

# A Local Food System Glossary: A Rose by Any Other Name

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The local food movement defined much of the change in food trends in the early twenty-first century. While “local food” has entered the vernacular, the meaning of the term is still somewhat ambiguous. In 2013, a group of agribusiness and other food systems specialists with land-grant universities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) attempted to identify opportunities for the land-grant system to assist both producers and consumers attempting to navigate the murky waters of local food systems (see the series of articles in *Choices*). While the group, organized by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Southern Risk Management Education Center (SRMEC), strove to clarify the issues related to producer involvement in local food systems, the contributors faced—as others have— many challenges in defining “local food.”

## The Importance of a Definition

In Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet dismisses the significance of a name by stating that “a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” However, as both Romeo and Juliet tragically learn, names do carry meaning for others. “A rose by any other name” does not hold for food marketing in the twenty-first century. Agribusiness literature is rife with studies showing that segments of consumers place premiums on various characteristics and attributes of the foods they purchase, creating numerous niche market opportunities (see Deselnicu et al., 2013, and McCluskey and Loureiro, 2000, for a review of the literature). Some food categories develop a standardized definition over time, with the most notable example being the USDA’s efforts to create a definitive national standard for certified organic products. However, other terms remain vague or overly broad in their definition because many characteristics play a role in developing that definition. One common example is the term “value-added agriculture,” which encompasses several categories of food and agricultural products (e.g., non-GMO grains, free-range poultry products, processing grapes into wine), each with its own set of qualifying characteristics, concepts, and unique practices (Lu and Dudensing, 2015).

“Local food”—much like “value-added agriculture”—is an umbrella term for an array of niche food distribution strategies in the agribusiness context, each with a set of characteristics that holds value for a segment of consumers and producers. Unlike “certified organic,” the USDA has not arrived at a uniform set of standards for local foods but rather embraces a rather broad definition—food produced within 400 miles or within a state’s borders (Martinez et al., 20010). It could be argued that one common characteristic of all local food definitions is a short supply chain with few (or no) intermediaries and some sense of proximity between the producer and the end consumer.

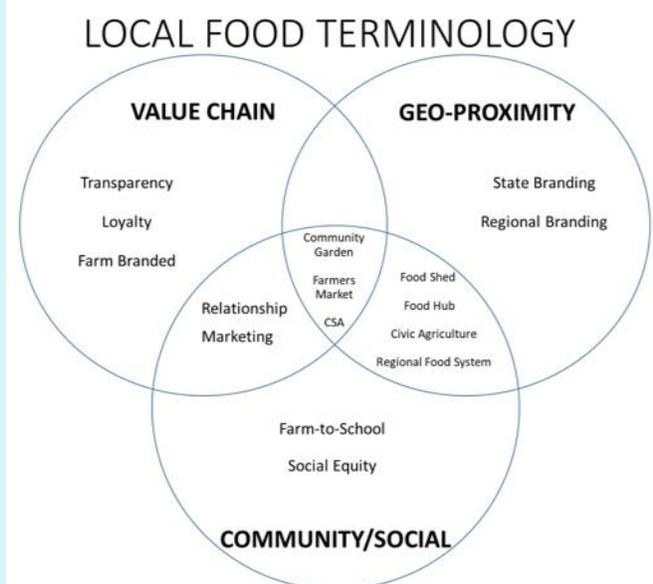
“Local”—and who defines “local”—has become a heated debate, both politically and within agribusinesses, and has been a common theme in recent food/agribusiness articles and publications. It has been the subject of USDA publications (e.g., Martinez et al., 2010; Low et al., 2015), a question for discussion in agribusiness (e.g., Hand and Martinez, 2010) and food journals (e.g., Lang, Stanton, and Qu, 2014), and the impetus for numerous applied economics studies (e.g., Darby et al., 2008; Durham, King and Roheim, 2009). Popular press articles and trade publications have also addressed the issue of defining local food, with some attributing the modern redefinition of

local foods to food manufacturers (e.g., Judkis, 2009) or retailers (Burfield, 2013) rather than solely the result of voiced consumer expectations.

Ultimately, research has shown that the definition of local is subject to the locavores themselves, those consumers who highly value purchasing and consuming local foods. These consumers have spurred many restaurants to market their products as locally sourced in order to attract who want to consume locally grown foods. Lusk and Norwood (2011) go so far as to say that “locavores seek to export goods without importing.”

