yet nearly all of these arrangements are coordinated with only a few

brief phone calls shortly before the advent of the growing season. He says:

And I have to trust them, and I do – you know, we've been doing this for a while, and they're good farmers and they're conscientious. But that part does get me a little nervous, you know, but I don't – there's not really much more that we can reasonably do. *If we were to write a real contract, I don't think it would help either of us. It would just be sort of a pain in the ass for all involved.* So it's just the way it works out, it's this very simple, quick interaction, for an enormous thing for our business. (emphasis added)

While many may think of a legal contract as some sort of security, this person indicates that a contract would instead get in the way. The connection he has with his suppliers is enough for him to be confident that what he needs will be available when he needs it—and for his suppliers to be assured that at least a certain portion of their farm's produce will be purchased. This is a clear example of the trust building that goes on between farms and retailers in local food systems.

What we see in these examples is that retailers trust farms to provide them with good quality local food and farms trust retailers to purchase that food from them. But this reciprocity between farms and retailers goes deeper than simply economic benefit for both. In a variety of ways, both sides (especially retailers) do things to help the other function well which in turn only serves to strengthen the region's food system. How does this trust and reciprocity develop? Close analysis of my data shows that it builds along the three mechanisms outlined above. First, participants must establish reliable, positive relationships built on clear and open lines of communication. Second, participants must demonstrate good will toward each other by remaining flexible to shifting conditions and accommodating each other's needs. Finally, and related to accommodating each other, participants must show that they recognize the work the other does as important to their shared goals, particularly as it relates to the establishment of a strong and vibrant local food system.

Building reliable, positive relationships

A central component of building (and maintaining) trust between farms and retailers is having reliable, positive relationships with each other. One of the buyers at Upper Valley Coop indicates this by discussing the arrival of asparagus in the spring, a highly valued, yet short-season good. She says her primary asparagus producer:

...just brings it in when he has it. We don't talk on the phone. We're just waiting for the asparagus

because there's no way we can't sell it. And we know that. And that's a relationships that has developed over the years....This farmer can sell his asparagus anywhere else. There's no reason [he should come to us] except for right relationship. There's no reason for him to come to us first. So we had to develop that and then we have to preserve it and nourish it.

In this story we see a retailer trusting that the supply of asparagus will come to them first and (implicitly) a farmer trusting that this retailer will continue to buy his asparagus as well. Clearly they have a long-standing, positive relationship and a consistent pattern of ordering. This consistency with ordering allows farmers to know what and how much to grow and retailers to be reasonably sure certain items will be available. Other respondents indicated that this consistency could come in the form of retailers having a regular, standing order with certain farms. Consistency could also mean a regular pattern of communicating both what was available (and when it will be delivered) each week as well as retailers simply “[being] consistent about placing their order” (Green Tree Farm).⁵ It's important to recognize how this is a two-way street. Says one farmer (Crystal Brook Farm), “most of the markets don't really appreciate when you're like ‘I've got so much of this.’ On that same day, what can you take? Because they've already made orders at that time.” Likewise, when retailers call late or change orders at the last minute, “that makes it really hard for us to get our harvesting process organized” (Green Tree Farm).

This consistency in ordering builds on clear and open lines of communication, a fundamental component of building any sort of reliable, positive relationship. Farms and retailers must be able to regularly and honestly communicate with each other. In addition to consistent ordering, this is also how participants negotiate their needs with one another, which generally focuses on two things: price and food selection. Several people I interviewed discussed a need to be open and honest when it comes to money, as expressed by the Deep Roots farmer: “I mean, it's definitely about developing those relationships so that they understand why you're charging something, they can feel comfortable saying we want to keep going with this but we can't pay that, we can only pay such and such. And then us

talking about whether that works or not.” While negotiating price, farms and retailers are also negotiating (or at least discussing) food selection. This is an opportunity for farmers to ask what retailers may want or need and then plan for it. These negotiations also help determine whether or not the farm and retailer form a good match for each other. Can the farm reasonably supply what the retailer needs? Will the retailer be able to work with what the farm provides? Beyond simply intention, these questions have material implications. The process of working out these issues with each other in a non-coercive way helps to determine how well given farms and retailers fit with each other in their ability to meet each other's needs and help the other to be successful. Though how this goodness of fit is precisely determined is beyond the scope of this research, it is in many ways just as important as the ability of farms and retailers to establish trust with each other through open communication and a willingness to engage in reciprocal relationships.

