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## **Preparing Heritage Foods, Preparing Our Future**

### **Introduction**

Food Heritage is rooted in both people and place. It is a reflection of where we have been and who we have known. The foods we eat and the way prepare them are a part of our cultural identity, linking us to the past and leading us to the future.

However, our food heritage and traditional food values are being threatened by the increasing prevalence of fast foods and processed foods. Each day, a quarter of the US population eats fast food (Schlosser, 2002). That's over 78 million fast food consumers today alone (US Census Bureau, 2012). Even when we are eating at home, our food preparation habits have changed. In 1984 we made 72 percent of our dinners from scratch, but by 2008 that number dropped to 57 percent (Balzer, 2009).

As a result of our high-calorie, low-nutrient diet, Americans are facing increased rates of obesity and diabetes. In 2009-2010, more than one-third of adults and almost 17% of youth in the US were obese (Ogden, 2012). Within the TJPDC, the City of Charlottesville, Albemarle County, Nelson County and Fluvanna County have adult obesity rates of 26.3-29.7% (CDC, 2012). Rates in Greene County and Lousia County are above 29.8% (CDC, 2012).

Obesity leads to increased risk for diabetes, heart disease, and hypertension (Ogden, 2012). Over 8% of the US population now has diabetes, and if recent trends

continue, by 2050 one-third of adults in the country will have diabetes (CDC, 2011). Our diets are beginning to have real and noticeable health impacts.

In a recent visit to the UVA Community Garden, Alice Waters expressed her fear that our declining relationship with food is leading to declines in our relationships with others. “Our everyday eating habits teach our values,” she said. “When you eat in a cheap and easy way, you think in a cheap and easy way. People are experiencing fast food lives and loves and they don’t want to pay attention anymore” (2012). The way we eat is taking a negative toll on our physical health, and may also be impacting our social and mental wellbeing.

Rediscovering our food heritage in central Virginia will have multiple benefits for local communities. It will require a shift from the purchase of packaged, processed foods to fresh, whole foods that are prepared in the home. A return to home cooking with fresh ingredients will eliminate some of those empty calories and bring nutrients back to our plates.

Additionally, returning to our food heritage will mean a return to our local lands, and a reinvestment in local farmers and producers. When we purchase highly processed, pre-packaged foods, we pay large national and international corporations to prepare our foods for us. Money we spend on those foods is lost from our local economy. Economist David Boyle likened money to the blood of a city. It needs to be circulated to the economy going. But when money is spent at big box stores, online retailers or non-local utilities, money “flows out, like a wound” (Schwartz, 2009). Boyle found that money spent purchasing foods directly from farmers (via farmers markets or community supported agriculture programs) was twice as efficient at keeping the local

economy alive than money spent at supermarkets (Schwartz, 2009). Heritage food preparation requires the use of whole foods, ideally grown close to home. Purchasing these foods from local producers will keep our dollars circulating in our local economy and will give us greater returns on our spending.

Lastly, a focus on our shared food heritage will promote a sense of community and a sense of place. It will forge bonds between community members sharing in a common heritage, between consumers and producers, and between community members and the land.

There are many different aspects to our food system. Food production, food processing, food retail, food preparation and food celebration all play valuable roles in determining what we eat and how we eat it. This paper focuses on heritage food preparation. How we prepare the foods we choose to feed ourselves impact our health and the health of our community.

Writing a local food charter, creating a food heritage cookbook and offering cooking classes, and getting heritage foods into local schools will strengthen our food heritage. The TJPDC should consider these efforts and others like these to preserve central Virginia's food heritage.

### **Idea #1: Food Charter**

A food charter is a formal document recognizing a community's values and principles that should be used to shape its food policy (Sanders & Shattuck, 2011). The charter created by community members who come together to share and discuss their vision for the community's food and agricultural system. As a result of this grassroots

approach, food charters are unique to the location they serve, representing the people and land of the particular locality. Once adopted by local governments, these documents can help guide decision-making and policy (Sanders & Shattuck, 2011). It is a tangible commitment to food heritage that can lay the groundwork for other changes to our food system.

In 2001, the Toronto City Council signed their food charter. This agreement arose out of the city's decision a year prior to become a food-secure city. The charter declares the community's belief that everyone has the right to be free from hunger. In addition to that right, the city sees food security as a way to improve the health of its residents, make the city more affordable, boost the local economy, reduce air pollution and bring the community together. The charter lays out steps the city plans to take in order to become food-secure. These steps include sponsoring nutrition programs, ensuring access to healthy foods, protecting local agricultural lands and encouraging the construction of community gardens. It will work with different levels of government, community organizations and businesses to achieve these goals.

