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Toronto farmers' markets: Towards cultural sustainability?

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Submitted October 17, 2011 / Revised January 31, March 22 and July 4, 2012 / Accepted August 6, 2012 /
Published online March 9, 2013

Citation: Bond, D., & Feagan, R. (2013). 'Toronto farmers' markets: Towards cultural sustainability?'.
Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development, 3(2), 45–60.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2013.032.005>

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Abstract

This paper accomplishes two interrelated objectives. The first is a qualitative assessment of the level of interest and accommodation of *culturally appropriate* foods at 14 farmers' markets (FMs) within the multicultural urban core of Toronto Ontario. The second objective acquires insights from key public "food commentators" and from new agricultural initiatives in this region that help us develop recommendations relative to the outcomes of the first objective. Results from the first part of the study indicate that the level of provision of culturally appropriate foods at these FMs in Toronto is at an embryonic stage. The results of the second part of the study point to a

range of initiatives oriented to support increased provision and accommodation of culturally appropriate foods along the FM chain, while also pointing to the existing constraints to these efforts. Broad recommendations include supporting emerging agricultural innovations and the diversity of partnership possibilities in this work; increasing awareness of such efforts for cultural sustainability objectives; and attending to FM vendor needs around this shift in demand. Policy efforts could focus on incentives and training for agricultural nonprofits and for partnership building, on supporting cultural groups hoping to increase their access to such foods grown in this region, and on existing farmers and those interested in farm access for these purposes. At the same time, advocacy for such shifts needs to recognize challenges in Canada to growing such new crops, the reality of farmer/vendor bottom lines, and broader global food system realities that constrain such efforts.

Keywords

cultural sustainability, culturally appropriate food, ethnicity, ethnocultural vegetables, ECV, farmers' markets, foodways, local food systems, multiculturalism

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Note: The origin of material for this paper is Deborah Bond's master's thesis at the University of Adelaide, Australia, under the supervision of Dr. Robert Feagan.

Introduction

Food is interwoven with a community's identity, its growth and development, its history of immigration and agricultural production, and industrialization, and its balancing of tradition and change. (Rahn, 2006, p. 33)

Within the diversity of local to global food narratives is an emerging interest in developing intersections between concepts and practices of local food systems and those of cultural sustainability. Examining for such intersection at farmers' markets (FMs) in Toronto, Canada, a city with a considerable immigration history and diverse multicultural population of 2.5 million people (Breton, Wsevolod, Kalbach, & Retiz, 1990), is the focus of this study. Recognizing that Toronto is arguably the key city in Canada's urban economic hierarchy and one ostensibly committed to building a healthy environment for its citizens, we draw on Agyeman's (2011) claim that "local food movement(s) should recognize, embrace and celebrate *cultural diversity* as much as it currently celebrates *biodiversity*" (para. 7).

This study determines qualitatively the extent to which FMs located in Toronto's urban core are accommodating the provision of culturally appropriate foods, while drawing on key voices, institutional experiences, and related activities in this region that contribute and respond to these findings. More specifically, we first examine the perspectives and efforts of 10 managers at 14 FMs in the Toronto urban core, with respect to the perceived potential and importance of culturally appropriate food provision. We then seek opinions and ideas on this theme from those whom we label public *food commentators*, and from alternative food system-oriented initiatives in this region. This allows us to suggest directions for building on the current level of culturally appropriate foods found at these study FMs and the chains that supply them. As FMs are held to be critical nodes within local and/or alternative food systems (see variously: Alkon, 2008b; Feagan, Morris, & Krug, 2004; Griffin & Frongillo, 2003; Hinrichs, 2000; Holloway & Kneafsey 2000; Joliffe, 2008; Kirwan,

2004; La Trobe, 2001), we believe they are a key site for this work.¹

The contention is that although this region is developing many local food system practices, these are not addressing effectively the food-related cultural needs of the increasing cohort of ethnic communities composing Toronto's metropolitan population. Such communities find few of their traditional or culturally appropriate foods available outside of the imported foods system.² We see a food system that has an increasing proportion of culturally appropriate foods from local sources, and that is affordable and accessible, as part of a necessary shift toward sustainability. The next section provides study context by looking at the geography of this region and at cultural sustainability ideas as they relate to this theme of FMs and local food systems.

Study Context

Toronto's Food and Cultural Geography

The cultural history of the Toronto region saw some limited long-distance trading among First Nations peoples prior to colonization, followed by a rapidly developing period of trans-Atlantic trade during European migration and settlement. However, trade patterns were largely local in terms of agricultural food production and consumption until the advent of a more industrialized food system post-WWII. Historically a marketplace and

¹ The increase in numbers of FMs also speaks to their place in such inquiry. For example, the U.S. has seen FM numbers rise from 4,093 in 2005, to upwards of 7,175 by August 2011 (Zezima, 2011), while numbers in the province of Ontario moved from about 60 in 1988 to 166 in 2013 (FMO, 2013a). The contribution of FMs to Ontario's economy is estimated at around CAD600 million, with an economic impact on the order of CAD1.8 billion (Farmers' Markets Ontario [FMO], 2013b).

² Though it is not feasible to list the multitude of foods associated with the 150 plus ethnicities composing Toronto's cultural make-up, some of the ones associated with the large Chinese, Southeast Asian, and Afro-Caribbean communities stand out and are seen as cultivable here — foods like Asian greens (e.g., komatsuna, mizuna or mustard spinach, Chinese cabbage), African peppers, bitter melon, callaloo, okra, Chinese broccoli and radish, Indian kaddou, Indian Tinda melon, Jamaican pumpkin, yard long bean, etc.

port location, Toronto has witnessed significant immigration over these roughly 200 years of colonization into its current metropolitan region status. “The City of Toronto is one of the most multicultural cities in the world — a city where more than 150 languages are spoken every day and 50% of residents are born outside of Canada” (Ontario Immigration, 2011, para. 1). Early waves of Irish, Greek, Eastern European, Polish, and Portuguese immigrants established ethnic enclaves in Toronto, from Little Italy, Greektown, and Little India to Chinatown, with more recent visible minorities like Southeast Asian and Afro-Caribbean diasporas establishing communities throughout Toronto (Buzzelli, 2001). Immigrants have ensured some continuity of their culinary traditions and food practices by using imported ethnic food products available within the conventional retail food system (Stewart, 2000).