In my interviews, I found an unexpected means of strengthening communication in the form of a farm-retailer liaison. Having someone who both works as a produce buyer for a retailer organization and operates or helps operate a farm [what Strohbehn and Gregoire (2003) refer to as having an advocate in a key position] can be valuable in several ways. Someone in such a position is able to look out for the interests of both retailers *and* farmers. Such a person could communicate to other farmers what a retailer is looking for and could help retailers to understand and account for some of the unpredictable components of farming, such as price fluctuations, variability of produce size, and regional problems that may be impacting most farmers' supply of a particular crop. I interviewed two people who occupied such a position, one a student worker at both the farm and cafe and one a produce buyer at a grocery store who also operated his own nine acre farm (and occasionally sold to the store). While such a position may seem to have potential for great conflict of interest, in truth this difficulty can be easily resolved by having another person sign off on deliveries from the farms at which these people work. Instead, both of these interviewees spoke of greater transparency all around indicating that, if properly implemented, such a position at many retailer establishments (even in an advisory role) may be beneficial to the furtherance of local food systems. If local farms and retailers were to form some sort of collaborative (as happened in Colorado; see Thilmany 2004), having a central coordinator and manager of the operation is one way to fill this liaison role. Such a position could be a partial solution to the potential problems inherent to a consolidated and centralized regional distribution system (see also IANR 2003), a point I return to in more detail in the section on how power dynamics may impact the breakdown of trust.

⁵ Several farms and retailers I spoke with discussed the ways in which the increasing ubiquity of email has streamlined and simplified ordering, particularly in the context of working with a variety of locally-based entities (rather than a single, centralized distributor). One retailer described the time-saving benefits this way: “To be able to just...block out an hour and sit down and look at everyone's list and decide what to get, that has certainly been a recent development that has been game changing in terms of...how much local ordering you can do because it's so much less time consuming than it used to be” (Charity Acorn).

Demonstrating good will

The development of a reliable, positive relationship with one's trading partner is a necessary but insufficient condition toward the establishment of trust. Participants must also demonstrate good will (and a sense of fairness) toward each other. There are multiple ways this can occur, but most commonly they center on accommodating each other's needs in a mutually beneficial way, as shown by this restaurant owner:

I think we have that understanding with the farms where they know that because we support them,... when they know we have other options, then they also will support us by giving us sometimes a little bit better deal than they might otherwise. To keep our restaurant with their produce. (The Citizen's Cup)

The "other options" he refers to are those available via conventional food outlets. Despite the ease the conventional system provides, this restaurateur is committed to supporting farms in his area and willing to work with their needs. In return, these farms do their best to work with his restaurant's needs as well. This accommodation, on the part of both farmers and retailers, is a way of showing each other good will and indicating that they can rely on each other's continued business. It forms a crucial component to establishing trust between farms and retailers.

One specific way retailers can accommodate the needs of farms is by remaining flexible to the sometimes unpredictable aspects of farming. Though most retailers want some degree of predictability and consistency, occasionally farmers will call up (or even stop in) with a one-time offer: "There's a few people I can think of who are writing invoices on scraps of paper and handing them to us. And if the produce is there and it looks great and we have a use for it, then a lot of times that's how it happens and Accounting just sort of has to deal with it" (Abbott's). In response to their inability to supply enough produce to an interested retailer, one farmer (Cook's Plot) spoke of how an area grocery store "create[d] something unusual for us:... a display that's just our stuff. It's almost like a farmers' market booth for us." A food processor I spoke with told me the story of taking 400, rather than 200, pounds of cilantro because "it got really excited and grew really well" and she knew she couldn't just leave the farmer with so much excess he likely couldn't sell—especially when she knew she could eventually use it. These examples indicate a variety of forms of accommodation: being flexible to respond to unexpected opportunities, adjusting established systems to accommodate the needs of the moment, and finding ways to work with one's trading partners to the mutual benefit of both parties.

Another way for retailers and farms to support each other is through "a shared promotion" (Abbot's), calling attention to which products come from or are sold at local sources (c.f. Hassanein et al. 2007; Vogt and Kaiser 2008). While it is "more than about just money" (The Citizen's Cup), this promotion has the greatest impact on trust when it is done by the more economically powerful retailers. Further, though I find that many retailers do this, this promotion is especially common at the restaurants. Though my evidence does not indicate why this is, one possible explanation is their focus on farm-to-table dining: advertising their sourcing farms significantly enhances their presentation of self (Goffman 1959).

