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## THE EMERGENT LOCAL FOOD SYSTEM IN THE EASTERN TOWNSHIPS

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Darren Bardati, Ph.D.,  
*Bishop's University*

### Abstract

This essay explores the rapid upsurge interest in local foods in the Eastern Townships, setting it within the context of the academic literature and other regions of North America. It provides an overview of the broad changes in the regions's food production since settlement in the late eighteenth century to the present, and advances observations about the abundance of local food producers, the explosive growth of farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture (CSA) schemes, and community gardens. The essay concludes that personal engagement with the geographic place of food, concerns about environmental sustainability, and transparency on the part of the producer about their farming process, are central components of people's interest in the local food system. It also raises further questions about the future of local food and its potential impact on the farming landscape and communities of the Eastern Townships.

### Résumé

*Cet article explore le vif intérêt envers les aliments locaux dans les Cantons-de-l'Est en présentant un aperçu de la recherche universitaire et en situant cet intérêt dans le contexte nord-américain. Il fournit un survol des grands changements en production alimentaire de la région depuis sa colonisation à la fin du dix-huitième siècle jusqu'à nos jours ainsi que des observations sur le nombre important de producteurs locaux dans la région et sur l'explosion des marchés de producteurs locaux, des programmes d'agriculture soutenue par la communauté (ASC) et des jardins communautaires. L'article en conclut qu'un engagement envers la géographie et la traçabilité des aliments, une attention à la durabilité environnementale et une transparence envers les procédés de production sont au cœur de l'intérêt généré par un système local d'alimentation. Il soulève également des questions sur l'avenir de la nourriture produite localement et son impact potentiel sur le paysage et les communautés agricoles des Cantons-de-l'Est.*

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## Introduction

This article asks the question: is there an emergent local food system in the Eastern Townships? To answer this question, the essay explores the production, distribution, availability and consumption of local food in the Eastern Townships. While the term "local food" has many interpretations in the literature (see discussion later), it is generally agreed that it is associated with issues of sustainability, quality, authenticity and community within a geographic region, rather than merely with a specific distance (Duram, 2010). Therefore, this investigation will frame the discussion of local food within the spatial boundaries of the historic Eastern Townships and discuss it in relation to the sustainability of the farming landscape and community. The term "local food systems" is defined as

complex networks of relationships between actors including producers, distributors, retailers, and consumers grounded in a particular place. These systems are the unit of measure by which participants in local food movements are working to increase food security and ensure the economic, ecological and social sustainability of communities (Dunne *et al*, 2011, 46).

Beginning with an overview of some of the broad changes in food production since settlement in the late eighteenth century to the present, and based on observations on the abundance of local food producers in this region, and especially the recent growth of farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture (CSA) schemes, and community gardens in the Eastern Townships, this essay explores this rapid upsurge interest in local food by setting it in context of the academic literature and other regions of North America. It also raises important questions about the future of local food and its potential impact on the farming landscape and communities of the Eastern Townships.

## Changing Landscapes of Food

### *A brief overview of food production*

The Eastern Townships region is no stranger to food production. The territory has supported continuous agricultural activities ever since it was opened to settlement following the *Constitution Act* of 1791 (Kesteman, 1998). At that time, colonial settlers extolled the climate and soils of the area, but the rolling Appalachians highlands, with their rocky uplands and poorly-drained valley bottoms, were only moderately suitable for agriculture (Harris and Warkentin, 1991) when compared with those of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence lowlands. Despite this, successive waves of settlers have occupied the land,

making a living from it. Wild game (deer, moose, game birds, and other animals) was plentiful, with an abundance of fish in streams and lakes, and all manner of edible plants, berries and nuts were found in the woodlands (Laberee, 1980). The first cash crop for the early settlers was pearl ash (potassium carbonate), made by cutting and burning the trees and boiling down the ashes. This ash found a ready market at home, in Montréal and abroad (Laberee, 1980). The cleared land was cultivated in crops of potatoes, corn and other subsistence staples, and used for pasturing livestock.

Over the years, food was being grown not just for household needs but also for commercial purposes. At first, the principal markets for agricultural products were the local distilleries and tanneries that took potatoes and hides. As roads to Montréal improved, however, the raising of livestock (beef, sheep and dairy cattle) became the focus of commercial agriculture. By the 1850s, oats, wheat, rye, buckwheat, and corn only accounted for between ten to fifteen per cent of cleared land, while pasture for livestock, and open meadows made up the difference (Harris and Warkentin, 1991). Excellent livestock breeding practices, combined with abundant pastures and meadows well suited to the rolling landscapes, made the Eastern Townships high-quality agricultural products sought after by the large urban markets of Montréal and Québec (Harris and Warkentin, 1991).