Geographically, Toronto is bounded to the west, north and east by “The Greenbelt,”³ a region of protected green space that includes 1.8 million acres of Canada’s highest rated agricultural land (CLI 1) (Agriculture and Agri-food Canada, 2011), and to the south by Lake Ontario. This region produces a diverse range of vegetables, fruit, dairy products, and animals for local consumption, with some of this production sold in FMs since the mid-to late 1800s (Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation, n.d.a). According to food policy experts and social activists, while the majority of Toronto’s residents generally eat well and food prices are reasonable, the regional food system faces a number of issues regarding farm and farmer viability, aspirations to increase FM numbers, and ensuring access to both healthier and increasing volumes of locally produced farm products (Metcalf Foundation, 2008).

Cultural Sustainability, Local Food Systems, and Farmers’ Markets

In our case, and in many other urban places in the world, the emergence of a multicultural milieu suggests that the development of more localized food systems, with FMs as key constituents, needs

to reflect this cultural diversity if they are to be sustainable.

Absent however in much of the popular discourse surrounding the local food movement and local food systems, has been an explicit recognition of the social justice and cultural concerns involving the ability of refugee, minority, economically marginalized and “new” populations to produce, access and consume healthy and culturally appropriate foods. (Agyeman, 2011, para. 3)⁴

In the same vein, Scarpato (2002) argues that local food systems and multiculturalism “belong to an emerging partnership that promotes sustainable gastronomic practices, habits and procedures... [where] their role is relevant within their respective communities but also at the global level” (p. 147). Although FMs are complex regarding the consumer motivations behind their patronage (Smithers, Lamarche, & Joseph, 2008), it is clear that the recent growth in the number of FMs is a response to a variety of consumer food concerns. These are centered on quality and safety, attributes like local and/or organic production, traceability, and social and environmental *embeddedness* — all reflections of emergent societal values. FMs are seen as focal to the development of more food-centered local social and cultural economies largely because of these kinds of perceived values (see variously Feagan & Morris, 2009; Gillespie, Hilchey, Hinrichs, & Feenstra, 2007; Penker, 2006; Sage, 2003; Winter, 2003).⁵

However, while FMs provide some contrast to the larger food retail system, there are still concerns regarding their role in broad-based consumer access (Zukin, 2008). A recognized need for FMs to focus on vendor viability means that the *economic* will necessarily overshadow other embedded values aspirations. The concern is that if local FM pricing

³ See various maps of the Greenbelt at <http://greenbelt.ca/maps>

⁴ Agyeman and Evans developed the concept of “just sustainability” (2004).

⁵ It should be noted, however, that writers like Guthman (2007) and Murdoch, Marsden, and Banks, (2000) suggest caution around placing too great an emphasis on the role of embeddedness in alternative food supply chains.

becomes tied to sociability and cultural niches not associated with the “basic need” challenges of new immigrants for instance, they can become “exclusive” food venues (Hall & Sharples, 2008). According to Food Banks Canada, more than 10 percent of their clients in 2009 were new immigrants (2009, p. 7), with 46 percent of their clients in 2008 born outside of Canada. While one goal of a sustainable food system is to ensure that everyone has equal access to food, ethnic population needs are now a more visible part of this discussion. Food affordability and accessibility are often difficult for new immigrants, what Ramsaroop and Wolk (2009) refer to as “racialized communities,” with accompanying issues around class and food insecurity.

Such tensions suggest both possibility and constraint regarding cultural sustainability—FMs as places of engagement and connection, and/or exclusion and disconnection (see Johnson, 2010, and Wood and Landry, 2009 on this theme). And as multiculturalism becomes increasingly definitive of urban places, the concern heightens around how or whether culturally diverse foodways are accommodated in local food systems development.⁶ Elton (2010) believes that “cultural change is one of the most important pieces in the puzzle of Toronto’s local food system and difficult to separate from broader global concerns” (p. 207). We see a sustainable food system as one that sustains community, is healthy for people and the environment, and sensitive to their cultural makeup (Birkeland, 2008; Blay-Palmer & Donald, 2006; DuPuis & Goodman, 2005).

As multiculturalism has been an official state policy in Canada since 1971,⁷ we see important intersections with our research. We see first a natural tie between multiculturalism and local food systems development, and second, a recognition that while multiculturalism ostensibly embraces the

food of the *other*, immigrants have been simultaneously marginalized, with their foodways at times raising fears of “infection and contamination” (Lessia & Rocha, 2009). Some FM studies highlight similar themes. Slocum (2007) labels FMs broadly as “white food space” while Alkon (2008a) states in her analysis of the North Berkeley FM that, “the understanding that sustainable agriculture is primarily concerned with the quality of the non-human environment helps to create ambivalence among participants towards social justice issues” (p. 274).