This kind of openness on the part of retailers encourages similar kinds of accommodation on the part of farmers, accommodation borne out of a spirit of good intention and not simply acquiescence to retailers' economic mandates. When crops come up short, farmers remember their better (or "favored" according to the owner of Veritas) customers and often supply them first over other markets. "Better" doesn't necessarily mean large volume accounts (though it can); most often it means customers who order faithfully, deal with farm problems alongside the farmer, and generally are willing to be flexible. The farmers at Cook's Plot especially like working with smaller venues because it allows them to more easily customize orders:

Mason: What you can do with a smaller order is, you know, if it's a small quantity of potatoes it's really easy just to fish out three pounds of ones that are the same size out of a bin as you're packing it up. So I feel like the smaller the order the more sort of attention to detail we can have. And if we're on the phone with them and they mention, I really liked these baby zucchini, you know, so like when that person orders again we'll make sure to give the honkers to someone else, who hasn't made that comment.

Lily: But, yeah, in that sense, if I know that it's going to a retail store where someone's going to be selecting it based on the visual versus I happen to know that Charity Acorn is planning to make zucchini soup, they can get something that has a minor blemish that won't sell retail that, if they're just gonna cook it. So we actually take the time to think about these things.

Here we see farmers taking time to think through the needs and desires of their various retail outlets and accommodate those interests. It would be far simpler (and faster) for them to simply throw an order together without this level of attention, but instead their attention to detail helps further build the trust they share with local retailers.

This has the potential to become a positive feedback loop, as the owner of Mountain Jars describes with one farm she works with regularly:

I ordered 700 lb of Seconds tomatoes, because I'm making salsa, I'm cooking it, it doesn't have to look pretty. They've made a decision some years where they've promised me 700 lb, it's the day I'm coming to pick up, they only had 600, they threw in 100 extra Firsts tomatoes and they took the loss on that. But they got the business, meaning, I'm going to keep ordering from them all season long.

Again we see how these reciprocal relationships establish not only trust but continued positive regard and help to maintain these locally based exchanges. This willingness to work with each other's needs and desires may in some sense simply be about good business practice. But the sense that comes out of these conversations is that this willingness to accommodate is also linked to the desire for strong, close relationships with their customers. Whatever the reason, accommodation on the part of both the farm and the retailer helps to further maintain a vibrant local food system.

Recognizing the importance of each other's work

Part of what makes these expressions of good will and mutual accommodation work is that participants recognize the work their trading partners do as important. There are two aspects to this recognition of importance. At a fundamental level, they are operating off of (and demonstrating) shared goals and values; in this case the shared value is that of local food and its associated benefits and the shared goal is seeing their local food system succeed. The other aspect of this recognition is a demonstration of competence, both in what they themselves are doing but also in what their trading partners are doing. Retailers show that they understand how farming works while farms show that they understand the pressures and needs of retailers. The more that each can do these things, the more likely a trusting relationship will be established and maintained.

Farming is an inherently unpredictable and precarious venture. Multiple variables impact how much food will ultimately be produced, what its condition will be, and when it will be ready for harvest. Some of the retailers I interviewed were acutely aware of these issues:

The farms are just unpredictable. They can't say, okay, we're going to have tomatoes for you between this month and this month and we're going to have this many and this is how much we're going to charge. That's not how it happens. It goes like this: [She makes a wave motion with her hand].

Depending upon the season and the weather and quality and there's so many variables. And so really, we all have to be very flexible. (Upper Valley Coop)

If you're the kind of business owner...who needs very strict, rigid, predictable scheduled things to happen, you're gonna have a hard time with the farms. Meaning you're going to have a hard time with Mother Nature. (Mountain Jars)

These retailers demonstrate a competence in the vagaries of agriculture and are willing to make the necessary accommodations to ensure a strong supply of local food (especially produce). One key accommodation is the ability to be flexible to the conditions of agriculture. In so doing, they signal to the farms that they are trustworthy and will not abandon or otherwise harm their trading partners when things don't work out as expected.

In a related fashion, retailers must also recognize the variance (or non-standardization) of food from the field. As the chef at Abbott's put it:

You know, local purveyors, they're growing what they grow, they're raising what they raise. And you have to sort of accept that your apples aren't always going to be perfectly uniform or your chickens aren't going to be the same size or some cows have more fat in them than others. The standardization is not always there. And... it's something that I think people are slowly learning more about.