Sherbrooke, formerly called Hyatt's Mills, established at the confluence of the Eastern Townships two largest rivers, the St. Francis and the Magog, soon emerged as the dominant economic centre in the region, thanks to investment purposely designed to harness the hydropower of its rivers for manufacturing (Kesteman, 1998). A vast concentration of railway lines was developed to move goods and people throughout the Eastern Townships and between Montréal and New England (Booth, 1982), further impacting settlement. With industrialization, agriculture and other primary extractive activities, such as forestry and mining, were also affected, becoming commercialized and specialized for export markets. Many farmers began leaving the farms to seek better paying jobs in the new manufacturing sector (Historical Geography of Eastern Townships, no date). Perhaps in response, agricultural societies were formed, made up of farmers, municipal councillors and local businessmen, to advance the interests of farmers by purchasing breeding stock and motorized farm equipment, as well as to organize annual fairs (Lowd, 1984), many of which are still operating in the Eastern Townships today.

Like elsewhere in the western world, agriculture changed significantly in the twentieth century with the predominance of fossil-fuel powered tractors that replaced draught animals, the use of amendments to the

soil such as chemical fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides to replace on-farm recycled nutrients (compost, crop and animal wastes), seeds from other places, and an emphasis on maximum-yield management of agricultural products as commodities for the external market. Even though per acre diversity of food production remained higher in the Eastern Townships than the Canadian average for areas of expanding commercial agriculture (Statistics Canada, 2015), small farms continued their progression towards intensification and specialization in a single crop or livestock, aided by government subsidies. Meanwhile, like the rest of Canada, economic and demographic changes resulted in fewer children being born and more opportunities for young people to find jobs off the farm. Further, the high costs of automation and mechanization of farming practices to meet the capacity demand of intensive agriculture, as well as increased pressures of costly government regulation, meant that many small family farms were replaced by larger agribusiness operations.

On many farms, the historic timber-framed barn structures, which previously held multiple species of animals managed as part of a family's farming operations, were gradually replaced with large, climate controlled steel barns holding hundreds of livestock which are rarely (or never, in the case of pigs and chickens) pastured outside. As a result, several fields and meadows were left unused. The natural process of ecological succession meant that, over time, forests invaded formerly cleared fields and meadows. By the late 1990s, more of the land base in the Eastern Townships was covered in forest than existed at the beginning of the century, leaving a visible sign on the landscape of the impact of changing agricultural practices.

### *The pastoral "image"*

Despite the industrialization of agriculture, urbanization, and the reduction of farm families, the Eastern Townships landscape still looks overwhelmingly pastoral today. As one drives along rural roads, passing over hills and into valleys, through forests and villages, one will observe various crops growing in fields, livestock grazing on hillsides, hay bales being collected, sugar shacks sitting nearly-hidden within maple groves, and tractors and barns of various sizes and shapes everywhere. In many ways, the Eastern Townships' countryside represents the picturesque idyll of pastoral life that exists in North American society's collective memory and is often captured in postcards, paintings, films and, more recently, in the logos of food products found at the supermarket grocery stores (Pollan, 2006; Kenner, 2008). These rolling landscapes with pastoral vistas, abundant recreational opportunities, quaint villages and restaurants, rural bed and breakfasts and country inns are, in fact, a major marketing asset of

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the growing agri-tourism industry in the Eastern Townships (Tourism Eastern Townships, 2015).

Yet, ironically, the vast majority of today's farmers could not feed their families on the food they produce on their farm owing to the specialization and intensification of agricultural products grown for, and marketed in, the industrial food system. The overwhelming majority of food found in grocery stores in Sherbrooke, Magog, Cowansville, Granby, and other cities and towns of the Eastern Townships does not come from the Eastern Townships. Rather, foods are brought in from numerous other places in the world such as California, Florida, South America and China. Despite this, stores do include sections now labeled "local" and branded "Aliments du Québec" (Aliments du Québec, 2015). A non-random sample of a few groceries stores in the Sherbrooke region reveals that less than 0.01% of items sold are labeled "Aliments du Québec." Included in this definition of "local" are all products from Quebec and within fifty kilometres beyond the provincial border. In most grocery stores, a small percentage of foods labeled "Aliments du Québec" comes from farms located in the Eastern Townships.

