

**Building Resilience, Security, and Identity into Central  
Virginia's Food Production**  
- Adaptable Examples



**PLAC 5500**  
**Virginia Food Heritage:**  
**Planning for Sustainability & Resilience**  
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## Introduction

Tune into the news on any given day and a story is probably playing on the topic of China's great migration - millions upon millions of peasants leaving the agrarian countryside in search of higher wages and greater opportunity in the city. This phenomenal demographic shift is a common theme throughout the world and has been playing out in one form or another, and at various speeds, since the advent of the cotton gin and other mechanical stand-ins. The sequence of events is fairly well known by now. Countries begin adopting modern methods of agriculture, which then frees up hoards of human capital. New industry simultaneously arises and the employment picture and population distribution changes radically. China's example is a marvel due to the sheer numbers involved, but the precedent found here in the United States actually serves as a cautionary tale. For, wrapped up in the triumph of the rural exodus is the startling realization that something was left behind – America's food heritage.

In the *Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006) and *In Defense of Food* (2009) author Michael Pollen adroitly theorizes that the consternation Americans currently experience towards food can be attributed to the outsourcing of its production. Essentially, many Americans no longer know where their food comes from because they aren't the ones growing it and neither is their neighbor. Couple this to weekly or even daily, sensationalized, news reports of food poisoning or contamination and what ensues is a recipe for widespread panic. With about 0.4 percent of Americans farming today many employment questionnaires have stopped listing it as an occupation choice.<sup>1</sup> In a previous era when most Americans gardened or at least knew their local growers problems in the

food system were easier to track down. Today, the problems might be global and accountability is difficult.

On the back of this issue is an American food identify crisis. Pollen and other food experts have pointed out that unlike Italy, Japan, or Mexico for example, the United States lacks a national cuisine. This becomes problematic because nutritional uncertainty is the inevitable result. In other countries the people simply do not worry as much about their diet because they're consuming time-honored food that grows well regionally and has met their needs since time immemorial. Americans, however, are crippled by the paradox of choice. Thus, the “omnivore’s dilemma” – just because humans *can* eat all sorts of food doesn’t mean they necessarily *should*. Confusion and indecision come to dominate reasoning and people turn in circles looking for answers. Some pine away for a simpler time, while others seek more pragmatic solutions.

## **Context**

This is the essence of the Virginia Food Heritage Project – removing the guesswork from Central Virginia’s food system by creating a distinctly local analogue to places like Bavaria, Provence, or Tuscany. The Project seeks to work in concert with the local food movement already afoot and enhance it by uncovering and developing the relationships that exist between the land, the people, and the food. It seeks to instantly connect in people’s minds the geography with good tasting healthy food. The Central Piedmont, Shenandoah, and Blue Ridge – these names are more than just places, but culturally identifiable resources, which have all the potential to



become synonymous with regional flavor. The opportunity is ripe and the benefits are manifold.

Some might label this as “just a branding ploy”, but to do so is more than a failure of imagination. It’s a failure to recognize the socioeconomic issues that if left untreated will soon require a chaotic paradigm shift. The issues of an aging body of farmers, rising land cost, and increased domestic hunger are but a few items that will come to dominate the agenda of policy makers if action isn’t taken soon. The numbers are very real and threaten to impinge on Virginia’s prosperity and social wellbeing.

- The average age of the farmer in America today is 57 years old – Secretary Tom Vilsack (Department of Agriculture)
- The average age of the Virginian farmer today is 58.2 years old, with nearly 30 percent 65 years of age or older – Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS)
- The average farm size in Virginia is 171 acres and has assets worth more than \$1 million - VDACS
- In Virginia, 912,790 individuals are considered food insecure, with food insecurity among seniors and children increasing – Virginia Farm to Table Team 2011
- Virginia community food banks are seeing needs increase from 25 percent to 55 percent – Connie Stevens, Virginia Public Radio, December 2010

Are these figures a call for civic action? Indeed. With nearly one-third of Virginia’s farmers at the typical age of retirement, the need to attract younger individuals back to

the land is paramount. The feasibility of this diminishes rapidly though given the high cost of land and potential for limited economic gain under current conditions.

Meanwhile, evidence of food insecurity is on the rise. The World Bank defines food security as people having access at all times to enough food for an active and healthy life. Based on this definition, current census estimates, and the numbers reported by the Virginia Tech's Farm to Table Team, 11 percent of Virginia's population lacks an adequate food supply.<sup>2</sup>

For many Central Virginians the problems stated above are difficult to reconcile with all the apparent success of the local food movement over the last few years.