Using “local food” as an over-arching term and drawing upon published and commonly applied terminology, we provide this rudimentary glossary of terms related to local food systems and an associated classification scheme. Terms are loosely grouped into categories, realizing that categories can overlap. As with the “value-added agriculture” schematic developed by Lu and Dudensing (2015), we try to highlight areas in which land-grant universities, government agencies, and natural alliances might play a role. Figure 1 provides a roadmap to the definitions covered in this article and the difficulties in assigning terms to just one category of terminology.

Figure 1. Commonly Used Local Food Terms and Classifications.



## Value Chain Terms

Diamond et al. (2014) defined food value chains as business arrangements in which “transparency, collaborative business planning and exchange of market intelligence and business know how among chain partners” result in “tangible benefits” to system participants. Not all food value chains place the same value on the same characteristics or business practices. In the consumers’ eyes, local food products have real or perceived values that distinguish them from competing products available through other marketing channels. The following terms relate to the distinguished values associated with local food.

## Relationship Marketing

Relationship marketing refers to a focus on longer-term customer attention, satisfaction, and retention to encourage repeat customers rather than a short-term goal such as quantity of sales transactions. Although relationship marketing is not new to food marketing, and thus not specific to local food, it is commonly recognized as a basic tenet underpinning local food systems. The USDA “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food” campaign epitomizes this philosophy, emphasizing relational loyalty on both sides of the market transaction. Relationship marketing is often mentioned as a key success factor for local food producers supplying area restaurants, as well as the chefs themselves (e.g., Curtis et al., 2008; Ernst and Woods, 2011). The grassroots and social media campaigns undertaken by local food suppliers and farmers’ markets are associated with relationship marketing.

## Transparency

While “transparency” is not adequately defined by the USDA, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), or local foods associations, the term generally implies an easily identified and available knowledge of all the details and components of the marketing chain. For local food consumers, the ability to easily see and understand the links in the short supply chain builds trust and serves as a sort of authenticity of the local food system. Transparency is also a critical component of food safety and traceability regulations and guidelines throughout the entire food industry. Some products are now Source Verified® (Where Food Comes From, 2017), which utilizes a third-party source verification and Quick Response (QR) Code technology to create transparency about the people and processes used to produce the food. (See Figure 2 for an example of the label.)

## Farm Branded

A specific farm’s brand carries with it a bundle of real and perceived characteristics signifying value (i.e., financial, social, and environmental) to the consumer. “Farm branded” refers to efforts by the supplier to build customer loyalty for the farm’s products, regardless of the marketing channel used by the consumer to obtain the farm’s products or the consumer’s proximity to the farm. Holcomb, Kenkel, and Brown (2012) found that 94.6% of suppliers to the 5,000-member Oklahoma Food Cooperative viewed the cooperative as an important marketing channel for their farm/business, yet they actively promoted their respective farm brands through farmers’ markets, specialty stores, and even conventional supermarkets.

## Geo-Proximity Terms

Geo-proximity terms are most commonly associated with “local,” even though proximity is not consistent in the eyes of consumers. The concept of “food miles,” the distance from the producer to the consumer, and the environmental footprint of food distribution, which includes other transportation efficiencies, have been hotly debated. Still, a food mile is unique to each and every food item, but the main issue of interest to consumers is the proximity of where food is produced to where they buy it. Yet even a measurable quantity like proximity has subjective meaning in local food systems. Most research has found that consumers develop their own perceptions of acceptable proximity associated with local food. For example, Durham, King, and Roheim (2009) surveyed consumers in the Pacific Northwest, Minnesota, and Rhode Island and found that almost equal percentages of consumers in Oregon and Minnesota viewed “local” as sourced from “less than 60 miles away” and “less than 175 miles away,” respectively.

Even without a universally accepted distance to define local food, geographically specific conditions have been placed on many local food-branding programs. Some might be defined as “political local,” meaning local is limited to a defined political or government entity or border, such as those defined by state departments of agriculture. Others are affiliated with natural boundaries or population centers. Martinez et al. (2010) reported that the 2008 Farm Bill defined the total distance a product could be transported and still be considered a “locally or regionally produced agricultural food product” to be less than 400 miles from its origin, or within the state in which it was produced.. Regardless, these geo-proximate terms are tied to boundaries that can be identified on a map.

