



FROM THE
FARM

LOCALLY-SOURCED



Greenhouse at Country Garden & Farm Market.

BY NANCY CROWE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ISSAAC RICKENBERG

Eating fresh and local is a lot like achieving world peace—a worthy goal, but one with many moving parts and few easy definitions. Though major grocery chains make more of an effort to carry products grown or raised in the areas they serve, they all define “local” a bit differently—everything from within the state to within a six-state region. “Fresh” is even harder. Are the tomatoes picked this morning fresh today, but not tomorrow? Nevertheless, we seem to know fresh and local when we find and taste it. And taste it we do at Fort Wayne’s now-numerous farmers’ markets, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs and farm-to-table restaurants. “There’s a growing interest, and we’re really creating a growing marketplace,” said Janet Katz, director of the Northeast Indiana Local Food Network. “It’s about relationships. It enhances enjoyment of the food to know where it came from and who produced it.”



Natural HONEY

With honeybees and other pollinators struggling against habitat loss, chemical use and virus-transmitting mites, local beekeepers are stepping up to reverse these trends by educating others and bringing sweetness to life as only local, natural honey can.

Glenn Hile, owner of **Glenn's Natural Honey**, has about 40 hives scattered across north Fort Wayne and sells honey at farmers' markets and festivals. In early summer, honey first comes from basswood and locust trees. "It makes a real light honey that has an almost minty flavor to it," Hile said. Then comes the clover honey, the alfalfa honey from the Amish farms and the wildflower honey.

"With local honey, you know the beekeeper, you know where it came from and you know how it was handled. You have a lot more confidence in its purity and that it wasn't treated with chemicals, antibiotics, whatnot," said Hile.

Glenn's Natural Honey, 3924 Spanish Trail, 260.433.4297. Other Fort Wayne honey purveyors include: Southwest Honey Company, 2505 Lower Huntington Road, 260.609.2897, southwesthoney.com; Atom Acres Family Farm, 4505 Bass Road, 260.445.8186

The FARMERS

You don't have to drive far from the heart of Fort Wayne to find yourself in farm country. Sixty-five percent of Allen County is agricultural land, according to Plan-it Allen.

To a city person lost on a country road, all fields, barns and pastures may look alike, and yet at each farm, fresh and local is being done in a way that couldn't happen anywhere else.

Ben and Don Hoffman run **Hoffman Certified Organics**, specializing in pasture-raised certified organic poultry, in Huntertown. The brothers, both of whom have jobs off the farm, maintain the business with the help of other family members, including their mother, Dotsie Hoffman, who is known for her loving care of the chickens. "She's out there on egg duty, singing to them now," said Ben.

In the field is a mobile chicken tractor, which looks like several oversized playpens hooked to a hen house on wheels, a couple of the pens shaded with tarps. This set-up keeps the animals corralled and safe from predators while letting them be outside and graze, and the whole thing is moved every day to give them a change of scenery and new dining options. Not far away, Mangalitsa pigs are enjoying a late-afternoon mud bath.

Being certified organic by the USDA is a stringent process, said the Hoffmans. The hardest part is finding the right suppliers and service providers to get the animals fed and processed organically—a delicate balance of the right procedures at a reasonable distance and a sustainable price.

Though sticker shock initially puts some consumers off—the price of Hoffman Organics' chicken is more than what you'd pay for a similar quantity at a supermarket—the quality keeps them coming back, said Don. That and the knowledge of what went into the process, and what did not.

Across town, in an indoor aquaponics operation at the Fort Wayne

Metals complex, **Get Fresh Farms** provides fresh produce and fish year-round. Flats of seedlings grow under lights in a spongy rock wool growing medium. When the seedlings are big enough, they go out to the greenhouse and more seeds will be planted. "It's a constant crop rotation," said Stefanie Woodring, an aquaponics associate in charge of daily operations at Get Fresh Farms.

One room is filled with big blue tanks, mostly housing tilapia. One tank is full of perch. Climb up a ladder and peer into one of the tilapia tanks and the fish begin to splash about, thinking it's feeding time. Water from the tanks, containing nutrients from the fish waste, is gravity-fed out to the greenhouse.

There, several species of plants are growing in floating raft beds and raised wicking beds filled with organic potting mix.

On this day, cherry tomato plants were soon to make way for snap peas and sugar snap peas. Also growing were kale, mint, parsley, basil, chard and bok choy.

"Kale is our big crop. We grow it year-round," said Woodring, adding that Get Fresh Farms keeps Three Rivers Natural Grocery supplied with kale even in the dead of winter. Being able to provide fresh fish in northeast Indiana year-round is another benefit.

Water from the raft beds circulates back to the fish, so very little water is wasted. The greenhouse also grows a small section of marigolds to give beneficial insects a home. It's part of the integrated pest management system.

Radish sprouts at Country Garden & Farm Market.





Tractor from Hoffman Certified Organics.

The MARKETS

National chains that emphasize healthy and/or organic food have opened stores in the area in recent years, adding to locally-owned standbys such as **Three Rivers Natural Grocery**, **Health Food Shoppe** and others.

Then there are the farmers' markets, where the people who grow the food sell it directly to the consumer. The **South Side Farmers' Market** has been a Saturday morning tradition for generations. Many more options have sprung up over the last decade, including the year-round **Fort Wayne's Farmers' Market**, the Young Leaders of Northeast Indiana-run **Barr Street Market**, summer markets at shopping centers and more.

The **Historic West Main Street Farmers' Market** is celebrating its 10th anniversary in 2018. The Nebraska Neighborhood Association started it as a way to help revitalize the West Main Street corridor.