The Charlottesville area in particular has experienced incredible momentum thanks in large part to programs out of The University of Virginia and nonprofit organizations like Local Food Hub and the Piedmont Environmental Council (PEC). The PEC's "*Buy Fresh, Buy Local*" partnership and advertising campaign is perhaps the most recognized regional symbol of the food movement – second only to perhaps the quasi-stardom of Joel Salatin and Polyface Farm. Additionally, support from local business, food vendors, and the advent of the Relay Foods model of drop delivery has really added vigor and convenience to local food demand and distribution.

However, despite these promising strides market penetration by local food, as a proportion of total food consumed, remains quite low. Because of this, and the relatively higher price of farmers' market food against similar items purchased from chain grocers, local food is often portrayed as "elitist". However, neither of these issues is responsible for the lack of regional identity that should be characteristic of the movement. Without a cohesive body that combines and extols the agricultural values

found throughout the Thomas Jefferson Planning District it is doubtful the local food movement will overcome its impediments. Additionally, it is nearly impossible to envision local agriculture surmounting the issues of aging Virginia farmers, land price, and food insecurity at its current scale.

## **Project Goal**

This goal of this report is to demonstrate through a case study how pragmatic solutions for food production and elements of regional heritage can combine to strengthen Central Virginia for the inevitable change in American agriculture. It will not focus on how to grow and harvest food the “old-fashioned” way, but does recognize the validity of traditional methods that have withstood the test of time. The case study examined offers innovative ways to address problems facing the Thomas Jefferson Planning District, and indeed the entire United States. Additionally, the economic benefits of establishing and conceptually rebranding towards heritage foods will be discussed within specific policy suggestions. The answers uncovered here will hopefully inform future decisions that increase social stability and food sovereignty.

## **Key Words**

- Food production itself covers a spectrum of activities, but for the purpose of this report the emphasis is on people and their physical interaction with earth and animals as a means of providing sustenance. In a nutshell this refers to farmers, crops, livestock, hunters and wild game.
- “Heritage Food” remains strictly undefined at this point, but loosely speaking it refers to regionally unique foods and associated traditions. This may include, but

is not limited to, specific crop varieties, livestock breeds, processing techniques, food preparation methods, and social food traditions.

**Case Study: Countryside Conservancy – Cuyahoga Valley National Park, Ohio.**  
Educating up-and-coming farmers, sharing innovative land-use models, partnering to face down food insecurity

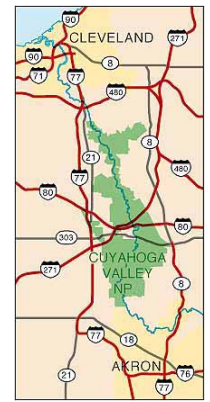


Supporting community-based food systems in Northeast Ohio

## Historical Background

Established as a “National Recreation Area” in 1974, the Cuyahoga Valley National Park (CVNP) south of Cleveland, Ohio was one of six national parks created in the 1970’s whose purpose was to serve major metropolitan areas. The CVNP’s establishment was, in part, due to the startling disappearance of the rural landscape that previously characterizing the Cuyahoga Valley. Between 1900 and 1950 more than half of the 700+ family farms disappeared, and half of those remaining vanished before the park was finally designated. This period of time was the tail end of the rural exodus in America and spans up to the post World War II suburbanization boom. Where 9 out of 10 American had been farming in 1800; only 1 in 10 remained by 1950.

For a number of years the park was decidedly managed in a relative state of wilderness. The first two superintendents were trained as wilderness managers and had little regard for the old family farms. Indeed, many parks were created through the years to protect the values of pristine nature against agriculture's negative effects. Virginia's own Shenandoah Valley followed such thinking when it evicted over 450 farm families during the 1930's.<sup>3</sup> To agribusiness itself these losses mattered little as the Park farms were viewed by many as too small and "outdated".



However, things began to change in 1996 with the CVNP's third superintendent, John Debo. After a decade of little progress in the park, he became aware of Europe's widespread practice of protecting farming in local and national parks. There he learned how Europe's traditional farming and food work to define many regions' history and culture. The result of this discovery led to the creation in 1999 of the Countryside Initiative – a program designed to adapt the European model to the framework of the National Park system.

The Initiative's goal was to rehabilitate and revitalize 20 or so of the most picturesque farms that used to operate in the Cuyahoga Valley – "restoring for public use and enjoyment many of the historic, scenic, natural and recreational values for which the CVNP was created". Thereby preserving its "rural landscape and character". Although initially met with mixed reviews, the Countryside Initiative quickly gained a reputation as a truly innovative program. The Countryside Conservancy (CC), the official body of the Countryside Initiative, inventoried and evaluated the rehabilitation potential of 85 old farms over the next four years, and by 2011 the CC had eleven farms



operationally rehabilitated and in use – placing “real farmers, on real farms, doing real farming.” By 2012, the CC had two more parcels offered up for long-term (60 year) lease.