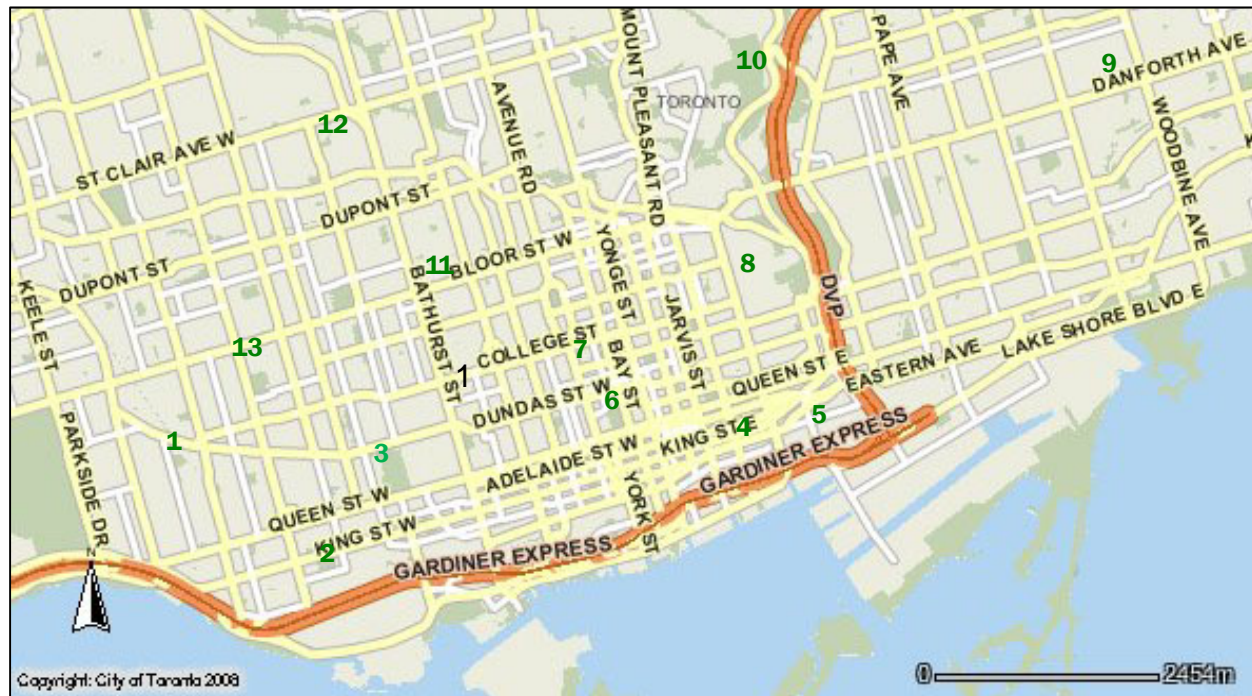
However, context is important, as a later work by Slocum (2008) notes increasing diversity of foods accommodating recent immigrants from Laos, Somalia, China, and Latin America at a Minneapolis FM. And the study by Alkon (2008a) noted above also highlights the distinct cultural and racial character of the West Oakland, California, FM, with its largely marginalized black population of vendors and patrons, and the foods tied to this specific cultural group in the U.S. We see opportunity in such observations for building more broadly on the discussion of the potential for inclusivity and cultural sustainability in FMs.

These discussions also include the contention by writers like Scarpato (2002) that imported food plays a role in the maintenance of cultural foodways, arguing that it would be “unsustainable” to ban imported products outright. We agree up to a point, but also agree with Elton (2010) that “it is possible to prepare many ethnic recipes with locally grown ingredients and we are able to grow some of the produce here; in this way we can create a local food system that caters to a myriad of cuisines” (p. 158).⁸ The following lays out the methodology and information collection process for this exploration at the intersection of cultural sustainability and local food systems development as seen in a set of FMs in the urban core of the city of Toronto.

⁶ A closer read on the terminology of *foodways* as a means to understand cultures and traditions in relation to gastronomy can be found in Santich (2007) and Rahn (2006).

⁷ Canada is the first country in the world to make this declaration: “Multiculturalism ensures that all citizens can keep their identities, can take pride in their ancestry and have a sense of belonging” (Citizenship and Immigration Canada [CIC], 2011, para. 2).

⁸ The work by Adekunle, Filson, Sethuratnum, and Cidro (2011) on Afro-Caribbean immigrants in Toronto reveals much about the complexity, and yet fairly straightforward appeal, of increasing the volume of what they refer to as ethnocultural vegetables grown in this region.

Figure 1. Toronto Core Farmers' Markets (Approximate Locations)

- | | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1 - Sorauren Park | 8 - Riverdale |
| 2 - Liberty Village | 9 - East Lynn Park |
| 3 - Trinity Bellwood | 10 - Evergreen Brickworks |
| 4 - St. Lawrence Market | 11 - Bloor and Borden |
| 5 - Distillery | 12 - The Stop |
| 6 - Nathan Phillips Square | 13 - Dufferin Grove Organic |
| 7 - Sick Kids Hospital | 14 - Kensington Market |

Map source: <http://map.toronto.ca/imapit/iMapIt.jsp?app=TOMaps>

Methodology and Toronto Case Study

The Toronto FMs selected for this study are representative of a number of variables related to economic class, land use zoning character (residential versus commercial for instance), ethnic composition, and scale of FM. The 14 FMs included the two oldest: Kensington (established in the early 1900s and a relatively large FM located in a historically Jewish neighborhood that is now primarily Asian and Caribbean) and the St. Lawrence market (established in 1803 per Cochrane, 2000); five medium-sized FMs: Nathan Phillips Square, The Brick Works, The Distillery, The Hospital for Sick Children, and The Stop; and seven smaller corner-lot FMs primarily located in urban residential areas: Dufferin Grove, Liberty Village, Riverdale, Trinity Bellwoods, Bloor/Borden, East Lynn, and

Sorauren Park (located in a low-income neighborhood with a strong Tibetan and Caribbean presence). By using a cross-section of FMs in the urban core, the desire was to draw upon a base of consumers who shop at FMs in civic spaces, those attending FMs in local parks and parking lots, and those frequenting the older, most established FMs. See figure 1 for the locations of the study FMs.

