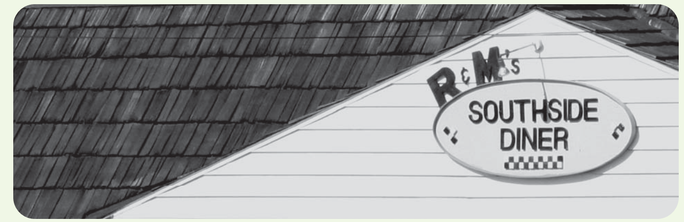
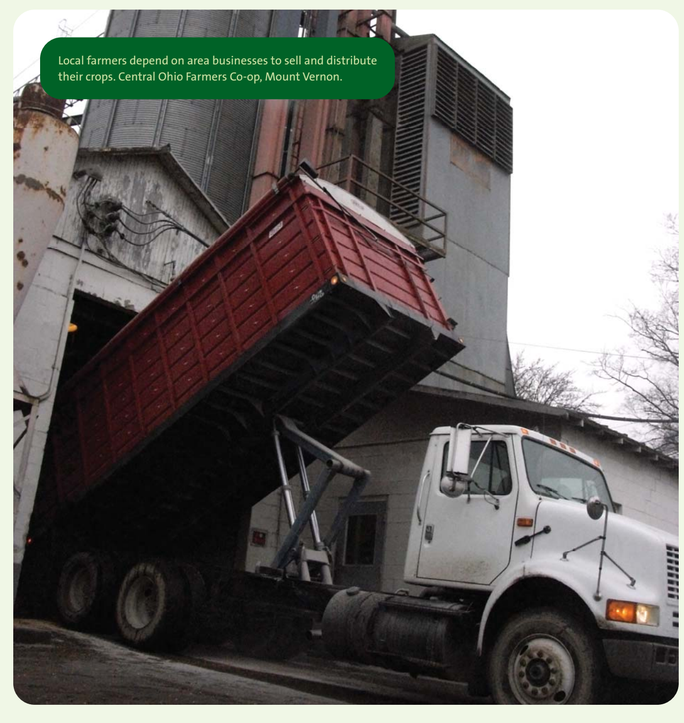
WHERE DOES OUR FOOD COME FROM?

Most people don't think about the food they eat—it comes from the supermarket, and the only question we ask is, "What's for dinner?" But lately, stories in the national media about personal health, food safety, and the security of our food system have led many people to think twice about the food we put in our shopping carts.