"That was always the goal of the market—not only bringing fresh fruits and vegetables to Nebraska

neighbors, but to bring other folks into the neighborhood," said Chris Shatto, association president.

With farmers' markets, customers have an opportunity to interact with vendors and create relationships no grocery store can offer.

Other markets are part of family farms. Southwest of town, almost to Roanoke, is the **Country Garden Farm & Market**, which Dan and Wendy Flotow have owned and operated for nearly a quarter century. They sell produce and plants at the farm, participate in several farmers' markets and sell to the Health Food Shoppe, Three Rivers Natural Grocery, Bravas, Mocha Lounge and others.

In 2003, Country Garden & Farm Market began what Dan said was one of the area's first CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) programs, in which customers buy shares of the farm's yield by paying up front. In return, they receive a weekly basket of in-season vegetables.

The Flotows made the move to organic farming out of concern over the potential effects of toxic pesticides or fertilizers on their three daughters.

The operation is not currently certified organic, however. Heavy rains

and subsequent flooding in 2015 took out all the crops and several chickens, and getting recertified—a process Dan said is expensive and not rigorous enough—was sidelined.

Dan still exercises quality control by buying seeds only from companies he trusts and making his own potting mix.

Farmers' market customers should ask how food was grown—conventional or organic—and learn what is in season, he said.

Business picked up in 2017, said Wendy. "We have a big following at the markets. People know us. They know what we grow."

The RESTAURANTS

Joseph Decuis has been on the local farm-to-table forefront since opening in Roanoke in 2000. Now a variety of area restaurants and food trucks have locally-sourced food as part of their menus and missions.

When Nicky Nolot was growing up, just about everything she ate came from her family's small farm or



NEAL BRUNS

Cheeseburger with bacon jam from Tolon.

that of her grandparents. With that background, and seeing the boom of farmers' markets in Fort Wayne, a farm-to-table concept made sense when she and husband Chef Matthew Nolot opened **Tolon** in 2016.

The downtown eatery specializes in seasonal fare, though Nolot said they still run up against customers not understanding that even though grocery stores may carry an item

year-round, if it's not in season locally, Tolon won't have it.

For the Nolots, local means straight from farm to consumer while food is at its prime, and sourced within a day's drive. This allows the restaurant to take advantage of longer growing seasons. For example, the Nolots work with a Vincennes asparagus farm, and the growing season for asparagus can go up to a month later in southern

Indiana. The aforementioned Get Fresh Farms and Hoffman Certified Organics are among Tolon's suppliers.

"It's a very complex network—building relationships with your farmers," said Nolot. "I spent two years cultivating these relationships before we opened."

That's what eating fresh and local is about, she added: "It's about sustainability and creating an environment beneficial to everyone."

Offering local, seasonal fare at a price customers will pay is a tightrope farm-to-table restaurants walk, and there are casualties. The Golden, which offered farm-to-table fare in an upscale atmosphere, closed in November after just over a year.


That sort of sustainability is important to Andrew Smith, co-owner with Dan Campbell and Jack May of **Junk Ditch Brewing Company** as well as **Affine Food Truck** and **GK Baked Goods**. That's why he hesitates to affix the farm-to-table label to what he does.

There are many factors involved in fresh and local, he said, including limitations on what is seasonally available and the prices customers are willing to pay. Arugula from a farm, say, 60 miles away might count as local for some but not be local enough for others.

Smith began building relationships with local farmers when he worked for Joseph Decuis years ago and has continued to do so with his own businesses. "You start to discover things are wildly better when they're fresh," he said. Now **Hawkins Family Farm**, **Countryside Produce Farm** and the Country Garden are among his primary suppliers.

Visiting a farm to see how it operates is more important to Smith than mileage or organic certification. It can even inspire.

During a visit to Country Garden, he noticed an unfamiliar tree and asked what it was. It was a fig tree, Dan Flotow told him. "You're not supposed to be able to grow a fig tree in Northeast Indiana," said Smith. "But there it was, fully enclosed in the greenhouse. I said, 'I'll buy those from you.'"

Soon after, fig desserts and a fig-enhanced sausage pizza turned up on the Junk Ditch menu. 

LOCAL RESOURCES

Hoffman Certified Organics
2212 Chapman Road,
Huntertown, 260.557.8028,
hoffmanorganics.com

Get Fresh Farms
9823 Ardmore Avenue,
260.399.2111,
getfreshfarms.com

Three Rivers Natural Grocery
1612 Sherman Boulevard,
260.424.8812,
3riversfood.coop

Countryside Produce
915 E. 200 S, La Grange,
260.499.4009

Country Garden Farm & Market
14110 US Highway 24 W,
Roanoke, 260.494.7254

Hawkins Family Farm
10373 N. 300 E,
North Manchester,
hawkinsfamilyfarm.com

Tolon Restaurant
614 S. Harrison Street,
260.399.5128,
tolonrestaurant.com

Junk Ditch Brewing Company
1825 W. Main Street,
260.203.4045,
junkditchbrewingco.com

Health Food Shoppe of Fort Wayne
3515 N. Anthony Boulevard,
260.483.5211,
healthfoodshoppe.com

Ft. Wayne's Farmers Market
Parkview Field,
ftwaynesfarmersmarket.com

Joseph Decuis
191 N. Main Street,
Roanoke, 260.672.1715,
josephdecuis.com

Ylni Farmers Market
302 E. Berry Street,
260.527.0060,
ylni.org/farmers-market