CC farms are small in scale (less than 5 acres to around 50) when compared to Ohio and Virginia averages, but very diverse. Their farmers currently raise fruit, vegetables, flowers, herbs, poultry, pigs, sheep, goats, cattle, and more. They have stated that they “are growing for 21<sup>st</sup> century tastes and markets” and “provide as much a glimpse of the future of farming in America as it’s past.”

### **Current Program – Farmers’ Markets**



In 2004 the CC established *the* first farmers’ market in a National Park, and now also operates a second market in the park during the winter and a nearby Akron city market. They’re a “producers-only” market meaning there are no resellers or middlemen to sap away profit from the hardworking farmers. With over 50 unique vendors listed, the Countryside Farmers’ Market offers up a wide variety of common and specialty crops. Additionally, the CC has produced a regional harvest calendar to keep patrons aware of the fresh products they can expect to find in Northeast Ohio in any particular month of the year. The market has experienced growth and success every year, continually seeking larger venues to host its expanding customer base. By working to connect communities and farmers the CC has created alternative market

choices. By hosting cooking demonstrations, local food programs, and seasonal celebrations at the markets, civic engagement has greatly increased. It is indeed one of the region's true success stories amidst an overall shrinking population and an eroding economic base.

### **Current Program – Supporting Farmers and Farmland**

Beyond the farmers market the Countryside Conservancy supports up-and-coming farmers, shares innovative land-use and business models, facilitates networking opportunities and advocates community-based agriculture. They offer production and business skill training, farmland leasing models, land-use planning and zoning assistance, and On-farm learning opportunities. Currently, the Conservancy's farming and gardening curricula consists of 16 classes, workshops, and networking events. They've determined that to take "local food to scale" (20%-30% of consumption) will take an incredible multi-generational effort. Therefore, they've sought out partnerships with youth programs and schools in order to get hundreds of thousands of kids interested and engaged in gardening at home and at school. The CC's curriculum for up-and-coming farmers is administered through their "Countryside U" program and is designed to address the largest impediments facing most beginning farmers and market gardeners:

1. access to land
2. access to capital
3. access to production and business skills training, and
4. access to infrastructure

## **How They Address The Major Issues**

The Countryside Conservancy is endeavoring to lower the average age of American farmers by both educating and empowering them. Though currently modest based on what will eventually be required, the program seems to have found the 21<sup>st</sup> century formula for getting interested people back to the land and productive. By reducing the barriers to entry, namely the access to land and capital, the CC has opened up a system where small-scale farming is both possible and, over time, competitive. As an outlet and conduit for the dissemination of agricultural information and knowledge, the CC is able to engage individuals who might otherwise reject farming as an occupation. They're able to slowly introduce people to the realities of farming in this day and age, but keep them motivated by offering an alternative to the specter of toiling like a sharecropper for negative returns. From covering basic production, writing a business plan, to actually running the everyday business, the CC seeks to set would-be farmers on the path to success. Additionally, a new apprenticeship program recently launched aims to target another major impediment to most farmers: hiring high quality, affordable labor. Much more remains to be done if states are to counter the attrition of farmers over the coming decades, but the CC appears to have a model that is easily adaptable to Central Virginia.

The Conservancy is also now directly addressing the issue of food security through a new partnership with Wholesome Wave – a nonprofit organization “dedicated to supporting small and midsized farms, and making fresh, healthy, locally grown fruits and vegetables available to all people, regardless of income.” In November of 2011, the Countryside Conservancy began supporting Wholesome Wave’s Double Value Coupon

Program (DVCP), dubbed “Countryside Carrot Cash” at the local Farmers’ Markets. These coupons increase the fruit and vegetable purchasing power of families participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), previously known as food stamps. Participants receive a dollar for dollar match, up to \$20, when they shop at the Countryside Farmers’ Markets. This program is nearly identical to Charlottesville’s own SNAP benefits that are facilitated through the Jefferson Area Board for Aging (JABA) and also provided by a grant from the Wholesome Wave Foundation.

**Recommended Action for Thomas Jefferson Planning District:**

Ideas for building resilience and security into Central Virginia’s heritage food production

The following ideas have been adapted for Central Virginia and uses the Countryside Conservancy as a model example where appropriate. These ideas are focused on production with intuitive aspects of heritage food and regional identity incorporated. As is inevitable when dealing with this topic the ideas touch on multiple elements of community based food systems and therefore provoke more questions than they answer. Nevertheless, Central Virginia requires such a vector if it is to build a resilient and secure agricultural future that draws upon its unique assets valuable heritage resources.