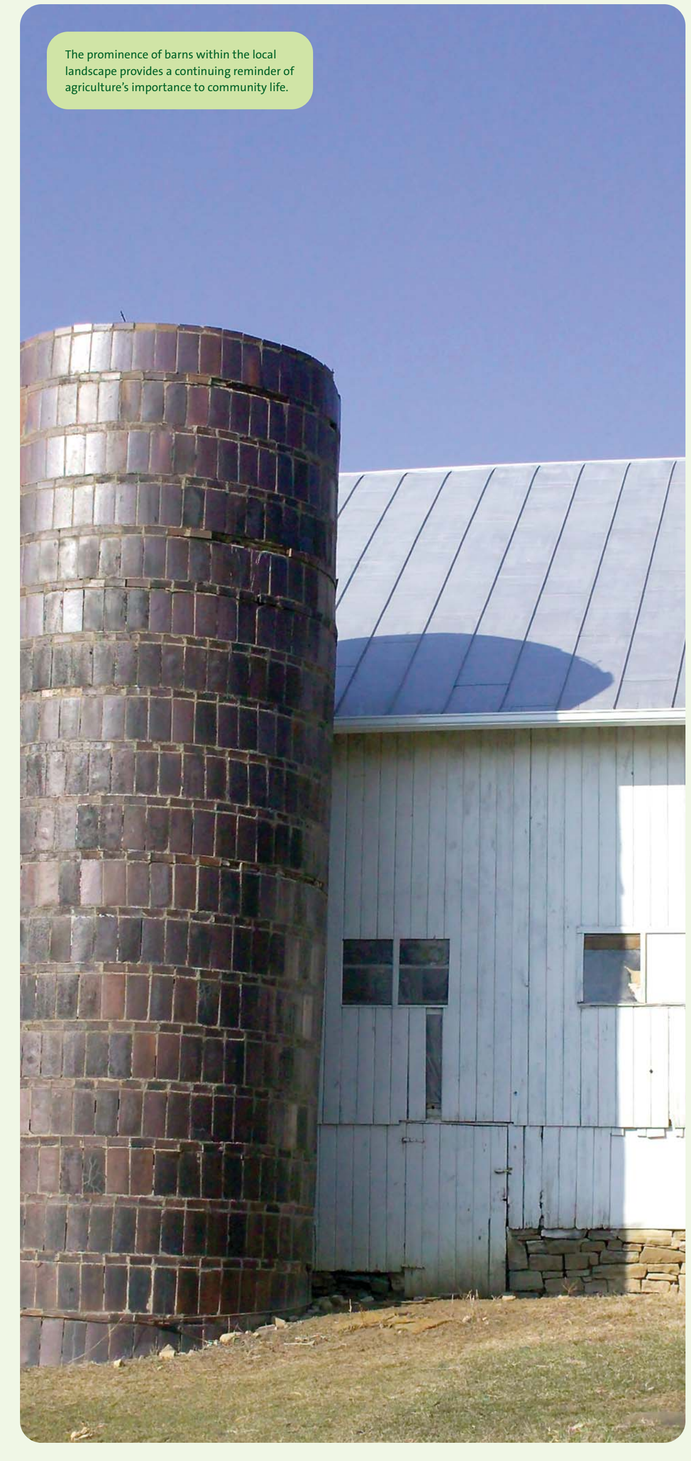


For generations, Knox County farmers have produced a variety of goods for regional consumption. But in today's global food economy, local farmers must increasingly compete with corporate agriculture to sell their products in a world market. Faced with this challenge, some family farmers leave agriculture, often selling their land for residential development. Related businesses—from machine shops to veterinary practices—struggle to survive. Other farmers are once again exploring local outlets, selling their products at farmers' markets and to local groceries and restaurants

Farms, auction houses, processing plants, transportation systems, restaurants, and grocery stores all account for what's on our dinner tables every night—these elements comprise a food system. Often, our food travels thousands of miles before reaching our kitchens, but exploring how this system operates on a local level offers a window into our community and enables us to understand the sources of our food.



Local farmers depend on area businesses to sell and distribute their crops. Central Ohio Farmers Co-op, Mount Vernon.



The prominence of barns within the local landscape provides a continuing reminder of agriculture's importance to community life.

BEEF

"The terminology is difficult: what's organic, what's natural, what's low fat, and I don't think people are really clear about that. Pastured stuff is really nebulous. These 'natural' products, which they sell premium price for in Kroger's, are not organic and not grass fed. These terms are multifaceted; what is natural to me is not necessarily natural to you."

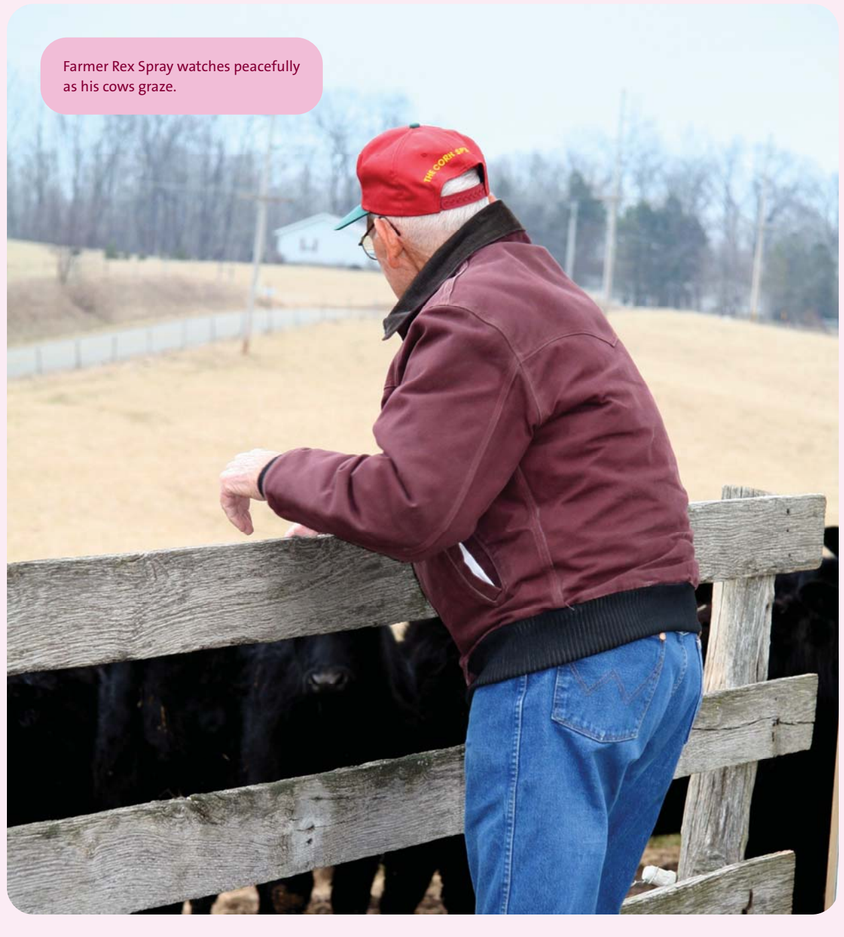
Nancy Ulman natural beef farmer, Bladensburg

The Spray brothers have been raising organic cows for over three decades.

"The economy has hurt us a little in the last couple years, certain things. But the great part is we don't have the expense of fertilizer, and weed sprays, and we get what we would call a premium price for almost all our farm products. It's affected us a lot less because we're organic."

Glenn Spray longtime organic farmer, Mount Vernon

There is no one way to raise a cow. In today's market, changing consumer demands are expressed in terms like organic, local, and natural. To the consumer, these words define the quality of the product, but to the farmer, these words are far less meaningful. Many farmers use organic methods but are not certified, simply because to become certified organic is a huge time commitment. Some farmers believe that local means as far as the next county, while others believe that food can be local even when sold outside of the state in which it was produced. There is no firm agreement on these terms. There is an agreement, however, that the public is becoming more aware of what they are consuming, and this awareness is drastically changing the ways in which beef is raised.