The tragedy is that while the people of the Eastern Townships are surrounded by landscapes that produce vast quantities of food, they overwhelmingly eat food produced from outside the region. This includes apples, berries, vegetables, dairy products, beef, lamb, pork, chicken, and others - the very food products produced in the Eastern Townships. Certainly, the short growing season accounts for some of the discrepancy, since most fresh produce is unavailable in the winter months. However, shipping in meats and dairy from other regions at any time of the year is harder to explain. In other words, while abundant local foods do exist in the Eastern Townships, they remain marginal in the dominant industrial, commodity-based food system. The local food system is largely insignificant by comparison.

#### Local Food: A Growing Interest

##### *"Local" is about connection with place*

In many parts of the industrial world, the popularity of local foods has seen an explosive growth in recent years as an alternative to the conventional mode of food production and marketing, referred to as the global industrial food system (Follett, 2009). "Local food" commonly describes "food that has been produced, processed and distributed within a particular geographic boundary or is associated with a particular region" (Duram, 2010, 234). Although the meaning of "local food" continues to be contested and debated (Feagan, 2007; McWilliams, 2009; Desrocher and Shimizu, 2012), it is best described

as a societal movement concerned with the sustainability, authenticity and transparency of the food supply chains (Duram, 2010). Feagan (2007) brings attention to the term as a means to “emplace” our food system. In other words, “local food” is fundamentally about connections forged between members of a community and their food-producing landscape.

The term “foodshed,” Feagan (2007) explains - although it draws from the conceptual ideas of the *watershed* with its boundaries set by somewhat immutable river-draining based characteristics - is perceived as a hybrid social and natural construct. The foodshed concept includes such natural boundaries as weather patterns, soil types, water availability, slope conditions and also the relationships that people have to these natural elements - a sense of place. The French term *terroir* refers “to an area or terrain, usually rather small, whose soil and micro-climate impart distinctive qualities to food products” (Barham, 2003, 131). These terms all have in common the general idea of re-localizing and re-connecting food with its natural and human communities (Ackerman-Leist, 2013).

The growth in interest in local foods is believed to be, in part, caused by a rejection of the lack of transparency associated with conventional global food systems. When people buy a typical food item at a grocery store, they will find it a challenge to determine the exact place where it was grown or raised, and how it got to their plate.<sup>1</sup> The conventional food system has become so large and opaque that sense of place has been completely eroded. The global food system has become efficient at delivering geographically-anonymous, or placeless, food.

The local food movement has emerged recently, in part, as a response to the issues associated with conventional food systems, and the need to “rebuild the foodshed” (Ackerman-Leist, 2013) and draw close connections between food purchasing choices and social, ecological, and economic sustainability issues (Wittman *et al*, 2010). Interest in local foods and the associated alternative food supply chains has also been also been fueled by issues on both the consumption and production sides of the food system.

Local food consumers have a growing interest in high quality food and in the way it is produced. According to Duram (2010), some consumers are interested in supporting local farmers, protecting local businesses, and helping to maintain a sense of agricultural tradition in the geographic area. Other consumers are reacting to mass-produced foods from the conventional global food system by demanding flavourful, nutritious, and safe foods from local independent sources. Others are primarily interested in local food for the environmental aspects. The desire people have to connect with food origins are a



unifying theme across all interest in local food. As Duram (2010, 236) states "people want to travel to the country and meet the farmer that grew or raised their food, see the land where it was produced, and feel a connection with that process."

### ***Food labels are not enough***

Through the *Food and Drug Act*, Canadian food labeling laws deal with nutritional and safety issues and have helped consumers make informed decisions about the food they choose to buy and eat (Health Canada, 2015). However, the proliferation of labels found on foods generated from the global food industry such as "organic," "natural" or "free-range" has been insufficient to address their concerns for transparency in the way food is produced. While food labeled "organic" must abide by specific, verifiable standards of production, these standards are insufficient in themselves to ensure quality food or the consumers' connection with the land and the farming community. There is no limit in any jurisdiction, for example, to how much mercury, lead, cadmium, arsenic, and aluminum is allowed in certified organic food. While the United States or Canada might have verification tools to ensure high quality organic standards are met, no one can be certain that these heavy metals are not found in organic foods because they are not tested for such. Furthermore, these certification standards and verification measures also vary widely from nation to nation. Consequently, is it really possible to trust certified organic food from China, for example, one of the most polluted nations on the planet (Adams, 2013)? Even if a certified organic food is to be trusted, what does it tell us about economic, social, and ecological sustainability? Does organic certification tell us anything about how farm workers are treated? And what about the distance these foods travel, and their shelf life in groceries stores, before they reach our homes? In other words, certified organic agribusiness companies may be no more sustainable than any other non-organic food producer (McWilliams, 2009).