Here this chef is showing openness to the variations that typically occur in smaller-scale food production and flexibility to adjust to the food that is available. These examples of willingness to be flexible to the unpredictability of farming show a specific and important way in which retailers can demonstrate their competence in how farming operations work. Displaying this sort of flexibility on the part of retailers signals that the retailer is open to working on the farmer's schedule and is a reminder that locally-oriented retailers have a vested interest in not only their own success, but in that of the (local) farmer as well. This allows a farmer to trust a retailer that a market opportunity will exist when produce starts coming in.

On the other side of the relationship, farms also need to demonstrate competence in the needs and demands of their retailer trading partners. At a basic level, this means demonstrating competence in the reality of their business situation, as noted by the owner of the food processor Mountain Jars: "The farms need to be businesses first. And I understand that they're farming, but they need to be a business. They need to—we need to talk price, we need to negotiate. There needs to be some level of the same professionalism I'm giving." The ability to "be a business" is

a simple way of demonstrating competence around the needs of their trading partners.

But competence in retailer operations may also extend to more specific situations. For example, some retailers may specialize in (or heavily promote) organic food in addition to other food qualities. Understanding the factors behind such a decision (as reasons to farm organically don't always align with reasons to purchase organic food; c.f. Guptill 2009) goes a long way toward building a stable and trust-based relationship with area retailers. One farm in my sample practices organic farming without being certified organic. "It requires a little bit more knowledge on the part of the individual purchaser," he says. "They sort of need to get what we're about in order to feel that it's worthwhile to make the extra effort to promote our stuff....And I think that there are a lot of people out there that do get it" (Cook's Plot). Because of this farm's proximity to a non-organic farm, they are unable to qualify for organic certification, even though they are otherwise running a completely organic farm in practice. Without this certification, this farm often has difficulty obtaining the usual organic price premium at various outlets and therefore must work harder to demonstrate to potential retailers their competency and reliability in the practice of organic farming. Importantly, the need for competence in organic practices in this example is really a two-way street: both the farmer and the retailer need to understand what organic means and how it operates.⁶

When trust breaks down

Though I have shown numerous examples of the formation and maintenance of trust in locally-oriented food exchanges, trust is not a guaranteed outcome. This begs an important question: where and how does trust break down and what forces make such a breakdown more likely to occur? Based on the literature we would expect trust to erode when one actor is no longer seen as trustworthy, which really means they no longer display appropriate moral dispositions, as outlined above.⁷ One example of this occurred during my delivery run fieldwork with Green Tree Farm. We made a delivery of butternut squash to a small coop grocer. While purchasing a snack, the produce manager called us back and told us rather brusquely that he couldn't sell the squash. It was not that the produce was poor quality; rather, half the bin was comprised of three

very large squashes that would have been difficult to sell. We took the rejected squash back with a promise to make an adjustment on the store's account, but the farmer I was with commented as we left that this kind of thing "causes strain between us and our wholesale people...they know it's good, we know it's good" so according to her they are in some ways abusing the relationship. Her worry was that the store might take a small issue like this as reason to stop orders from the farm altogether, even though other deliveries appear to have been positive experiences—and despite the fact that the farm would have gladly accommodated this request for smaller squash had the grocer indicated this preference. In fact, while individual customers may not have purchased the squash, they would be perfect for a restaurant kitchen. This example points to not only the expression of good will that comes in accommodating each other's needs (and how that good will can be potentially cut off when such accommodation does not occur), but also the profound need for clear communication between trading partners. If such problems continue unabated, it could potentially erode trust.