## State Branding

The Farmer-to-Consumer Direct Marketing Act of 1976 and subsequent block grant funding in the 1980s helped many states start or revamp state branding programs (Nganje, Hughner, and Lee, 2011). The goal of implementing these programs was and is to increase demand for products produced within a specified state, essentially a state-

Figure 2. Example of the Source Verified Label



Source: Where Food Comes From (2018).

defined version of the generic advertising commonly used for certain agricultural commodities (e.g., pork, beef, milk, etc.), but in which the state brand is the constant and the branded products vary. Theoretically, these programs increase in-state demand for products and generate a spillover effect in other states, promoting state-branded products beyond their borders. State branding programs tend to be applied to both fresh foods and further processed foods manufactured in the state, even if the processed foods contain ingredients not produced in the state.

## Regional Branding

Regional branding can be smaller or larger in scope than state branding. A state as large as Texas or California can have multiple in-state regions to differentiate agricultural production (e.g., Rio Grande Valley citrus and Napa Valley vineyards), while the Northeastern United States has branding regions encompassing multiple states. Unlike state branding, which involve political orchestration and governmental funding, regional branding may naturally arise from a recognizable kinship or the demographic and economic association of states or counties. A region may be tied to metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) that either individually overlap state boundaries or naturally create a region by their collective proximity to one another, without consideration of state boundaries. King, Hand, and Gomez (2015) identified the “Washington, D.C. local area” as encompassing the District of Columbia and 56 counties across five states (Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia).

## Foodshed

Hedden (1929) provided the first recognized definition of a “foodshed,” analogous to a watershed (i.e., the “dikes and dams guiding the flow of food from producer to consumer”), pointing out the vulnerability of the whole “shed” to any mishap at one point in the flow. More recent definitions of foodsheds have related the term to geographic regions encompassing food production to reasonably match the region’s food consumption. Hahn (2013) defines a foodshed as a “geographical area between where food is produced and where the food is consumed.” Peters et al. (2008) likened the term to a geographically defined area that can promote sufficient and sustainable food production to meet the needs of the area without necessarily meeting all seasonal demands (e.g., strawberries in winter) or all food demands (e.g., bananas in the non-tropic United States).

## Food Hub

According to the USDA (Barham et al., 2012), a regional food hub is “a business or organization that actively manages the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of source-identified food products primarily from local and regional producers to strengthen their ability to satisfy wholesale, retail, and institutional demand.” Though not included in the USDA definition, many food hubs also include social mission objectives in their business models (e.g., producer educational services, community food access). The scope of a food hub is generally defined geographically, hence the inclusion of the term in this section. The USDA oversees funding programs related to the development of food hubs, and several state agencies and NGOs such as Winrock International’s Wallace Center have established programs through their National Good Food Network to assist in the planning and creation of local food hubs.

## Community/Social Terms

Local food is often connotes community well-being, whether that well-being relates to economics, health, or some measure(s) of social justice. Such types of well-being are often difficult to accurately measure due to the challenges of identifying opportunity costs for producers and the impacts of local food spending on overall consumer expenditures (e.g., Hughes et al., 2008). Toler et al. (2009) found that at least a portion of price premiums paid by farmers’ market shoppers were related to “fairness” and “community” perceptions as opposed to solely on product characteristics such as freshness, food safety, or “food miles.” Farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture, and food hubs are commonly associated with local food, but other proponents advocate for more community-driven agriculture that considers the well-being a specific place.

## Civic Agriculture

“Civic agriculture” is a term originally coined by rural sociologist Dr. Thomas Lyson, who later devoted a book to the concept (Lyson, 2004). The term represents the trend toward locally based agriculture and food production as a contrast to the increasingly globalized nature of food production, but Lyson’s definition is more place-based and closely ties local food to a community’s social and economic development. The term is generally applied to face-to-face interactions between farmers and consumers and includes most forms of community-based food systems, including farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture (CSA), and farm-to-school efforts. The USDA, state departments of agriculture and health, and numerous NGOs have adopted concepts of civic agriculture.