This case study used two types of data collection methods with the 10 FM managers: a questionnaire and a short, open-ended interview that took approximately 30 minutes. In most cases, the FM managers were contacted in advance of this data collection, and secondary information on the study FMs was collected. Information was sought on the level of culturally appropriate foods available at each FM, vendor accommodation and

interest in or demand for such foods, and more broadly based FM trends the managers might associate with this theme in the future. The interviews often led to wider conversations about roles of local food, ethnicity, community, and about each manager's ideas on building sustainable food systems in Toronto. Questions posed were sensitive to the participant's cultural background, and all information was collected via a hard-copy questionnaire and was audiotaped when permitted.⁹ Though it is not possible to ensure anonymity for the managers given their association with the specific FMs of this study, we still used pseudonyms.¹⁰ Interviews were held during open hours in late summer, considered the busiest season for FMs. In addition, interviews were conducted with public food commentators in tandem with the collection of relevant ideas and experiences associated with new agricultural and food-related initiatives in this region.

Results

The FMs were evenly divided between civic spaces and ethnic neighborhoods across central downtown Toronto (see figure 1). The number of vendors ranged from approximately 15 at the smallest seasonal FM, to nearly 50 at the St. Lawrence Market (north building). With the exception of Toronto's larger markets, which operate year-round, most FMs were open from May until late October, operating on a weekly basis. Some of the larger FMs are connected with associations like Farmers' Markets Ontario (FMO, 2011), while Toronto's oldest FMs, the Kensington and the St. Lawrence Market, operate under the direction of the City of Toronto. A rough estimate suggests that these 14 FMs combined saw an average of 40,000 to 50,000 people a week during the summer season.

Farmers' Market Managers: Stewards and Facilitators

The FM managers' ages ranged from 25 to 65, and

eight of the 10 were women. The managers had operated their specific markets between three and 10 years, although the manager of the St. Lawrence Market had overseen market operations since the 1970s. Eight of the market managers were second-generation immigrants from Eastern Europe, Ireland, China, Israel, Great Britain, and Portugal, and in some cases had a farming background or were living on farms. Some market managers lived in the vicinity of their markets and several had grown up in the same neighborhoods as their FM.

The general consensus of the FM managers is of a growing awareness and interest in FMs in Toronto, coincident with growing of FM numbers in the past decade here. It was evident that the FMs in the study share similarities around their convivial atmosphere, good representation of vendor-farmers, and fresh seasonal produce — the last dependent on the time of year. The consensus among managers is that consumers see fresh, locally grown food as connected to good health and Toronto's FMs as a component of a food system that is becoming more localized. Of course, there are differences across this set of FMs: "there is no cookie cutter for farmers' markets...they all have their own personality" (Colleen, manager, Trinity Bellwoods, in Little Italy). The next section looks at the interest in and extent of availability of *culturally appropriate foods*, with information collected from the manager interviews.

Trends and Interest in Culturally Appropriate Foods

Across the 14 FMs in this study, we see availability of some culturally appropriate foods, along with evidence of an increased interest by consumers in these kinds of foods. Importantly, this finding is FM-specific, is only just emerging in some FMs, and there are a number of constraints associated with increasing their presence. A critical finding is that while the managers have nudged vendor-farmers to consider diversifying their production and market offerings, the key constraint is that farmers are understandably reluctant to grow crops of which they are not familiar regarding cultivation potential, and which they believe may not sell. Though the managers generally agree that FMs can play a central role in providing safe, culturally appropriate foods to consumers, and with

⁹ The information collection process met the ethical guidelines for academic research at the University of Adelaide, Australia.

¹⁰ The use of quotes and ideas from the FM managers was done with their permission.

increased “local” product, this aspect of food retail remains a generally nascent consideration.¹¹

It appears that although managers are committed to the needs of their customers, this primarily means focusing on what they believe the FM does best, which is to sell fresh, locally produced foods to consumers in a socially engaging atmosphere. Important to this finding, we judge, is recognition that FMs exist within a conventionally framed food-based economy. This means they are strongly tied to basic producer profitability needs, food-safety rules and regulations, extant market classifications of FMs, and, ironically, to the observation that increased competition due to FM popularity is perceived to constrain innovation. According to several market managers, farmers are generally risk-averse and therefore cautious regarding the introduction of new products like culturally appropriate foods. Similarly, questions on food system needs saw managers generally iterating the message of vendor-farmers around the need for consumers who can afford market prices: “it’s all about maintaining the farmer” (Colleen, Trinity Bellwoods). And though this manager believes that vendor-farmers need to “step up the game to fill the gaps,” including around the provision of culturally appropriate foods, most managers were cautious about dealing with this shift in local food systems, preferring to defer discussion to the centrality of vendor-farmers in FM operation.

What we observed is that the majority of the FMs are positioned pragmatically as, first and foremost, places of commercial exchange, with associated manager-vendor relationships premised on this aspect of FM and vendor viability. In this vein, with the exception of the well established St. Lawrence Market, the recent growth of Toronto’s FM numbers has many market managers concerned about “FM saturation” and “competition” between the city’s FMs. According to Karen, manager of the Nathan Phillips Square and Metro Hall FMs located in Toronto’s commercial core,

We need an overall plan for setting up FMs...We are all stepping on each other. I think we’ve reached the limit...It’s like everyone wants to start a farmers’ market...It’s getting harder to get farmers to come into the city.