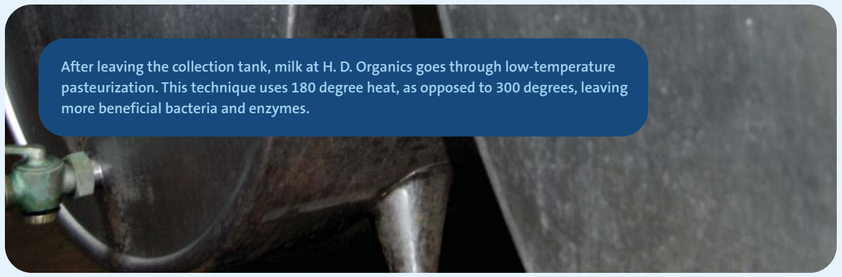
Farmer Rex Spray watches peacefully as his cows graze.

DAIRY

"To make any more money, we have to become more efficient. We have to produce more milk with fewer expenses. Yet it still costs us the same to buy a shirt as it does you and everyone else. But the way we're supposed to make our money is to become more efficient. You either got to increase the numbers that you do or become more efficient: produce more milk per cow or lower your cost of producing that milk."

Ron Orsborn dairy farmer, Mount Vernon

In a world where mass production and low prices reign, places like H. D. Organics and the small farmers that supply them manage to stay in business thanks to customers willing to pay the extra dollar for organically produced milk.



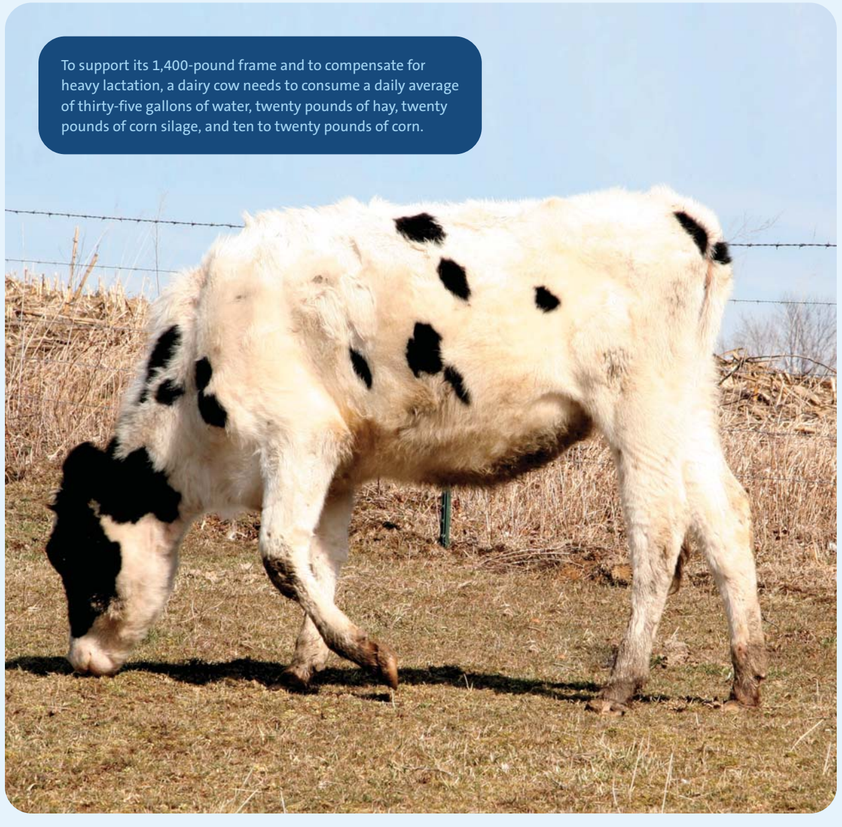
After leaving the collection tank, milk at H. D. Organics goes through low-temperature pasteurization. This technique uses 180 degree heat, as opposed to 300 degrees, leaving more beneficial bacteria and enzymes.

"We're letting Mother Nature work the way it's supposed to, and the nutrition is just out of this world. The cow's body can only produce so many nutrients, and if you dilute that into over ninety pounds of milk a day, you won't see nearly the same health benefits. You need to let the cow do what she's designed to do instead of pushing her and making her into a milk machine."

Doug Daniels organic dairy farmer, Fredericktown

The motto of H. D. Organics, an organic dairy processing company in Utica, draws from a familiar saying while speaking volumes about some of the food we consume: "You are what you eat...eats." This adage refers to the care and upkeep of dairy cows that provide our milk. The health and well-being of a cow are directly reflected in the nutritional value of her milk.

However, since the past decade there has been a significant change in the demands placed on dairy cows nationwide. From 1995 to 2004, the amount of milk produced by the average cow increased sixteen percent. Dairy farmers must struggle to keep such high levels of production on the lowest possible budget. As a result, the cows are forced to produce milk in stressful conditions, and the product contains fewer nutrients. Consumers are paying the price for cheaper dairy.