But shared moral dispositions are more likely to be absent in situations with extreme power imbalances between participants. In reality, there are always power imbalances between locally-oriented farms and retailers, stemming primarily from scale-related pressures in such systems (Buttel et al. 1990; Martinez et al. 2010; Norberg-Hodge 1998; Stephenson and Lev 2004). One of the central elements of power is the control of goods and services that another entity needs (Emerson 1962; Fligstein and Dauter 2007; Hart and Saunders 1997; Weber 1978 [1922]). On the surface it may seem that this definition of power gives local farms more power than retailers (as they have the local food—or goods—the retailer wants). But these retail outlets (indeed, all food consumers) always have the opportunity to return to the conventional food supply (c.f. Hinrichs 2000; Guthman et al. 2006), making a desire for locally-sourced goods the only thing requiring they source from local farms. A retailer's ability to access what amounts to an infinite food supply gives retailers greater power than farms to determine the details of the relationship (Hart and Saunders 1997). Ultimately, this makes locally-oriented farms highly dependent upon locally-oriented retailers, and all the more so the more that farm's income comes from a particular retailer. In short, within local food systems, retail outlets will always have more power relative to farms. This dependency creates an ever present potential power dynamic within local food systems even if no immediately obvious power play has occurred (Foucault 1978; Provan et al. 1980), a dynamic due directly to the existence of the conventional food system.

Many of the retailers in my sample gave some indication that they recognized this power imbalance, at least on an

⁶ Similarly, Upper Valley Coop specializes in only organic food, yet one of the buyers will often help local non-organic farmers who call up with produce to sell find a possible outlet.

⁷ Of course, trust would also break down in the event of a real betrayal, though this is an extreme event.

intuitive level. The mechanisms of building positive relationships, demonstrating good will, and recognizing the importance of their trading partners' work were all ways they navigated these currents to establish a trusting relationship rather than an exploitative one. But a few examples indicate particular challenges to this process and especially-critical spaces in which the breakdown of trust is more likely.

The first significant challenge comes when there is a misalignment of goals and values. As Mount (2012) points out, local food is assumed to operate on a shared set of goals and values, but even when these values are shared different participants may seek (or emphasize) different outcomes. While all participants in my sample indicate they value local food, not all of them mean the same thing by this statement. A better defining feature might be the process by which they come to share these goals and values. Most take what we might call a reflexive position (DuPuis and Goodman 2005), recognizing that local food has positive value largely from its association with other factors (healthy environments, economic benefits, etc.). These factors are not inherent to local, though, and will only emerge to the degree that all participants have similar expectations and will work to manifest these associated elements. This is part of what makes trust necessary in the first place. Some participants, however, treat "local" as nothing more than a value-added promotional marker, much the way organic and fair trade are often marketed. Two of the (largest) grocery store produce managers I interviewed signaled this orientation to local food throughout the entire interview. They seemed to express great pride in sourcing their food locally but showed no critical reflexivity around these relationships, and were oblivious to the prospect of seeing the relationships they had with their farm suppliers as a partnership rather than a customer-oriented exchange. Their discussions of working with locally-oriented farms were couched in the logic of conventional food and the convenience and speed mainstream distribution channels provide.

The ability to clearly communicate with co-participants is the other critical arena for the development of trust, as it is the space in which positive relationships are built and good will can be more easily demonstrated (and sought). In immediate exchanges between farms and retailers, such communication is relatively straightforward, as trading partners have ample opportunity to interface directly with one another. But with the growth of local food participants (in size, number, and even popularity), one approach being considered in some areas is to develop a regionally-based distribution system or food hub; such an operation would help solve many of the emerging problems related to managing distribution and delivery when working with what are often small-scale establishments on the retail and (especially) farm side (Feenstra 1997; Gregoire et al. 2005;

Hassanein et al. 2007; Heiss et al. 2015; Izumi et al. 2006; Izumi et al. 2010; Schmidt et al. 2011; Tropp and Olowolayemo 2000; Vogt and Kaiser 2008). Much of the rhetoric of local food at least implicitly cuts out the middleman, but intermediaries like food distributors or larger farms with greater distributional capacities can play a role in developing locally-based systems while still keeping the links in the overall supply chain low. Such cooperative structures could be mutually beneficial by allowing an efficient pool of labor and other resources (PFI 2002). Several retailers in my sample did indicate interest in a consolidated delivery system for area local foods. Indeed, one larger farm in the area (Nature's Bounty, an 80-acre farm not in my interview sample) has started to do this, and was mentioned several times (by both farms and retailers). This farm acts as a distributor for not only its own produce, but that of smaller nearby farms, too. At least one farmer (Cook's Plot) really liked this idea because it allows him to use his already small plot of land to focus on doing certain crops really well (rather than trying to "grow everything") and still being able to supply area retailers.

