

Maine's Connected Food System: *On the Web and Online*

by Barbara Ives

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Are you a farmer or fisherman looking to sell your products? A consumer looking for a nearby farmers' market? A group of friends hoping to purchase a CSA share or start a buying club? A foodie, a chef, a home gardener, a sheep breeder? Whatever your interest there's a web site for you. The online, interactive Maine food movement is sophisticated, easy to find, and easy to use. There are blogs, Facebook pages, Google groups, and tweets galore. State agencies, nonprofits, trade associations, schools, groups, and individuals are using these tools and launching new media to connect Maine's food system. Here are a few of note.

The Eat Local Foods Coalition of Maine has been developing two maps to help increase access and availability of local foods. The Maine Food Map allows you to search for food in your area or add your local food business to the map. The Maine Food, Farming and Fishing Resource Map is a place for food producers to connect with vendors, service providers, and other resources. Both are interactive and allow users to add new resources. The coalition's web site also has a number of user-formed groups, and discussion forums include topics such as food policy, food consumption, and local foods access.

The Maine Department of Agriculture's (DOA) "Get Real. Get Maine!" web site allows users to find

food and farms, farmers' markets, and agriculture fairs. The DOA is also working with Maine Ag Trader, which has two new web sites that support direct sales, Maine Food Trader and Maine Ag Trader, sponsored by the New England Environmental Finance Center at the Muskie School of Public Service. Consumers find food on Maine Food Trader, and producers find things they need to run their businesses on Maine Ag Trader. Membership is free, and there are four types of listings: available, wanted, donations, and events. Members can give feedback about the success of their listing, which will enable further studies of statewide patterns of food access. The sites are searchable by items, category, and county, and users can expand the area beyond Maine through Shared Harvest Network, which links to other states' online traders.

A consumer buying club is a group of friends and neighbors who pool the household food demands of several families to allow wholesale purchase of local food at below retail prices. Buying clubs or collective ordering is not a new idea, but they have grown with the introduction of sophisticated online ordering capabilities. A number of buying-club software packages are available, along with free online ordering templates. Crown O' Maine delivers to 38 buying clubs around the state and includes information on its web site on how to start and run a buying club.

Farm Fresh for ME is a new initiative of the Heart of Maine Resource Conservation & Development, which is currently piloting an online marketplace where farmers and consumers can meet to buy and sell local farm products. The ultimate vision of Farm Fresh for ME is to increase the market for small family farms in their communities while supplying food to Maine consumers at an affordable price.

All of these efforts are designed to provide farmers and fishermen with more income and profit while helping families find local, fresh, and nutritious food. Direct sales, via the web or face-to-face, are a proven way for producers to increase income without consumers taking on added cost. An interconnected food system is the ultimate goal, and the online Maine food universe is making that happen faster and more efficiently. 🐟