To support its 1,400-pound frame and to compensate for heavy lactation, a dairy cow needs to consume a daily average of thirty-five gallons of water, twenty pounds of hay, twenty pounds of corn silage, and ten to twenty pounds of corn.

DINING IN

"Bigger grocers mean more convenience foods as well as produce and other healthful foods. So yeah, I do think it has affected the way people in Knox County live. We're becoming more like city people in that we eat on the go and there are more choices available and we don't really think about our nutrition as much."

Dina Herald nutritionist, Knox County Health Department

Few consumers are aware of the importance of taking extra time to consider the groceries they purchase. More consideration could ensure that they are eating quality, healthy food.

When purchasing food, decisions are not made solely on the basis of cost. Other factors include culture, convenience, availability, environment, knowledge, promotion, and, of course, taste.

"No, I don't even really check the price. You know, to me, you either spend money on the food or you eventually spend it on the doctor. So, I would rather spend it on the food."

Daniele Marsh director of education, Knox Community Hospital

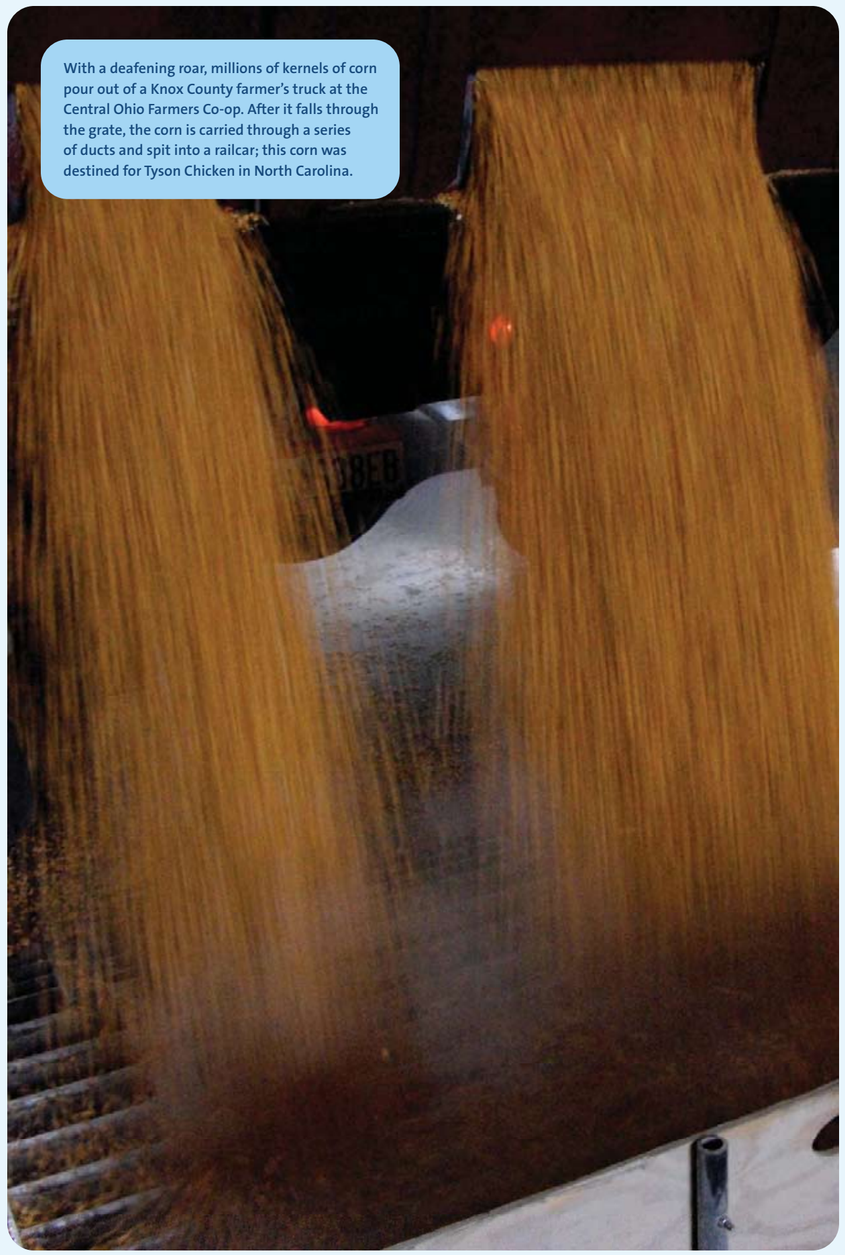
We make decisions on where to shop based on what each of us values: low prices, locally grown and organic food, or brand names. For many, cost is the single most important factor in this process. But when people choose low prices, they often sacrifice quality, and sometimes their own health. With confusing labels—low fat, no fat, low carb, organic, local, etc.—shoppers are more likely to resort to the most familiar products without taking extra time to look at the label or research exactly what they are putting on the table.

In the past, shoppers were limited to what was locally available, but today the majority of the food available in supermarkets comes from another state or a different country altogether. Regardless of the advent of super-stores and large grocery chains, some consumers still seek out specialty stores for the freshest local products.