## Community Supported Agriculture

Community supported agriculture (CSA) is the most popular form of local food system, with local consumers and a local farmer reaching an agreement, generally on a subscription basis, on the production and division of food items produced on part or all of the farm. Consumers (the “community”) pledge financial and/or labor support to a farm business so that the farming operation becomes, either legally or idealistically, the community’s farm. The consumers and the producer share the risks and benefits of the farm operation. In the traditional model, consumers receive weekly shares of the farm’s output for their pledged financial support to the operation. Typically, CSA members, or “share-holders” of the farm operation, reach an agreement with the landowner (e.g., for the acres of production, the crops and quantities to be provided per share) prior to pledging financial and/or labor support. In return, they receive shares of or a regular subscription to the farm’s output (i.e., vegetables, fruits, eggs, dairy, meats, etc.) throughout the growing season and the satisfaction of participating directly in the production of their food.

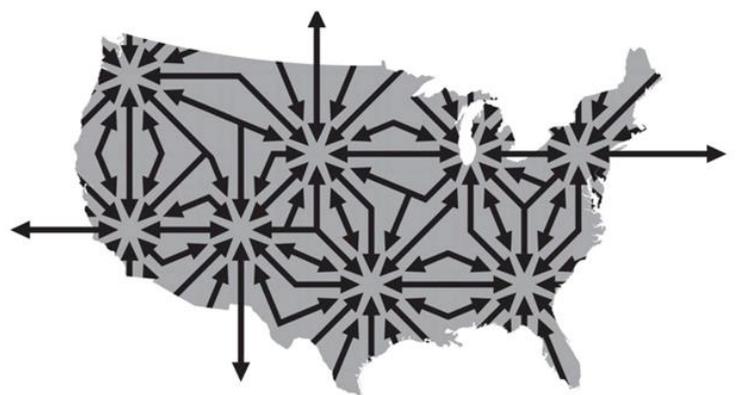
## Community Gardens

According to Lawson (2005), the term “community garden” dates back to World War I and “tends to be associated with one particular manifestation—the neighborhood garden in which individuals have their own plots yet share in the garden’s overall management.” The other type of community garden is one in which participating community members agree upon the crops to be grown on the land, share in the costs and labor of producing the crops, and agree upon a division of the crops. However, the ways in which community gardens are operated and organized, and even the ownership of the land, can vary greatly. In some cases, individual gardeners grow for their own consumption in their allotted space; in other cases, all members collectively maintain the whole garden and harvested crops are divided into shares among participating members, while in other cases a portion of the garden’s output may be designated for charitable contribution to members of the community deemed most needy. School gardens, in which students provide the labor to produce crops, are another type of community garden.

## Regional Food System

Clancy and Ruhf (2010) define a regional food system as one in which “as much food as possible to meet the population’s food needs is produced, processed, distributed, and purchased at multiple levels and scales within the region” (see Figure 3 for an example of regional food system flows). Rather than emphasize the geographic dimensions of a region, the authors tie regional food systems to social equity, explaining that an idealized regional model would also result in “maximum resilience, minimum importation, and significant economic and social return to all stakeholders in the region.”

Figure 3. National Integrated Regional Foodshed Model: Concept



Source: Urban Design Lab, Earth Institute at Columbia University (n.d.).

## Social Equity

“Social equity” may be the most complex and value-driven term associated with local food, primarily due to the subjective nature of “equitable,” “fair,” or “just” and the tendency to apply the term to societal morality and structural injustices rather than location-specific definitions. One of the best definitions of social equity as it relates to local food comes from Fehr and Schmidt (1999), who—rather than defining “equity”—focused their analysis on definitions of “inequity.” The authors proposed that people are averse to two forms of inequity: advantageous inequity (“I have more money than you”) and disadvantageous inequity (“You have more money than me”). Using these definitions, “social equity” is more or less achieved when members of a community have collectively minimized their perceived inequity—both in the process of achieving equity and in the actual outcome of equity.

## Summary

While not exhaustive, this glossary addresses the varying nature of the terms, the quantitative-versus-qualitative concepts affiliated with discussions about local food systems, and the roles played by various stakeholders and governmental entities in the definition and application of these terms. As Figure 1 shows, local food terms are difficult to assign to just one category of terminology. Time, politics, consumer tastes, values, perceptions, and preferences have played and will continue to play a role in the meanings of these terms.

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