The Toronto Food Charter has served as an example for the drafting of food charters in many other cities. The TJPDC could encourage municipalities in the five-county region to adopt their own food charters in support of food security and local, heritage foods. Such charters could build on the Toronto charter, also including language to preserve heritage varieties and breeds, and programs educating the public on their importance. These charters can then be used to show public support for heritage food systems and to justify future policies and programs that promote food heritage.

## **Idea #2: A Food Heritage Cookbook and Cooking Classes**

The African American Heritage Cookbook published by the Tuskegee Institute includes over 200 traditional African American recipes, as well as short stories, literary quotations, poems, and historic photographs. Its author, Carolyn Quick Tillery, spent a year and a half gathering recipes that reflect the heritage of Tuskegee, Alabama's African American community. It has a particular focus on honoring Booker T. Washington, founder of the Tuskegee Institute.

The book not only compiles heritage recipes, preserving them for our future and teaching future generations how to prepare them, but is also captures the history and culture of the era.

The TJPDC should partner with the Virginia Food Heritage Project (VFHP) to create a similar heritage cookbook for the central Virginia region. Such a cookbook would be beneficial on several levels. Reaching out to the community to gather recipes, stories and photographs will inspire community members to contemplate their food heritage, which they may not often do. Once the Central Virginia Food Heritage book is published, it will ensure that recipes precious to this region are preserved, remembered and passed down. It will spread knowledge of how to prepare central Virginia's traditional foods to those who might not have otherwise had access to that information. To reach a wider audience, the Central Virginia Food Heritage book could be offered in print, online, and as an app for smart phones.

To fully embrace the recipes and techniques gathered in the Central Virginia Food Heritage book, the TJPDC and VFHP should sponsor cooking classes. These

classes will offer hands-on experience and instruction for community members who want to learn heritage recipes. Classes can take place in different locations to ensure that all sects of the community have access. Holding classes at the Jefferson School would honor the African American community. Cooking classes at the Jefferson Area Board of Aging would encourage intergenerational interaction, and provide community members contact with some of the people most likely to remember these recipes. Taking advantage of the Lorna Sundberg International Center Kitchen at the University of Virginia would involve college students and faculty. As residents meet one another and cook together, they will be not only learning recipes, but also building community.

Ideally, these classes would be available online as well. The Nourished Kitchen provides an interesting example for how to provide online courses and meal plans. Nourished Kitchen teaches participants how to cook “real food” – food that is healthy and traditional. To do so, it offers a series of videos, recipes, tutorials, and digital workbooks and factsheets. The twelve courses in the series not only teach students how to cook, but also how to grocery shop, how to minimize the cost of foods, and how to plan meals. In fact, Nourished Kitchen offers a weekly meal plan for those who are not used to planning meals from scratch. The weekly meal plans include three dinner menus, one desert, and several other recipes. Additionally, staff is on hand to answer questions by email and conference calls are held monthly.

Offering a Central Virginia Food Heritage online course to compliment the classes and cookbook would allow this information to reach a wider audience. Those living in rural parts of the Thomas Jefferson Planning District may find online classes to be more economical than classes requiring a drive into town. Online courses will also

allow participants to take lessons at the time and pace that is most convenient for them. Online courses also have very small overhead costs. Once the videos and accompanying information have been made, there is little extra expense to the program.

Creating a Central Virginia Food Heritage book and offering online cooking classes will create community as people gather to learn about food, and will allow knowledge of heritage cooking to be passed on.

### **Idea #3: Getting Heritage Foods into School Cafeterias**

Schools in Colorado's Weld County School district have found a way to introduce scratch cooking into their city schools. At the start of the 2011-2012 school year, the school district began its new program. This year, about 75% of the food served in school cafeterias is being cooked from scratch. The school district hopes to increase to cooking all foods from scratch by next school year.

To prepare for this, the school district participated in the Cook for America Program. This program is a weeklong scratch cooking boot camp for cafeteria staff. Professional chefs Kate Adamick and Andrea Martin started the program in 2010, with the mission to provide concentrated and comprehensive culinary training to school food service personnel (CFA, 2011). The program teaches cafeteria workers about food safety and sanitation, culinary math, time management, knife skills, menu planning, and foundational cooking techniques (CFA, 2011). Since the program's start, Adamick and Martin have worked with about 100 school districts across the country, about half of which are in Colorado (Johnson, 2011).