TRANSPORTING FOOD

"It's definitely more efficient, 'cause every time you see a railcar going out, that's four semi loads of grain. So it's a big difference in fuel cost and handling. More economical all the way around."

Phil Pearce president, Central Ohio Farmers Co-op, Mount Vernon



With a deafening roar, millions of kernels of corn pour out of a Knox County farmer's truck at the Central Ohio Farmers Co-op. After it falls through the grate, the corn is carried through a series of ducts and spit into a railcar; this corn was destined for Tyson Chicken in North Carolina.

"Peak oil [the idea that the era of cheap, abundant fossil fuels is ending] is a challenge to our conventional food system but an opportunity for the local food movement."

Megan Quinn outreach director, Community Service Inc., Yellow Springs

On any given day, food produced in Knox County is being shipped all across the world; a single soybean may travel from here to Japan. At the same time, food from far away is being purchased by local consumers. In fact, the average food item travels over 1,500 miles from farm to plate.

The American food system is highly centralized, with huge amounts of food passing through a handful of scattered "hubs" in order to be processed and distributed. To support this system, our country has developed a largely automated, efficient shipping network via road, rail, and water.

But despite new technology that has made long-distance transport possible, problems have emerged: fuel costs have risen dramatically, traffic and pollution have had significant impact, animals hauled long distances lose weight and quality (a fact well known among farmers), while produce is bred for transportability at the expense of nutritional value and flavor.

Mitch Bumpus, a truck driver for Lanning's Foods, delivers food from all over the country–like the North Carolina yams, Idaho potatoes, and Utah beef on this dolly–to local stores and restaurants, such as KC's Steak & Rib House in Bellville.

HONEY

"You go home, eat supper, and get out there and take care of your bees. Forget about the TV! You can go and watch the TV after dark! Farmers get their work done when the sun's shining. My gosh, the poor bees, they're depending on you. You don't get there, they die."

Carlton Simpson beekeeper, Danville

When held up to the light, flecks of pollen are visible in jars of unfiltered honey—you are not likely to find this in a major chain grocery store.

"Honeybee pollination is essential for a top-notch crop of apples."

Maureen Buchwald Glen Hill Orchards, Mount Vernon

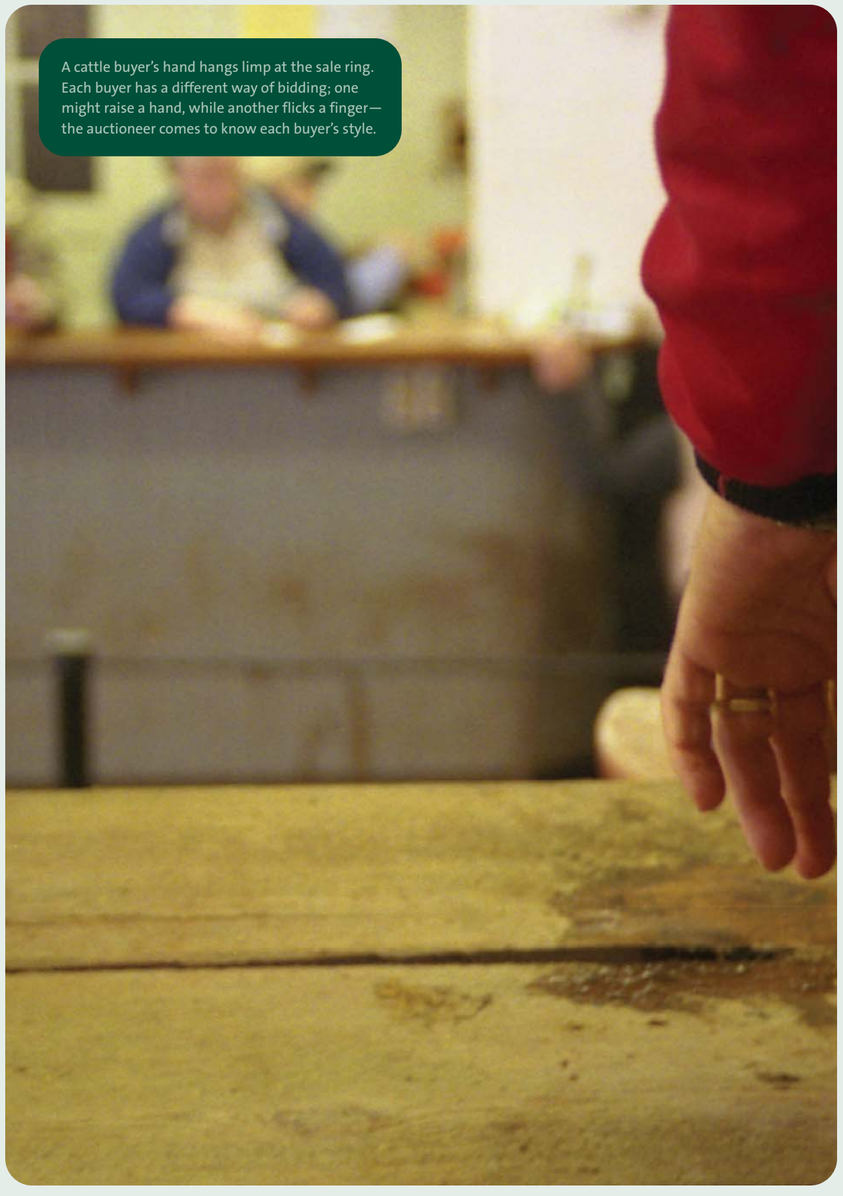
A beehive is nature's local food system. As a unit, bees produce enough food to sustain their population and provide us with a unique sweetener. In the process, they inadvertently play a crucial role in the ecosystem—passing from flower to flower, bees drop pollen and help foster growth. In this sense, beekeepers are not so different from the animals they raise. In addition to selling honey and beeswax, beekeepers often rent their hives to farmers and orchard keepers during crucial blossoming periods. Soybeans, apples, strawberries, pumpkins, and melons are just a few crops to which pollination is vital. Mites have drastically reduced the wild honeybee population over the last fifteen years, and many farmers rely on beekeepers to keep their crops rich and profitable. Honey may be a luxury, but bees are a necessity.