Similarly, Rosemary, manager of one of Toronto’s most diverse markets, The Stop, says, “taking care of these farmers is my work....We really don’t know how hard it is for farmers....They are not wealthy people.” And according to Anita, manager of Distillery FM, the competition in the downtown core is her biggest challenge. Located in a gentrifying area of restaurants and art galleries, she says “given the number of FMs in the city, I’m not sure we’ll survive.”¹² There is indeed tension around this theme, for as noted above by Colleen, and by Donna (manager of four FMs), their mandate is to ensure the viability of the vendor-farmer, while also helping them recognize that customer interest in culturally appropriate foods is growing. One of the managers remarked that “if the vendors are smart they’ll ask the consumers.”

The Importance of Context

Context often emerged as a key variable with respect to the study’s central objective. For example, attached to the slowly emerging recognition of the sales potential and need for culturally appropriate foods, we hold that the role of “resellers,” though contentious given the vendor-farmer relationship commonly portrayed for the FM, has potential to open the door to introducing more ethnically oriented foods. For example, Kensington Market resellers provide a variety of imported ethnocultural foods that would otherwise be unavailable, and in a historic context where it has served a diverse neighborhood of immigrant groups coming and going since its 1900 Jewish beginnings. This is illustrative of the complexity of the role of the FM relative to the core study question. As Mary notes, “I’ve seen Kensington go through a few cultural waves. When the Portuguese and Italians were here

¹¹ Adekunle et al. (2011) note in their Afro-Caribbean study a number of factors at play in the farmer and farm production reticence regarding ethnocultural food production.

¹² This topic of “saturation” was recently flagged in the *New York Times* (Zezima, 2011) and in the *Toronto Globe and Mail* (Bula, 2011).

there was an emphasis on produce and bakeries... and you could buy smoked sausage from someone's garage." And more recently, "you'll run into a farmer with something very exciting... The Sri Lankan owner, he's very well-versed and fussy about what he carries based on his background."

An FM consumer-catchment area is commonly the local neighborhood. Alan, manager of the Sorauren FM in Parkdale, a low-income neighborhood with the second largest Tibetan population outside of Tibet and a large Caribbean presence, says that the FM is attracting new young farmers who are becoming aware of the cultural diversity of this neighborhood. Vendors here are "experimenting" with ethnocultural produce like Asian greens, okra, bok-choy, game birds, varieties of mushrooms, and vegetables like callaloo being used in prepared foods like roti. The manager says this phenomenon is increasing customer interest in such FM fare. Similarly, of the markets Donna manages, the most diverse is the weekly "Sick Kids" FM located in the parking lot of a downtown hospital. She sees changes occurring which speak to this study question, noting that "many Caribbean employees who shop at the FM have requested Caribbean-style produce, so many migrant workers working on Ontario farms are the vendors coming to sell to these consumers,"¹³ as a means to create these relationships.

Context is also associated with how managers have been encouraging FMs to reflect their neighborhood setting. For example, the St. Lawrence Market is having a new FM structure built that is sensitive to Toronto's multicultural shifts generally, and to the changing complexion of its own neighborhood. According to its manager, John, "we need to recognize the city's cultural diversity... the St. Lawrence Market has always targeted all ethnicities." This market does not include ethnocultural foods yet, though John says that "we have dance groups and music groups from various culturally

diverse backgrounds to encourage ethnic groups to embrace the market." John also notes that the "south market," a market of resellers and part of the St. Lawrence complex, helps to fill the gap between ethnic communities' food needs and what is grown locally. Similarly, with a policy oriented to meet the needs of its culturally diverse neighborhood, The Stop FM, which describes itself as a "community food center," has a community kitchen and a weekly FM and has developed "Global Roots" garden plots featuring vegetables associated with the culinary traditions of specific ethnicities (Scharf, Levkoe, & Saul, 2010).¹⁴ Among a number of related initiatives, The Stop FM also has created programs to teach new immigrants how to grow food and give them kitchen skills to reduce their reliance on food banks.¹⁵

An interesting finding, given the only sporadic availability of culturally appropriate foods, is that the majority of FM managers see cultural diversity in their FM consumers. For example, at The Brick Works, located in a revitalized area of Toronto and one of the city's largest FMs, manager Ellen says that consumers are "broad-based... we're seeing a lot of cultural diversity," although she recognizes the lack of culturally appropriate foods at the FM for this diverse population. However, there are FMs where such client diversity is not evident: "I'm seeing very little ethnicity in this market... They [the "ethnic" consumers] seem to support their local grocery stores which import culturally appropriate food" (Anita, Distillery FM). Similarly, Karen, the manager of Nathan Phillips Square and Metro Hall FMs, which are located in commercial areas, states that vendors have not noted a demand for ethnocultural produce, although several vendors now "dabble" in more culturally specific products, including bok-choy, Nappa cabbage, okra, and callaloo. Karen says, "If consumers told me they wanted more culturally diverse products I would bring that to the

¹³ Immigrant farm labor raises its own issues of social justice and sustainability, although the point raised by this FM manager is that these migrant labor vendors play a role in helping their farm employer understand changes in customer demands, and therefore may influence changes in the produce mix grown on their farms.

¹⁴ Ethnic communities like Chinese, Tibetan, South Asian, Somalian, Latin American and Filipino are represented in these Global Roots gardens; see <http://thetop.org/global-roots-gardens>, first paragraph.

¹⁵ See: <http://thetop.org/the-stop%27s-farmers%27-market> for more information on this distinct food system initiative under the Toronto FM umbrella.

vendors...I'm sure there's a need for it in certain areas but this FM [Nathan Phillips Square] may not be one of those pockets." It would seem that provision of culturally appropriate foods at this study's FMs is patchy and FM-specific — commonly meaning *neighborhood specific*. We now turn to the information provided by the public food commentators and to observations based on the food system initiatives and institutions associated with the focus of this study.