Other labels found on food packaging can be entirely deceptive, meant only as a marketing tool to sound appealing, but having no actual meaning. The United States Food and Drug Administration has not developed a definition for the use of the word "natural" or its derivatives (USFDA, 2015). Consequently, the label "natural" can be used in a plethora of ways, including to describe natural-smelling chemical scents created by pharmaceutical companies in a lab and added to processed foods.

The term "pasture-raised" might conjure the idea of a few chickens grazing happily in sun-kissed grassy fields. Indeed, the labels and logos do conjure this image graphically. Again, the marketing deception is at work in the mind of the trusting consumer. According to the United

Stated Department of Agriculture standards, a chicken can be labeled "free-range" if it has "access" to an outdoor setting for at least two weeks of its life (approximately 25%), while in Canada, the term "free-range" is not legally-defined (Weeks, 2009). Chickens grown for their meat, called broilers, commonly housed in buildings with thousands of others, even hundreds of thousands, under artificial light for 75% of their lives, can be sold as "free-range." When the doors are opened to give the broilers "access" to an "outdoor setting" most of these birds will not even make it to the door, being too weak for their legs to support movement (Kleppel, 2014). Therefore, the central aims of local food are not met with such marketing labels. Rather personal engagement on the part of the consumer and transparency on the part of the producer are central components of the local food system.

For producers, the interest in local food is also appealing and growing. In several parts of the industrialized world, some farmers are responding to economic pressures of the global food commodity market, as well as new consumer-driven demand and opportunities, to market their agricultural products directly to consumers. As Duram states (2010, 235) "many farmers try to generate more income and try to respond to declining commodity prices by creating local food systems." Consequently, these local food systems incorporate a variety of direct-marketing techniques, such as farmers' markets, road-side farm stands, pick-your-own produce farms, specialty shops, and community-supported agriculture (CSAs). Value-added processing is often done at the farm, on a small-scale basis, using raw products from the farm or a neighbouring farm. Each local food product has a "story" which can be described as part of the direct-marketing to consumers. These local foods are most often produced by small to mid-sized farms where personal interactions between the farmer and the consumer are a valued part of the transaction.

While these personal consumer-producer interactions around local food make up a central feature of the alternative food system which helps explain its recent expansion, it is important to note that both consumers and producers are part of both local and global food systems.

### **The Emergent Local Food System**

#### ***The growing interest in farmers markets***

A farmers' market is a common area where several farmers gather on a recurring basis to sell a variety of fresh fruits, vegetables, and other farm products directly to consumers (Martinez *et al*, 2010). The increasing number of farmers' markets in Canada and the US has been examined by scholars with respect to their contribution

to local food systems (Enright, 2014). Feagan *et al* (2004, 247) claim "the local food systems literature contends that direct marketing can help a community move beyond the narrow economic transaction by providing sites conducive to social interaction and a broadening of the values located in food decisions." Indeed the growth in popularity of farmers' markets has been attributed to "factors of changing consumer interest and the changing economies of agriculture" (Brown, 2002, 167). Of course, retail farmers markets are not a new phenomenon, having existed since early settlement of the continent; indeed, this is the way farmers marketed most food to consumers before the rise of the modern grocery store and large supermarket. Yet, according to Brown (2001, 655), "beginning in the late 1980s, farmers markets entered another growth phase, which continues." In the US, there are over 5000 farmers' markets currently in operation, up from 1755 in 1994 (Wittman *et al*, 2010). In Canada, there are currently over 500 farmers' markets, more than double that of 1990. A national study commissioned by Farmers Market Canada (2009), found that the economic impact of annual sales at farmers markets was \$3.09 million dollars. While this represents but a decidedly tiny proportion of the Canadian economy, farmers' markets are among the fastest growing sectors. One of the most significant findings was the value consumers place on being able to buy food directly from the farmer who produced it. While 92% of shoppers rated it as important, a full 62% rated it as "extremely important" (Farmers Market Canada, 2009, 2). These findings confirm the growing need for people to re-connect with farmers and to re-localize their food.

The explosive growth in farmers' markets seen elsewhere in Canada has also occurred in Quebec. Today, the Association des marchés publics du Québec website (AMPQ, 2015) lists over 85 registered farmers' markets in the province. Thirty years ago, there were approximately six seasonal farmers' markets in the Eastern Townships. Today, there are just under twenty well-established seasonal farmers markets, fairly evenly spread throughout the Eastern Townships (see Table 1).