Bev Simpson with beekeeping equipment. The Simpsons run an apiary, sell equipment, rent hives for pollination, and offer advice to newcomers.

AUCTION DAY

"If an auction closes, everyone loses. The people who are marketing their cattle need to find another market for it; buyers have to find other markets to buy their cattle; people lose their jobs; it doesn't bring as much revenue into the community as it did before. Community loses, everybody loses."

Martin Yoder buyer and owner, Yoder Livestock and Trucking, Orrville



A cattle buyer's hand hangs limp at the sale ring. Each buyer has a different way of bidding; one might raise a hand, while another flicks a finger—the auctioneer comes to know each buyer's style.

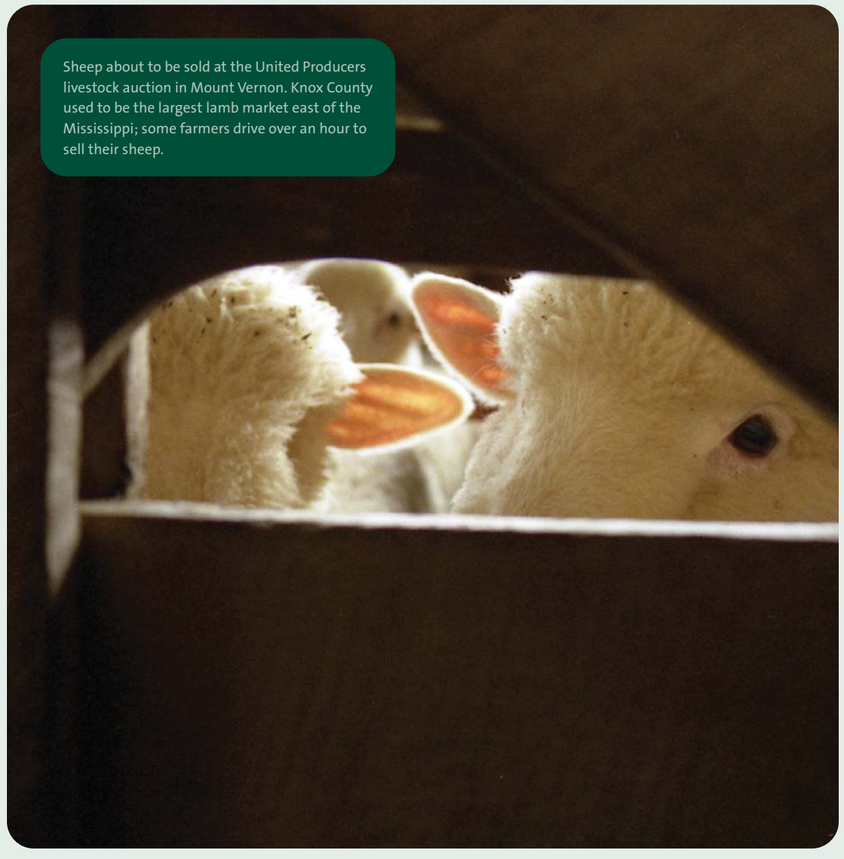
Sign in the parking lot of the Danville Auction. Many auction houses in central Ohio, especially produce auctions, are owned and operated by the Amish.

"It's not like it used to be. When I started, we used to run eight, nine hundred head of cattle through here every Wednesday and a thousand hogs and a thousand lambs. And now you're running a couple hundred head of cattle, and three hundred head of hog and six hundred head of lamb through."

Rick Reynolds general manager, United Producers, Mount Vernon

The cow moos, a finger goes up, the auctioneer yells "sold": it's auction day! Auctions are a vital part of our rural economy. They enable family farmers, who would otherwise be undersold by large, industrialized operations, to market their livestock and produce locally. Auctions work for buyers, too, allowing them to fill their orders at competitive prices, regularly and reliably.

Auctions are also longstanding social forums. Farmers, neighbors, and passersby drop in to watch the auction and "chew the cud." With the steady decline of family farming in recent decades, auction houses have begun to empty out. But while some auction houses have closed down, others are becoming increasingly popular. New markets for ethnic foods, locally grown produce, and free-range livestock have encouraged farmers to produce more, buyers to buy more, and spectators to come and watch it all unfold.