Public Food Commentators and Food Initiatives: Feedback and Discussion

We begin with the core message of the Greenbelt Foundation report *Planting the First Seed: Creating Opportunities for Ethnic Farmers & Young Farmers in the Greenbelt* (Mitchell, Hilts, Asselin, & Mausberg, 2007), which notes that Toronto's multi-ethnicity is not reflected in what is grown in the Greenbelt. While there are some ethnic fruits and vegetables grown in this region, it is limited and unable to meet demand.¹⁶ Furthermore, immigrants with agricultural backgrounds and farming hopes lack opportunities to move into farming here. Hence, according to Christie Young, executive director of FarmStart in Ontario, first-generation immigrants have become accustomed to shopping at small grocery stores or off the back of the truck from the Ontario Food Terminal.¹⁷ And according to Young, one of the public food commentators for the research, first-generation immigrants who do break into farming often lack the confidence to sell at FMs. She sees much potential in this kind of program, although she says initiatives like FarmStart require increased support: "if we are to embrace multiculturalism and support immigrant farmers they will need greater support in creating a greater comfort level...It's a lonely business for an immigrant farmer."

FarmStart's research also reveals a shortage of supply for culturally appropriate foods owing to

high transportation costs in the global supply system, suggesting that local producers could take advantage of opportunities for innovation and entrepreneurship to meet these demands. This was repeated by both researchers Landman and MacDonald at the University of Guelph in interviews held with them on the potential for ethnocultural vegetable production in Ontario (Landman, 2012; MacDonald, 2012). An important development is that although such foods were not considered locally cultivable in the past given various agricultural limitations, recent innovations demonstrate that it is possible to produce vegetables and fruits that have historically been imported from United States and the Caribbean.¹⁸ At the same time as flagging some potential, food-science research also cautions that issues around pests, growing conditions, weeds, and diseases are part of ongoing research around the production of such crops (MacDonald, 2012; Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs [OMAFRA], 1986; Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association [OSCIA], 2009).

Wayne Roberts sees the gamble, as it is described for FM vendors regarding the introduction of new foods, as one that misses the broader vision for FMs.¹⁹ In his opinion, a viable future for FMs can be based on farmers broadening their base, with appropriate support, so as to compete with supermarkets and "mom and pop" grocery stores. He believes people are willing to make shifts in their food-purchasing habits. He positions FMs as fulcrums for helping to move food systems

¹⁸ Recent efforts at a regional agricultural research farm demonstrate that a number of "world crops" can be cultivated in this region. A farmer in this region is "experimenting with exotic produce such as Indian red carrots, Jamaican pumpkins and Mexican tomatillos at his Bradford, Ont., farm" (Trichur, 2012, para. 1). We also see declarations like this from the agricultural ministry in Ontario: "Ontario is home to one of the most ethnically diverse populations in North America and this diversity offers great market opportunities for locally-grown, non-traditional crops" (Filotas, Todd, Westerveld, & Prinold, 2009). See also the Ontario report, "New Crops, Old Challenges: Tips and tricks for managing new crops!" (Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association [OSCIA], 2009).

¹⁹ Wayne Roberts is a former Toronto Food Policy Council Project coordinator and author of *The No-Nonsense Guide to World Food* (Roberts, 2008).

¹⁶ See as well, Adekunle et al. (2011) for notes on this lack of supply.

¹⁷ FarmStart (2011) is a nonprofit association providing new farmers with support to develop local, ecologically sound, and economically viable enterprises. FarmStart is also connected with the McVean "Community" Farm that is mentioned later.

from somewhat narrow agricultural sustainability objectives, to ones based on a broader set of *embedded* values — the environment, social justice, and economic viability — using community “cohesion” as a descriptor of these values.²⁰ He sees FMs contributing to the consumer-producer relationship on different levels, advocating that they be elevated beyond the “stodgy” “classification system” that constrains FM discourses — narrowly defined by “local” or “organic,” for instance. In this vein, FM manager Donna believes that “neighborhood support is critical...A successful farmers’ market has to have community involvement.” Roberts sees the embeddedness values of FMs, their celebration of “community,” and their potential as “third places” of participation and adaptation as part of this shift: “Toronto has been too obsessed with ‘classification’ instead of performance....The farmers’ market concept is a relationship concept...we need to expand what the farmers’ market offers to make it more viable.” Roberts contends that FMs need to be positioned as more than sellers of commodities, while simultaneously helping farmers recognize the potential of the ethnocultural market.²¹ Paradoxically perhaps, the concern regarding increased FM competition might spur interest in innovation around meeting the needs of consumers seeking culturally appropriate foods.

At the city’s neighborhood level, we found groups like the Toronto Community Food Animators (TCFA, 2011), helping residents in underserved neighborhoods organize FMs, community kitchens, and gardens (FoodShare, n.d.b).²² A specific example of the TCFA, the Afri-Can FoodBasket (AFB) focuses on meeting the nutrition, health, and employment needs of members of the African-Canadian community in Toronto. This

program provides fresh fruits and vegetables, promotes eating healthy and culturally appropriate foods, and is connected to an ancillary program, “Roots to Fruits,” which provides horticultural and garden development training, environmental education, and cultural awareness workshops (AFB, n.d.). AFB executive director Anan Lololi says the Afri-Can FoodBasket program, along with its 26 community garden projects, is planning future crops on conservation land outside of Toronto. These are aimed at developing training farms and support programs to encourage involvement in Ontario agriculture by the immigrant community. The intention is to demonstrate both the demand and potential for growing a diversity of ethnic foods. Lololi states, “We have good sun, water, and seeds, so you can get the same type of crop as those jetted-in edibles.”²³ A similar project that entered its second year in 2012 is seen in figure 2 (next page), illustrative of “The World Crops Project” in the Greenbelt outside of Toronto, at the Albion Hills Community Garden (AHCG, 2011).²⁴

Another concern associated with this study objective is that despite the growth of FMs, many ethnic communities do not have easy access to fresh, healthy food, as noted in some FM studies that focused on social justice (Alkon, 2008a), and with new immigrants in Toronto facing even higher rates of poverty than the norm (Toronto Public Health [TPH], 2010). A Toronto nonprofit organization called FoodShare (FoodShare, n.d.a) works in partnership with other community organizations to run “Good Food Markets” that are similar to FMs, although they are purposely

²⁰ Roberts’ notes on “cohesion” (2011) coalesce various ideas reminiscent of the embeddedness discussion seen elsewhere around food being able to both symbolically and practically bring people together.