There are also numerous occasional or one-time only farmers' markets not listed in Table 1, which spring up from time to time in various towns and cities, especially during summer festivals and agricultural fairs. Other farmers' markets are combined with, or incorporated in, flea markets, bazaars and large garage sales where no focus is placed on local food. These latter types are not included in this discussion.

The farmers' markets in the Eastern Townships vary in size, diversity of products sold, and customer base. Some have been established since the 1970s (*e.g.*, North Hatley), while others are new

Table 1. Eastern Townships Farmers' Markets

Farmers' Market Region	Farmers' Market Name	Farmer's Market Location
Central region (2)	Marché agricole de Lennoxville	2882 du College, Sherbrooke
	Marché de la Gare, Sherbrooke	720 Place de la Gare, Sherbrooke
Western region (6)	Marché de la station gourmande de Farnham	313 de l'Hôtel-de-Ville, Farnham
	Marché fermier de Frelighsburg	2 Place de l'hôtel-de-ville, Frelighsburg
	Marché public de Granby et région	Place Johnson, rue Principale, Granby
	Marché coop de Knowlton	7 Mont Echo, Knowlton
	Marché public de Knowlton-Lac-Brome	48 Maple, Lac-Brome (Knowlton)
	Marché public du Canton de Potton	232 Principale, Mansonville
Northern region (3)	Marché public Mante du carré	6 Daniel-Johnson, Danville
	Marché champêtre de Melbourne	1257 Route 243, Melbourne
	Marché Locavore de Racine	154 Route 222, Racine
Eastern region (4)	Marché public de Lac-Mégantic	Centre sportif, Lac-Mégantic
	Marché de la petite école	66 Route 108, Sainte-Marguerite-de-Lingwick
	Marché public de Scotstown	Parc Walter Mackenzie, Scotstown
	Marché public de Stornoway	Halte routière du Village relais, Stornoway
Southern region (3)	Marché champêtre d'Ayer's Cliff	977 Main, Ayer's Cliff
	Marché champêtre de North Hatley	Parc de la rivière, North Hatley
	Marché public de Stanstead	Musée Colby-Cutis, 535 Dufferin, Stanstead

Source: Créateurs de saveurs Cantons-de-l'Est. Les créateurs de saveurs. Website. <http://createursdesaveurs.com/createurs/>. There may be more local farmers' markets in operation which are not listed.

(e.g., Lennoxville). All of them will run only between the months of June and October. Some will run several days per week (e.g., Marché de la Gare de Sherbrooke) while the majority only run for a few hours on a Saturday morning. Some contain only a dozen or so vendors (e.g., Stornoway), while others have twenty-five or more vendors (e.g., Ayer's Cliff). Some markets tend to be more on the "purist" side when it comes to local food, meaning they allow only local producers – as defined by a certain distance (e.g. 50 km) from the market, and no re-selling is allowed (e.g., Lennoxville), while others will allow vendors to resale items from outside the Eastern Townships (e.g., Marché de la Gare de Sherbrooke). Some markets are run by non-profit associations and receive no financial assistance from municipal governments, while others are heavily dependent on, and managed by, them. Very little is currently known about the history, structure, and dynamics of farmers' markets in the Eastern Townships, except for anecdotal knowledge gained from the experience of customers and vendors who become a part of them.

Because no comprehensive data has yet been collected on these farmers' markets, it is impossible to provide accurate information on their contributions to the local economy or to the emerging local food system. However, it is fair to state that they are very popular, and that their popularity and size and influence are on the increase, matching the phenomenon seen across Canada (Farmers Market Canada, 2009). The atmosphere at farmers' markets is distinct from that of a supermarket grocery store. People come into direct contact with farmers from whom they buy food, unlike what takes place in supermarkets. This open transparency of the food supply chain that direct-marking affords at a farmers' market is valued by the consumer, and conversations about local food ensue. This does not, and cannot, happen at a grocery store where the employees may know very little about the origins, producers, or farming practices of the food they are selling. Gillespie *et al* (2007, 70) suggest that because farmers' markets are grounded in public life in a more "open and accessible way" compared to a supermarket, the role they play by making local food more visible is "at the root of re-establishing local food systems."