However, other farmers (and even retailers) seemed more ambivalent. To centralize in this way limits the personal connection that many farmers (and some retailers) find valuable in selling to a locally-based market (Heiss et al. 2015; PFI 2002; Schmidt et al. 2011). One farmer (Deep Roots Farm) indicated a desire to get to know her wholesale accounts better: "That's why we write notes and put them in the box....We want to know you! Do you want to know us?" But an even more crucial consideration is the way in which such consolidation of delivery would likely also (re)consolidate economic power (especially if the intermediary role is carried out by larger area farms coordinating group deliveries or if the intermediary is a for-profit enterprise; see Heiss et al. 2015 and Kennedy 2007). One buyer at Upper Valley Coop noted this potential problem. He liked the idea of a cooperative distribution system, but not in the way Nature's Bounty does it. He hinted at the potential for further consolidation of economic power:

They think we should buy all of our zucchini and kale from them because – well, it's not worth it for them to send up their truck if they don't have a \$300 or \$500 order. So they think that we're doing a disservice to the farms by supporting so many farms. Because they think we should pick less farms and give them each more money....Whose interests are we most concerned about? Obviously we don't want to be doing a disservice to the farms, but it's really the largest ones that seem to have that problem and want more business. Because they want to ship the pallets.

While this larger farm is providing a useful service to several smaller farms in the area (as well as simplifying

deliveries for several retailers), their desire to take a lion's share of a given retailer's sales does run the risk of cutting out smaller producers who don't distribute through them. Instead, this food buyer would "like to see...a system where there's a distribution vehicle that goes and picks up from the farms and then immediately delivers it....Even if that delivery service took a dollar, two dollars per case, it would still be more advantageous than the farmer paying an employee and paying for fuel to be driving around."

When the options for distribution and delivery of goods lessen, smaller farms may find themselves more beholden to the dictates of the larger entities (now perhaps other farms in addition to retailers), even while the economics of distribution for these smaller farms push them to go this route in order to maintain a viable operation. This process of consolidation was a major factor in bringing us the unsustainable industrial food chain we have today. While this does not mean that such consolidated distribution systems should be avoided (indeed, they may be necessary as local food systems grow), it means participants should think carefully about how they will be implemented so that they do not limit communication channels nor reproduce the power dynamics of the conventional food system, but instead help to further facilitate trust between participants.

Conclusion

In the face of the pressures of the conventional food system, one significant factor in how locally-oriented food participants build healthy, stable alternatives is through establishing trusting and reciprocal relationships with one another. In this way, trust is an important component of local food, but as antecedent to rather than outcome of its development. While consumers may or may not be able to have greater trust in food from local sources, what is more critical to understand, I argue, is how trust between actors in the wider system of exchange undergirds the development of that system. To the degree they can develop this trust, they will be better equipped to resist pressures to continually expand their markets and accommodate to the logics of the conventional system. To build these relationships, local food participants must see each other as more than simply a source or an outlet for food. As I have shown, this trust relies on all parties working to develop these positive relationships through clear communication, transparency, and consistency. It also requires that participants demonstrate their good will toward one another by emphasizing fairness and accommodating each other's needs. And all participants must recognize the importance of what others bring to the relationship, a recognition that appears to build on a shared value system regarding the importance of locally-oriented food.

This research provides some theoretical traction into how local food systems operate successfully as systems (rather than simply discrete operations). Yet there are many ways in which future research might further theorize these operational dynamics. For example, this research builds on a highly developed local food scene, where farms and retail outlets have been maintaining a local focus for some time and where many consumers routinely seek out local food. How might these relationships develop differently in areas with less established infrastructure and cultural demand for local food? Also, what other factors might inhibit this process? Most of the operations in my sample engage reflexively in the idea of local, yet clearly others are completely uncritical, treating local as just one more value attribute for food; what further impact does this have and are there ways of encouraging greater reflexivity? How is size a part of this process? That is, do local food participants have different valuations of what "counts" as local based on how big another operation is? And if so, how might that influence their willingness to engage in reciprocal relationships with one another?

Reciprocity is about recognizing the non-economic values in participating in local food. When negotiating price, when finding ways to accommodate each other, when returning to trusted trading partners, these farm and retailer participants are doing the reciprocity work that allows them to navigate a system of food provisioning that operates as alternative to, yet still in the context of, a conventional food system that demands uniformity, predictability, and control. However, unlike the romanticized notion of local food seen in many popular portrayals of it, such trust does not simply occur as a "natural" property of these alternative relationships. Instead, it requires continual recommitment and engagement, a reflexive participation in this local scene that allows room for adaptation and change.

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