Sheep about to be sold at the United Producers livestock auction in Mount Vernon. Knox County used to be the largest lamb market east of the Mississippi; some farmers drive over an hour to sell their sheep.

DINING OUT

"Americans now spend more money on fast food than on higher education, personal computers, computer software, or new cars. They spend more on fast food than on movies, books, magazines, newspapers, videos, and recorded music–combined."

Eric Schlosser author, *Fast Food Nation*

Different restaurants—from fast food to ethnic, family style to gourmet—each reflect different consumer tastes. Kenyon Inn & Restaurant, Gambier

Fast food employees and prized chefs alike hold the secrets behind the cuisine. Middle Ground Cafe, Gambier

"There ain't nothing better than a homegrown tomato."

Sue Butler owner, Butler's Family Restaurant, Bladensburg

More than just places to consume food, restaurants serve a social purpose. Whether you're a "regular" at a certain locale or a sporadic visitor, good meals bring people together.

Restaurants make it their mission to serve a flavorful meal. However, the quality of a product depends on the quality of ingredients. Fast food franchises offer convenient, inexpensive food with a nearly universal mouth-watering aroma and distinctly memorable taste. Niche cafes utilizing local food appeal to those who believe in maximizing freshness and taste, while maintaining a relationship with the land.

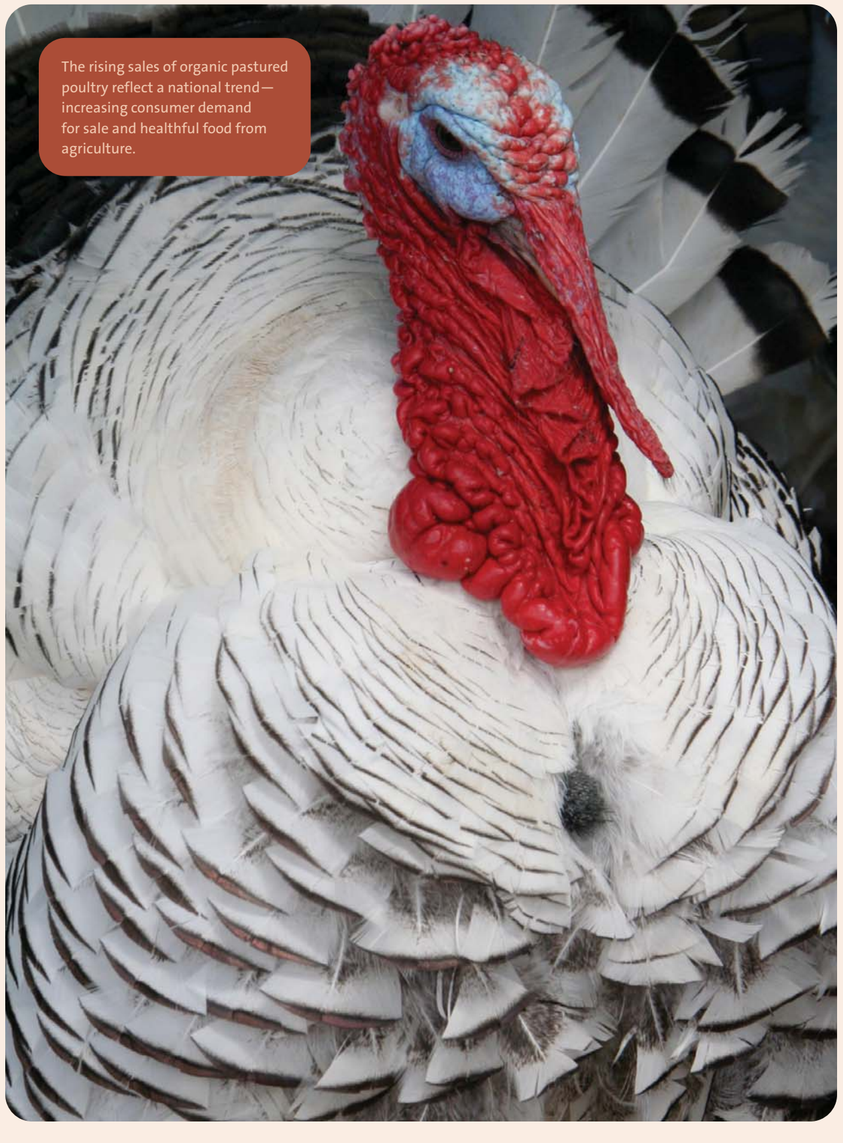
Menus reflect consumer taste, as well as the production capabilities of the establishment. Chefs consider cost, taste, seasonal availability, nutritional value, storage feasibility, and convenience when they buy ingredients. Groceries are delivered either fresh or already processed in frozen, canned, dehydrated, or freeze-dried form. Unprocessed food is seen as simple and pure when compared to a single fast food hamburger patty, which can contain meat from dozens or even hundreds of different cattle.