The weekly and seasonal ritual of the farmers' market adds to an ongoing conversation around food between consumers and producers, which contributes to mutual learning. Milestad *et al* (2010), in their study of farmers' markets in Sweden, found that customers and farmers were found to learn and adapt to each other due to opportunities offered by farmers' markets. They found that "when farmers and customers use interaction at farmers' markets to revise prior interpretations (or make new ones) about, for example each other, food and farming

conditions, they gain a better understanding of the complexity of the food system and its context" (Milestad *et al*, 2010, 43). Consequently, they state, consumer choices and farm management practices are influenced in a sustainable direction through interactions at farmers' markets (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. A Typical Farmers' Market**

Farmers' markets, like this one in Sherbrooke's borough of Lennoxville, are important components of the local food system – community spaces where people have a chance to meet the local farmers who grow their food. Photo: D. Bardati

These values of transparency and relationship-building, and the movement toward more sustainable farm practices and consumer choices, associated with farmers' markets all serve to help build local food systems. It would be interesting and relevant to conduct a similar examination of interaction between farmers and customers at the Eastern Townships farmers' markets to categorize and understand their impact on the local food system in this region.

***The growing interest in community-supported agriculture (CSA)***

Community supported agriculture, or CSA, consists of shareholders who pay at the beginning of the growing season for a share of the harvest, farmers who agree to provide fresh, locally grown, chemical-free food once or twice a week during the growing season, and a core group of volunteers who oversee food distribution, publicity, accounting, and other business items (Farnsworth *et al*, 1996). By working together, shareholders and farmers share financial and

production risks, eliminate food brokers and processors, and substitute the current profit maximizing food production and distribution with a community-based, sustainable one (Farnsworth *et al*, 1996).

The CSA concept originated in Europe, influenced by biodynamic (today farmers would probably call it "better-than-organic") agriculture ideas formulated by Austrian philosopher, Rudolph Steiner (Kleppel, 2014), and was brought to New England in the mid-1980s. CSAs have since spread across North America. Today, there are over 2500 registered CSAs listed on the Local Harvest website (Local Harvest, 2015), while the US Department of Agriculture included in its comprehensive census over 13,000 CSAs operating in North America, including 451 in Canada (USDA, 2007).

In Quebec, while the term CSA is formally translated as *Agriculture soutenue par la communauté (ASC)*, they are known mostly by the colloquial term *paniers bio*, referring to the weekly organic food baskets consumers receive for paying a share in the CSA. They are found in nearly all regions of the province, and come in all shapes and sizes. A variant of CSA has emerged in Quebec in recent years, thanks to easy internet access, called *marchés de solidarité* (solidarity markets). They are a more flexible box scheme where no seasonal pre-payments are required, eliminating the risk-sharing aspect of a CSA. Instead, consumers place an order through a web portal, indicating exactly which products they want, and pay on the spot for each order (Équiterre, 2010). Like a traditional CSA, deliveries are still made at pre-determined drop-off points on a specific day.

In the Eastern Townships, the Créateurs de saveurs website lists five *marchés de solidarité* (Table 2), but these are by no means the only ones operating in the region. For example, the author is aware of four other medium-sized CSAs (two of which are near Lennoxville), which are not listed. As is the case of farmers' markets, no study has been undertaken to examine the CSAs in the region, so accurate data on these CSAs is unavailable. Each of the five CSAs listed in Table 2 include, on average, over fifty farmer-producers, with over 2000 products sold. The Sherbrooke CSA alone boasts over 4000 subscriber-clients. It is not an overstatement to state that CSAs have become very popular with Eastern Townships' customers.

Both the "community" and the "organic" aspects of CSAs are vital to their popularity. Each CSA website commonly lists all the producers and their contact information and specific products to be sold on any given week. Most customers buying into the CSA will understand that they are not buying generic food products. Instead they are connecting to a specific place, and specific people, where their food is grown. As Wells *et al* (1999, 38) state "CSA brings a growing circle of people into

Table 2.  
Eastern Townships-based Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA)

CSA Region	CSA Name	CSA Location
Central region (1)	Marché de solidarité Estrie-Sherbrooke centre-ville	843 King Ouest, Sherbrooke
Western region (3)	Marché de solidarité Brome-Missisquoi, Cowansville et Sutton	314 du Sud, Cowansville
	Marché de solidarité de Magog	50 Laurier, Magog
	Marché de solidarité de Waterloo et Saint-Étienne-de-Bolton	151 Lewis Ouest, Waterloo
Southern region (1)	Marché de solidarité Vallée de la Coaticook	136 Main Est, Coaticook

Source: Créateurs de saveurs Cantons-de-l'Est. Où est les trouver.  
Website: <http://createursdesaveurs.com/ou-les-trouver/?pdv-category=40/>.  
There may be more local CSAs in operation which are not listed.

a closer relationship with place – farming, nature, and each other.” Despite the lack of detailed analysis at this time, it would be fair to say that these local CSAs have a major influence on rebuilding the foodshed and helping more people become involved in the emergent local food system in the Eastern Townships.