As a result of Weld County's scratch cooking, meals have gotten healthier and the ingredient list has gotten simpler. Take the bean burrito: last year's packaged, pre-processed burrito had more than 35 ingredients, including some like potassium citrate and zinc oxide. This year's burrito? Only 12 (Johnson, 2011).

While the initial changes have been costly, the district received assistance from the Colorado Health Foundation, a nonprofit whose mission is to help school districts throughout the state return to scratch cooking. The Foundation provided \$273,000 in grants to help cover the \$360,000 cost for kitchen construction and new equipment. Greeley was fortunate not only to receive those grants, but that it still had a large, central kitchen space with ovens left from when scratch cooking was still taking place in the 1980s (Johnson, 2011).

Though the upfront costs can be daunting, many argue that the routine costs afterward are no more expensive than traditional school cafeterias. "The biggest myth is that it costs more money," said Kate Adamick, Cook for America co-founder (Johnson, 2011). She found that poorer school districts in particular might benefit from federal reimbursements when they switch to scratch cooking. They will likely find it cheaper to process their own meats, rather than buying them already processed (Johnson, 2011). She has found so much convincing evidence on the matter that she recently published the book Lunch Money to dispel the myth that school lunch reform is cost prohibitive (CFA, 2011). Jeremy West, Nutrition Director for the school district, points out that they did have to hire ten more employees for their main kitchen, but found that they needed ten fewer employees in cafeterias across the district.



This is a great long-term goal for school districts in the TJPDC. Getting there will take a big commitment, lots of time, and increased funding. Many schools have kitchens built only to reheat precooked foods, which lack the equipment necessary to cook from scratch. Districts will have to invest in retraining cafeteria staff who are used to thawing prepared foods, not using whole ingredients to prepare meals in house. These meals will be healthier for students. Additionally, when partnered with Farm to Table programs, local farmers can benefit too. When cooking from scratch and sourcing some produce from local farmers, schools have an opportunity to prepare heritage foods for students. Having a monthly or weekly central Virginia food heritage meal, and advertising it to students, will educate children on the food heritage of this region. In addition to some federal and state grants that may be available, there are numerous other grants available for schools aiming to incorporate healthy foods into their cafeterias. Some grants include the Love Your Veggies Grant Program, Team Nutrition Training Grants, Fuel Up to Play 60, and Action for Healthy Kids.

Providing healthy, nutrient–dense foods that are cooked from scratch should be a priority for schools, but getting there will take time. What can schools do in the meantime?

“Start small,” advises Andrea Early, Executive Director of School Nutrition for Harrisonburg City Schools and State Lead for the Farm to School Network (2012). Early has been working to get fresh foods and local foods into cafeteria lunches, but realizes she cannot do it all at once. The Virginia Farm to School program aims to “promoting opportunities for schools, distributors and growers to work together to increase the volume of locally grown product served in school cafeterias and dining halls” (VA Dept.

of Agriculture and Consumer Services, 2012). Since her school district joined the Farm to School movement in 2007, the amount of money spent on locally sourced food has steadily increased to about 10% during this school year.

Early explains how Harrisonburg City Schools started small, focusing its initial efforts on lettuce. The first step was to get rid of nutrient deficient iceberg lettuce and replace it with more nutritional romaine lettuce. From there, Early surveyed local farmers to see who grows lettuce and who grows enough to supply a school or school district. Over the course of several years, the school district was able to make the jump to purchasing much of its lettuce locally.

When she says “start small,” Early has two things in mind: incremental changes to school menus and incremental changes to school’s throughout the district. Scrapping school menus and jumping to scratch cooking might not be politically or economically feasible. But introducing a few more locally sourced whole foods and cooking an additional menu item or two from scratch each year builds positive momentum without overwhelming the school district. Part of that also includes making changes on a school-by-school basis. If a local farmer is unable to supply enough produce for the entire school system, but can supply a school or two, she gives it the go-ahead. Waiting for broad gains might stall progress.

The 2008 Farm Bill gave schools the ability to include geographic preferences when acquiring unprocessed agricultural products (Early, 2012). Virginia, however, does not. Out of fear of limiting interstate commerce, the state does not allow geographically specific language. As a result, Early has become somewhat of a wordsmith. While she is unable to say that she wants apples from Virginia, she can specify that she wants

them to “be delivered within two days of harvest” (2012). She’s also managed to get locally sourced bagels into the schools by requesting unsliced bagels, since major producers such as Sara Lee only provide sliced ones.