²¹ See as well the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation report on the role of FMs in preserving agriculture in this part of southern Ontario (Gurin, 2006).

²² Animators are described as people who facilitate and create energy and interest around a specific action or activity.

²³ See Joseph (2011) for notes on the 20 hectare (49 acre) McVean Farm west of Toronto, where a collaboration between FarmStart and the AFB (with Lololi) on a 0.8 hectare (2 acre) allotment brings “together a dozen community groups, among them a Kenyan women’s group, an Afro-centric school organization, the largely Eritrean JOI Collective, the Twelve Tribes of the Israel Rastafarian group and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church” (p. 68).

²⁴ There is a similar effort seen in the “New Crop Animation Project,” a partnership between the Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation, The Stop, and the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre in this region, with work being carried out by what are called “Global Roots” gardeners (The Friends of the Greenbelt Foundation, n.d.b).

Figure 2. Pilot Project with Culturally Appropriate Foods

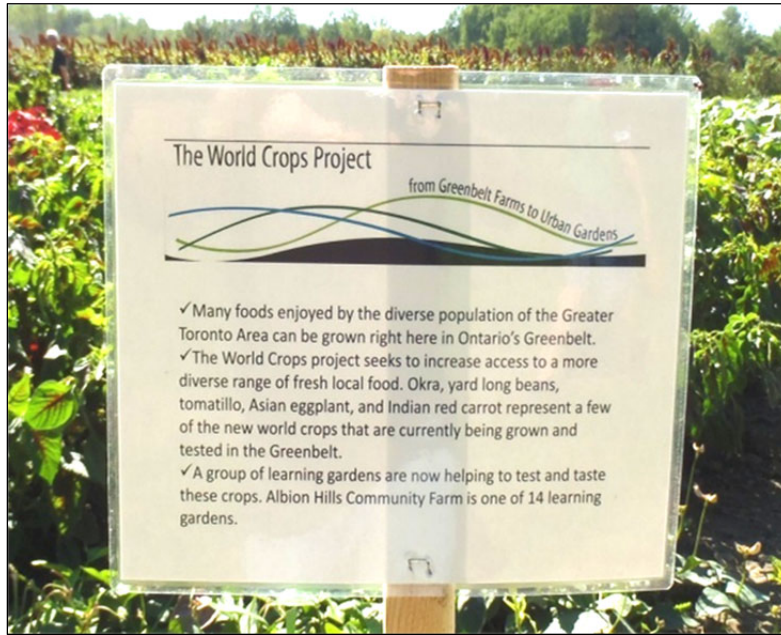


Photo source: Robert Feagan

located in underprivileged new immigrant neighborhoods. Good Food Markets are small, selling seasonal, local produce from both local farmers and the Toronto Food Terminal (Ontario's large wholesale produce and fruit distribution center). According to Ayal Dinner, a food animator with FoodShare and the manager of a weekly FM, Good Food Markets offer a healthy, accessible, and affordable venue for fresh produce. The 17 Good Food Markets support immigrants by linking their communities to Ontario's agricultural region while also serving as gathering places in local neighborhoods. Importantly, the general "food access" issue was not flagged by the managers of the FMs in this study.

Integral to this discussion, as Young of FarmStart notes, is that Toronto's ethnic population wants fresh produce even if it is imported. The basic contention of ours around this theme is that if these foods can be grown locally, then issues such as food miles, local farm support, agricultural land preservation, etc., can be worked on more effectively. In 2007, the Toronto Environmental Alliance (TEA, n.d.) started publishing food guides that identify the location of FMs and food retailers selling ethnocultural food grown in the Greenbelt

and surrounding rural areas. The four initial guides cover food "from back home" for African/Caribbean, Chinese, Middle Eastern, and South Asian cuisines.²⁵

Concluding Thoughts and Recommendations

Cultural diversity is a neglected dimension of sustainability research generally, so this paper looked specifically at the theme of culturally appropriate foods and immigrant populations. We first investigated the extent to which a set of FMs located in the urban core of Toronto accommodates culturally appropriate foods. The results of this part of the study were then informed by ideas and insights acquired from both public food commentators and from examining emerging local food

initiatives and institutions in this region. We found generally that FM accommodation of culturally appropriate foods is only at an early stage of acceptance. Although such food-demand trends are recognized by the managers, it was clear that their primary managerial objectives are tied to the base needs of their vendor-farmers. In general the vendor-farmers, understandably, see diversification into this market as one of uncertainty and perceived financial risk. Although there are instances of higher-level accommodation of these foods in specific ethnic residential neighborhood FMs, and some steps to raise the visibility of cultural diversity via the introduction of music and ethnic dining at others like the St. Lawrence Market, these were not widespread.

The second part of the study points to emerging practices, experiences, and ideas around increasing the availability of culturally appropriate foods in the FM chain. Examples include the Toronto Environmental Alliance and their ethnic Food Guides, and small neighborhood programs developed by FoodShare like Good Food Markets

²⁵ See the Greenbelt website (<http://greenbelt.ca/node/1033>) for links to the four food guides developed by the TEA.

serving both seasonal and imported foodstuffs. Initiatives like FarmStart and the NewComer FarmStart-Up Project are developing paths at the front of the FM chain for immigrants with agricultural background and aspirations. And efforts by the Greenbelt Foundation support the development of farming linkages for culturally appropriate foods at FMs.²⁶ We also see nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) like the Afri-Can FoodBasket in downtown Toronto partnered with the Albion Hills and McVean public community farms located on Toronto Region Conservation Area lands as important efforts in this mix. Their advocacy around teaching and training ethnic communities regarding the potential for growing food that meets their specific cultural needs is a key aspect of such food system initiatives.