**Idea #1**

**Promote and develop training in food production through the Central Virginia heritage lens**

1. *Organize a web of training activities in a variety of settings, ranging from elementary school to college, and include health care facilities, and continuing*

*education programs in order to improve the knowledge of current growers and motivate potential new growers.* The CC understands that in order to lower the age of farmers young people have to be engaged and inspired early on, “gardening and cooking at home, at school, at church, at 4H, at scouts, etc.” Central Virginia should launch a survey to assess community support for these types of agricultural programs. Appealing to regional history, a unifying theme should emerge that can link dissimilar people to a common necessity – the need to eat – and a common desire – eat nutritionally rich food. Through this approach a new educational framework has the best chance of survival.

2. *Offer school-based programs that integrate nutrition, heritage food, and gardening in order to raise awareness about the connection between healthy food choices and regionally identifiable, locally grown, fresh produce.* Working with parents and the school boards the region should seek opportunities to incorporate these aspects into the curriculum – if not during the school year then during specially organized “summer farm-camp” programs. Schools can also offer to host farm themed “career day” where regional farmers offer up a representative to demonstrate or teach about aspects of farm life. Rather than running the logistical problems of bussing loads of children to local farms, bring aspects of the farm to them. This should not be viewed as a substitute for potentially funded fieldtrips to farms, but as a manner of mitigating limited school budgets.

## **Idea #2**

### **Preserve farms on the urban fringe and support initiatives that convert idle and under-used city and county land into production areas**

1. *Encourage land tenure agreements such as land trusts, leases, and allied policy initiatives. Secure long-term commitment for community gardens, entrepreneurial farms, “farm parks”, and other urban and fringe agriculture ventures.* The CC, through its “Farmlink” program, “helps those who need farmland access to connect with landowners wanting to keep their property in agricultural use.” They support every size of farm, from “urban lots and suburban lawns to small acreage and large farming operations.” The CC’s National Park parcels are offered up at 60-year leases to qualified applicants. Many hobby farmers or large parcel landowners exist in and around Central Virginia. These owners should be engaged about forming partnerships that would put their land to its highest and best use. The contract process should be formalized and the duration should be no less than a decade.
2. *Convert some public lands in parks, around municipal buildings, schools, public housing, and hospitals to food production with planting of regionally identifiable and suitable fruit trees, edible landscapes, and production areas.* Much of the Cuyahoga Valley National Park remains in a state of wilderness, but the CC has reestablished farming within the Park where it makes sense. Central Virginia is blessed with a mild climate, good soil and a relatively low population. Therefore, its overall contribution to statewide hunger initiatives could increase with relative ease and few added burdens. Many open space parcels and underused parks

could be put into productive use where appropriate. These pocket farms could alter urban hunger trends if widely utilized, dispersed, and if a charitable component was made conditional on their use.

## **Conclusion**

The Countryside Conservancy's Ohio/chicken logo appearing in parts of this report is just one example of how Northeast Ohio is developing a community based food system with regional identity. The logo *is* a form of "branding", but its simple and betrays no gimmickry because it comes across as genuine to anyone living in the region. It's instantly recognizable, and evokes feelings that go beyond words to those touched by the Conservancy's helping hand. It represents both the region's agricultural heritage and the promise of a verdant future. The Conservancy is putting a face back on Ohio farmers while simultaneously increasing accountability and trust by connecting them to their end users. The process has been restorative and has undoubtedly boosted regional pride. Like Detroit, the Cleveland area has been beset with the challenges of a shrinking population and increased unemployment. However, portions of its agricultural sector are sanguine and are preparing for a deeper economy – one where sustainable practice and cultural significance are paramount.

Central Virginia is, of course, doing many of these same things. The five counties of the Thomas Jefferson Planning District have a promising future no matter the short-term market vagaries. Nevertheless, the need to continually innovate and anticipate the region's needs is part of any sound planning strategy. Right now the connection between rich historical resources and the burgeoning local food movement

is severely underdeveloped. The potential exist for uniting the two in a way that could become a multi-generational solution to some of the major issues facing Virginia and the rest of the United States. By creating a place-based regional food production identity that includes its food heritage, Central Virginia stands the best chance at building a resilient, secure future.

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<sup>1</sup> United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics “Farmer”  
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<sup>2</sup> Virginia Farm to Table Team. 2011. Virginia Farm to Table: Healthy Farms and Healthy Food for the Common Wealth and Common Good. A Plan for Strengthening Virginia’s Food System and Economic Future. E.S. Bendfeldt, C. Tyler-Mackey, M. Benson, L. Hightower, K. Niewolny (Eds.) December 2011.  
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<sup>3</sup> Engle, Reed “Historical Overview” Shenandoah National Park, National Park Service  
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