Early mentioned that proposed changes to the Farm Bill include a Cash in Lieu of Commodities Voluntary Option, which would allow school districts to purchase commodities directly from vendors instead of being limited to pre-approved United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) options. The current USDA commodity procurement options are not regionalized. Commodities are ordered months in advance and shipped from anywhere in the country to the school district. Allowing a cash in lieu of commodities option would give school districts the option to make purchases directly from local vendors. Early sees this as a step in the right direction.

Additionally, Early is applying for Farm to School grants for the Harrisonburg City School District. The USDA funds Farm to School grants for both the planning for Farm to School programs and their implementation. Early hopes the district will be able to get funding for a refrigerated truck to more safely transport foods to different schools around the city.

Overall, Early is excited about the changes she has seen in her district’s cafeterias since joining the Farm to School program. She would love to see Virginia allow for geographic preferences, the Farm Bill implement the cash in lieu of commodities program, parents get more involved in their children’s nutrition, and –of course—more funding for school nutrition programs that are asked to make big changes with few dollars.

To help the five-county district move forward, the TJPDC should strive to get all school districts in the region to be a part of the Virginia Farm to School Program. At this point, Fluvanna County has yet to officially join the program. This program provides some resources and funding for schools to partner with local producers. Schools in the TJPD can use these connections to promote central Virginia's food heritage. The highlight of the Farm to School Program is the Farm to School Week held in the fall. During this time, schools are encouraged to serve and advertise local foods. This provides the perfect opportunity to showcase heritage foods as well. Why not use local ingredients to make traditional local recipes?

Schools in the TJPD can capitalize on this relationship with local farmers by inviting them to visit schools and meet students, either in the cafeteria or in the classroom. Producers can educate children about where their food comes from and can help them to understand their connection to their Earth and their food heritage.

Few people in the TJPD are likely aware of Virginia's regulations for school food procurement. TJPDC, VFHP and the Piedmont Environmental Council (PEC) could work together to spread awareness of schools' inability to give preference to local foods. Individuals and organizations with an interest in local and heritage foods may be inspired to act on this issue. Once that information is publicized, citizens can put pressure on their elected officials to change that legislation. They can demand that the commonwealth allow school districts to value local producers more than those across the country.

Until that happens, the TJPDC, VFHP and PEC should help school districts to navigate federal and state procurement regulations and craft requests in such a way

that foods can be purchased from local producers. These organizations could provide school districts with suggested language and terminology that would favor local foods, such as Early's request that foods be able to be delivered within two days of harvest. This clever crafting requires time and effort. There is no reason for each school district to be brainstorming on its own. Having one of the aforementioned organizations gather and distribute suggestions for how to word requests would save time and money, and could bring more local foods into schools in the TJPDC.

## **Conclusion**

Fully embracing our food heritage requires consideration for all aspects of our food system: food production, food processing, food retail, food preparation and food celebration. My research focused on food preparation, recognizing the importance of the way we each choose to feed ourselves. Food preparation is perhaps the most personal connection with food heritage. It is the point in our food system in which we are choosing what foods to feed our families and how they should be prepared. That said, our food preparation is embedded in the greater food system and is influenced by a variety of outside factors.

The TJPDC has the ability to partner with other organizations and promote changes that support our local food heritage. Drafting a Food Heritage Charter will formalize community support for central Virginia's food heritage and can be used to help guide future decision-making. With a charter in place, it will provide a foundation for actions and policies that support a heritage food system.

Creating a Central Virginia Food Heritage book and cooking classes will celebrate our region's food. These projects will inspire community members to recall and share their food memories, will educate people on how to prepare heritage recipes, and will bring people together to prepare it. By having cookbook available in print, online and smart phone app, this information will be able to reach a wide audience. In addition, offering cooking classes at a variety of locations around the TJPD, as well as online, will encourage widespread participation.

An important step forward will be to further incorporate heritage and local foods into school cafeterias in the TJPD. In the long-term, school districts should try to convert to scratch cooking, as Weld County Schools did. The schools could take advantage of a variety of grants and the Cook for America program to prepare for the switch. In the shorter-term, school districts can embrace the Farm to School program and work to increase the amounts of local and heritage foods served. School districts should work to make incremental changes to their menu, as Harrisonburg City Schools have done. The TJPD can work with other organizations to raise public awareness of the regulatory hurdles that face schools trying to procure local foods. With this information, the public can lobby their elected officials for change to the system.

Food heritage connects us to our place, our past, our future, and one another. Restoring our food heritage will benefit the health and economy of communities in the TJPD. At the same time, connecting with our shared food heritage will strengthen our communities and promote a sense of place. As Waters pointed out, the way we eat defines us. We can choose between fast food lives and those that embrace our heritage. Just some food for thought.

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