On the FM end of this chain, we see food system commentators like Wayne Roberts advocating for a broadened role of FMs, beyond their base confines as locally grown food venues, to places of “cohesion” — of relationship-building in neighborhoods and civic spaces, and of connection and linkage between community members and food producers. Anan Lololi of AFB, noted earlier, plays a role in helping resource-poor ethnic communities grow culturally appropriate fruit and vegetables where FMs have not yet proven viable. FM vendor-farmers and their to the demand for culturally appropriate foods, and to researchers like Landman in the School of Environmental Design and Rural Development at the University of Guelph. She believes that the provincial agriculture ministry must play a role in supporting NGO efforts around opportunities for farming access for interested immigrants in Toronto to increase the availability of culturally appropriate foods in the FM chain (Landman, 2012).

Community capacity and “cohesion”-building processes are seen as important steps in moving toward local food systems that address the theme of this study. The Stop, Trinity Bellwoods, and

Sorauren Park FM projects represent these kinds of shifts and provide examples of the importance of neighborhood “context,” where FMs tied in with gardens of culturally appropriate foods, celebration, and training. Nick Saul, executive director of The Stop, one of the public food commentators interviewed, says “a person’s diet should consist of food which satisfies cultural preferences” and that we need to adopt a “wide range of strategies that meet food access issues.” The aspiration is that such efforts can move us toward accommodating the food needs of such populations, and in ways that reflect neighborhood contexts of both the FM vendors and the dynamic nature of the consumers who represent this rapidly changing metropolitan region.

There are of course broader questions regarding social justice and food access questions that are flagged by this research, and which require larger efforts than could be entertained here. And we recognize that we cannot be Pollyannish given the nature of the global food system. That is, we do not hold our breath for deep shifts in the regional food system no matter the innovative character of the ideas and initiatives explored here. But we believe we see a nudging of the food system via such efforts, and ones which can be thought of as working in tandem with the global food chain — a kind of rebalancing perhaps. With respect to our case study, it means recognizing that this is an urban region challenged by a limited growing season and by farmers who are rightly cautious in their food production decisions.²⁷


In this regard, it is appropriate to emphasize that such effort to increase the amount of culturally appropriate crops while also assisting farmers to overcome their reluctance to grow such crops are significant challenges. The provincial agriculture ministry notes a variety of new practices farmers will need to learn regarding the cultivation of such new crops: pest management, crop rotation, import

²⁶ According to the Greenbelt Foundation: “The Foundation leads on key agricultural issues including...Supporting the creation of new multi-cultural crops and development of ethnic local food guides in Toronto and York Region” (Friends of the Greenbelt, n.d.c, bullet 6).

²⁷ “Although cooler Canadian climates can present a production challenge, scientists spearheading world crop research at the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre near Niagara Falls, Ontario, say a surprising number of exotic vegetables can be successfully grown across the country” (Trichur, 2012, para. 5).

controls, sourcing of seeds, etc. (OSCIA, 2009).²⁸ This also means that market access and demand information studies are necessary, along with anticipated pricing figures (Kelleher, Lam, Skowronski, and Vaidyanathan, 2009). These speak to a range of issues around such agricultural shifts. However, we also believe that simultaneously the market can play a role in inspiring on-farm innovations that can move toward meeting the cultural needs evident at many of the study FMs.²⁹

Useful synergies can also be seen in the partnerships among the Agricultural Research Station in Vineland in the Greenbelt and the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority's world crops pilot projects at the Albion Hills and McVean community farms, for instance. All speak to the kinds of collaborative efforts that will benefit by growing into a kind of "local ethnic food supply network" (Kelleher et al., 2009, p. 4). Moving in the direction of an FM-supportive food system in this light recognizes that sustainability shifts are messy and that local, responsible food production can only occur where and when it is realistically possible. Given this, we believe that Toronto's

evolving cultural demographic both needs and requires such efforts and can be accommodated in terms of movement toward meeting its diverse foodways needs while doing so via locally inspired agricultural innovation. We finish by noting that the majority of our conventional FM produce — from apples to potatoes to peppers — were all in effect, world crops in this region at some point. The pressing need to address issues of the global food system, coupled with the need to re-imagine better local food systems in their specific contexts, suggests to us that moving in the direction of such shifts is both feasible and appropriate. 

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- ²⁸ MacDonald (2012), a professor in plant agriculture at the University of Guelph in Ontario, notes:
There are challenges in every kind of agriculture, and with new crops sometimes there are even greater challenges. One of them of course is crop protection. Getting products registered to control insects and diseases and weeds on minor crops takes a long time and it can be even more difficult than it is on more conventional vegetable crops.
- However, she also says, "I think the future for ethno-cultural vegetables looks bright."
- ²⁹ The composite of "agricultural action plans" from this region's various local governments and associated ministries of agriculture at the federal and provincial levels points to the increasingly multicultural composition of this region's population as an indication of the opportunities and therefore roles that various government bodies must play in supporting farming shifts. These include attention to programs that increase opportunities for new farmers, partnerships and linkages, and production of locally sourced foods that accommodate the changing cultural mix: "Access to nutritious, affordable, safe and culturally diverse food ..." (Walton & Lambrick, p. 10); recognition that the region has "...ideal conditions to try new pilot projects in both food and farming" (p. 14); and "undertake demand analysis for world foods in the Golden Horseshoe" (p. 16).

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