#### *The growing interest in community gardens*

While community gardens do not normally involve direct-marketing or a commercial transaction between a producer and a consumer, they may be seen as a valued component to the local food system. They are included in this discussion because of the recent proliferation of community gardens in the Eastern Townships. Once again, as was the case with farmers' markets and CSAs, very little information is available about the growth, history, structure, social and economic benefits, ecological practices, and community involvement of community gardens in the Eastern Townships. Consequently, this discussion is preliminary at best, while suggesting that more scholarly attention needs to be placed on the role of community gardens in enhancing the emergent local food system in the Eastern Townships.

The history of community gardens may date back as far as 100 BC in the UK with the small Celtic fields of Lands' End, Cornwall, which are still in use today (Thompson *et al*, 2007). But it was not until 1908 that the *Allotment Act* of Parliament established a legal requirement for local authorities to meet community demand for gardens (Humphreys, 1996). In the USA, a program of allotment gardens began in the late 1890s in response to the needs of families devastated by the effects of economic depression. Not long after, John Dewey promoted gardens



in schools as part of his educational reforms (Thompson *et al*, 2007). During both world wars, victory gardens, or food gardens for defense, were planted in Canada, the US and the UK to help alleviate food shortages. Over 28 million victory gardens produced 44% of fresh vegetables during the war years (Warner, 1987).

Community gardens around the world have been credited with an array of beneficial outcomes for participants. Guitart *et al* (2015) in reviewing the literature have noted that the main motivations behind, and benefits of, community gardens include: community-building, mental or physical health promotion, relaxation, crime reduction, preserving cultural heritage, fundraising, saving money, education, contact with nature, and sustainability, among others.

A bi-national non-profit organization, the American Community Garden Association (ACGA, 2015) has as its mission "to build communities by increasing and enhancing community gardening and greening across the United States and Canada." The ACGA works to promote and support all aspects of community food and ornamental gardening, urban forestry, preservation and management of open space, and integrated planning and management of developing urban and rural lands. From this review, it is clear that community gardening incorporates a wider array of goals than only helping to build the local food system. Nonetheless, like farmers' markets and CSAs, community gardens create close links between local food and community members within a particular geographic place.

Several community gardens exist in the Eastern Townships, but they are not well documented. It is estimated, based on anecdotal evidence, that there are approximately forty community gardens in the Eastern Townships, most of which are within urban centres (there are at least seven community gardens in Sherbrooke), as well as smaller towns and villages (Ville de Sherbrooke, 2015). Almost all have appeared within the last decade.

Unfortunately, at the time of writing, it is unclear as to the exact number of gardens currently in existence in the Eastern Townships, what variety of garden types and sizes exist, what bio-physical characteristics are found in the garden location, what the goals of each of these community gardens are, what management structures are in place, or anything about gardeners socio-demographic backgrounds, garden facilities and types of plants grown, and who reaps the benefits of any food produced, since no study (scholarly or otherwise) has yet been conducted on community gardens in the Eastern Townships.

While community gardening can be both environmentally beneficial (*e.g.* composting, local sourcing of plants and materials, etc.) and environmentally harmful (*e.g.* use of synthetic chemical

herbicides and pesticides, limited plant diversity, etc.), at present, there is also a lack of systematic assessment of the ecological viability of these various community gardens in the Eastern Townships. One may ask the question: how environmentally sustainable are these community gardens?

Despite this gap in knowledge, the rise in interest in community gardening worldwide, and in the Eastern Townships in particular, should be seen as an important indicator in society's desire to connect with nature and local food. As was the case with victory gardens during the world wars, community gardens serve an important role in building community around food, as well as helping people develop practical skills and knowledge about how to grow food - important skills and knowledge that much of society has lost since the late 1940s.

#### Concluding Thoughts: The Future of Local Food?

This essay began by asking the question: is there an emergent local food system in the Eastern Townships? Having first reviewed the changing food landscape in the region and explored the recent upsurge in farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture (CSA), and community gardens in the Eastern Townships within the context of advances in direct-marketing of local foods across North America, this paper squarely suggests that the answer is a resounding "yes."