Chain restaurants dominate the roadside landscapes in nearly every town in America. Mount Vernon

POULTRY

"We are obviously a mechanized, mechanical process here, and the farm operations are no less mechanical in the requirements of placement and timing. Things have to move like clockwork. We have out on the farms at any given moment 1.5 million chickens that we are feeding, and to bring them into the plant within our target range for weight is like operating a giant piece of high tech equipment. It is really a fascinating operation."

Glenn Mott compliance manager, Gerber Poultry Inc., Kidron



The rising sales of organic pastured poultry reflect a national trend—increasing consumer demand for sale and healthful food from agriculture.

Gerber's Poultry, a supplier of all-natural chicken in Kidron. This family owned facility has a line capacity of 140 birds a minute, and is responsible for over a third of Ohio's annual processing—more than 28 million meat chickens.

"When you figure out all the labor and everything, you can't touch the supermarket, but you know what's in your food."

Joe Thompson Knox County Historical Farm, Gambier

Of all the animals that once wandered the barnyards of Ohio, none evokes more contrasting images than the chicken. Our romanticized impression of spirited backyard bug scavengers is a far stretch from today's reality: the birds are confined in tight cages to conserve energy and are bred to maximize weight.

One hundred years ago, the typical American farm had an average flock size of eighty free-ranging chickens. Today, a single commercial broiler growing house in Knox County contains twenty thousand chickens, more than all the chickens in each of seventy-eight other counties in Ohio—but backyard flocks are making a comeback, and poultry customers are seeking pasture-raised product with renewed vigor. Within the poultry market today, we see the industrialization of the chicken, inexpensive and safe, contrasted with a naturally raised chicken, traditional and wholesome.

THE CHANGING AMERICAN DIET

"I used to make dinners from scratch when my children were growing up. If I did go to the market to buy a chicken I bought a whole one and used every last piece. Take out was too expensive for a family of seven. Today, since it is just me I'm cooking for (my children are grown) if it's convenient, quick, healthy, and I can put it into the microwave, I'll eat it."

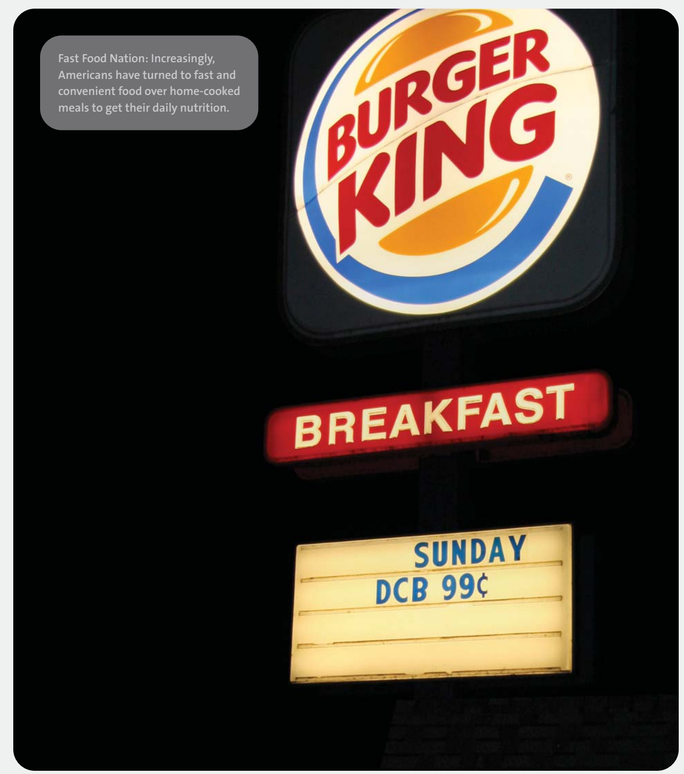
Doris Jean Dilts Fredericktown

In the aisles of Kroger, a supermarket chain in Knox County, a staple of the American diet can be found: easily prepared, frozen food.

"Americans want to get the most for their dollar, and fast food restaurants are able to cheaply provide large quantities of food for less money."

Dina Herald nutritionist, Knox County Health Department

Look no further than Knox County, Ohio, to witness the effects of the changing American diet over the last sixty years. Busy lifestyles leave little time for cooking from scratch, sit-down family meals, or exercise. Urban sprawl has increased the number of fast food restaurants, large supermarkets, and other convenient, low-price food options; these are often chosen over healthier alternatives available at farmers' markets, local food stores, and homegrown goods. Fast food is higher in fat, salt, and calories, and is served in significantly larger portions than a person needs nutritionally. All of these factors have contributed to high obesity rates, heart disease, and other health problems. Knox County residents, like most Americans, may benefit from becoming more aware of not only the quantity but also the source of the foods they eat, in order to make informed decisions for a more healthful diet.



Fast Food Nation: Increasingly, Americans have turned to fast and convenient food over home-cooked meals to get their daily nutrition.

CREDITS

food for thought

Where Does Our Food Come From? was directed by Professor Howard L. Sacks and conducted by students Alex Bogdanov, Charmayne Cooley, Lauren Greene, Becky Laughner, John Marsh, Dan Poppick, Allison Roberts, Dan Rymer, and Max Thelander.

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