Although the people and landscapes of the Eastern Townships have always produced food, a growing segment of society within the region has been impacted by the local foods phenomenon and is demanding more transparency and direct involvement with the food they eat. For producers, the pressures on industrial agriculture and agribusiness have caused some to shift direction, opening up new entrepreneurial opportunities to adapt their operations to focus on value-added direct-marketing of their products. Meanwhile the supply of local foods in the Eastern Townships continues to expand under increasing demand (Équiterre, 2010). Both of these trends have successfully melded together well as part of the region's growing agri-tourism industry (see, for example, the region's principal tourist brochure *Tourisme Cantons-de-l'Est 2015-2016* and its emphasis on farms and food in the regions' (Tourisme Cantons-de-l'Est, 2015).

This demand is not a simple reflection of economic imperatives, but is instead primarily motivated by people seeking out genuine connections with farmers within a geographic place. Local food systems are re-emerging rapidly in almost all parts of the industrialized world. Following World War II, the food system shifted from local to national and global food sources, spurred on by a host of economic, political, social and technological factors. There is no question that many of the

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changes in the food sector over the past seventy years were positive for consumers. Yet some concerns about the global food system have also arisen among a growing segment of society regarding the quality of food, the ecological sustainability of farming practices, and the lack of social connectivity between food producers and consumers.

Food labeling, with environmentally-friendly sounding marketing terms such as "pasture-raised" and "natural" by industrial food producers who capitalize on the new wave of society's environmental sensitivity, have not convinced everyone. Even organic food certification, while an important step toward sustainability (a step being sought after by much of the local food movement), is wrought with problems and insufficient to create a connection between the consumer and the land where the food was produced. Only direct close contact with farmers, through visits to farms and farmers' market, without intermediaries, seems to satisfy the growing urge for the emplacement of food.

In most jurisdictions, local foods currently represent less than 5% of the food market. Although comprehensive data is lacking for the Eastern Townships, one would suggest it is probably within that range. Local foods could easily be written off as insignificant if not for the fact that local foods make up the fastest-growing segment of the food market (Martinez *et al*, 2010). It is not surprising that large grocery chains are now carrying lines of "local" food, following the same trend that transformed certified organic food from the fringe to the mainstream. While the organic food market, some would argue, has been co-opted by big agribusiness, the same cannot be done as easily with local foods. Multinational food companies would have a difficult time meeting the needs of full transparency throughout the supply chain, direct producer-consumer interactions, and food *placefulness* (as opposed to current *placelessness*) in all regions.

What lies in the future for local food? This essay has demonstrated that more research is needed to examine the impact of the emerging local food systems. In twenty years, someone reading this essay will perhaps be able to write a response with a clearer view of some of the answers on the enduring influence of the local food system. Barring a global economic collapse and major overhaul of the global industrial food complex, or major continental-scale natural disasters, no one imagines that local food systems will replace global food systems. Rather, more than likely, local and global food systems will continue to influence each other, hopefully towards more economic, social and ecologically sustainable directions. Or perhaps the local foods phenomenon will fade away and be regarded as a trend that did not last. Perhaps small farms will close down and people will lose

interest in connecting with the producers, the practices, and the place of their food. The Eastern Townships farming landscape may become dominated by fewer large monoculture crops and concentrated livestock agribusiness farms owned by distant corporations, as has already happened in many other regions of North America.

This author, however, agrees with Gayeton (2014) and others (see, for example, Morland, 2015; Kleppel, 2014; Ackerman-Leist, 2013; Wittman *et al* 2010; Gillespie *et al*, 2007) who, as observers of the future of local food systems, suggest that local foods systems are here to stay. The landscape will continue to be transformed by small-scale local food producers, ecologically-sound practices will become even more important to society, and people will grow even more intimate with their food supplies. Furthermore, it is this author's bold (but admittedly unsubstantiated) prediction that should major economic hardships develop, or large natural disasters that induce widespread crop failures emerge, the global food system, as it currently exists, might be ill-equipped to address society's food needs. Under such circumstances, only several, small-scale, diverse, closely connected communities with knowledge and skills at producing local food systems in their own region, like those emerging in the Eastern Townships, would be most fully positioned to help people survive and thrive.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Students in an introductory environmental studies class at Bishop's University were given an assignment to choose three food items they had eaten and to trace the path it took from the farm to their plate. The overwhelming majority of students could not complete the assignment. Even when students called the 1-800 phone numbers found on some food packaging, they discovered that company employees could not answer their questions either.

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