

Local, Organic, Sustainable

This mantra is much easier said than done.

BY CULLEN CURTISS

While many Santa Feans agree that eating locally produced, organic food is the right thing to do, it definitely can be more expensive. The Santa Fe Farmers Market is not immune to criticism for what some say are its high prices.

Bobbe Besold, a local artist, activist, and educator, says she spends between \$100 and \$150 on food each week. "I've shopped at farms, farmers markets and belonged to CSAs [community-supported agriculture projects] for most of my life," she says, "and this market, in general, is overpriced compared to others."

Still, she comes to the market to buy meat, fruit, tomatoes, berries, chile and other things she can't grow herself or get through her membership in Beneficial Farms' CSA.

There are 30 or so vendors and scores of shoppers at the Santa Fe Farmers Market on an overcast Saturday morning, and they seem unaffected by the winter building's state of dilapidation. There are not enough buckets to catch the water leaking from the ceiling, but it's warm and bustling. With the market's permanent home opening this summer at the Railyard, it's clear there is a strong sense of optimism that business will continue to thrive.

"We estimate we do over \$2 million in sales each year, and business and the number of customers have increased over the past few years," George Gundrey, executive director of the Santa Fe Farmers Market, says. When asked to compare his prices with other farmers market prices in New Mexico, he says, "I'm sure that our prices are the highest. I want our farmers to charge as much as they can get." Then he adds, "You get what you pay for. It's superior quality. Our market focuses on small, family farmers. Our veggie growers are using organic methods even if they do not have the certification. They do a lot of the work themselves with their hands."

"If we want less expensive local food, we have to make different choices," Steve Warshawer, a long-time local farmer who is now enterprise development manager in charge of farmer outreach at La Montañita Co-op, says. "Everyone probably thinks that because we have taken away a lot of the transportation costs, we should get cheaper food by buying local. The major factor is the issue of scale in the industrial model and what it does to drive down cost. The industrial food system creates phenomenal cost economies. Our sense of what food ought to cost comes from that paradigm."

In northern New Mexico, where the largest farms are microscopic compared to the rest of the state, Warshawer says "most are operating at scales that make it impossible—if we want to address our real costs—to produce food anywhere near the cost that the industrial food system can deliver."

Warshawer explains scale in the context of his own Mesa Top Farm: "I have ridiculously expensive land and water. I pump my water, do rainwater catchment and landscape-based water management. My labor is volunteer to offset the cost of the land, water and capital because I mortgage against my property like most farmers do."

Federal resources and subsidies are not available to small farmers the way they are to industrial farmers. In industrialized farming, capital is cheap and water costs are low or absent because they are federally funded. And land costs are often amortized differently because they are part of a corporate portfolio, rented or the land is used as cover crop for real estate.

Part of the problem comes from shoppers' expect-

tations. At Whole Foods you'll find industrially grown yellow bell peppers and Red Delicious apples so perfect they look almost plastic. But many shoppers are attracted to that kind of consistency and uniformity. Local, organic produce is sometimes not so pretty.

"If shoppers would buy nutritious, unattractive produce, farmers could sell more of their crops," Warshawer says. Also, shoppers demand to eat things like peaches and corn in the winter. "There's a propensity of our culture to eat out of season," he says. "La Montañita has debates about seasonality and some feel passionate that we shouldn't sell grapes from South America. But we are a member-owned business. If it's what the members want, we find a way to get it to them with as much integrity as possible."

Through their responses to an annual survey, La Montañita Co-op's 14,000 members make it clear that the No. 1 reason they choose La Montañita is because it supports local and regional products. Twenty percent of sales in the Santa Fe store can be attributed to local and regional products—that's up from 16 percent in 2003.

As La Montañita tried to strengthen its partnerships with 400 local and regional producers within a 300-mile radius of Albuquerque, it found that producers' economies of scale had turned upside down—transportation costs alone had tripled.

"If we didn't want to be doing business with the last generation, we had to find a way to help," CE Pugh, the Co-op's outgoing general manager, says.

To the extent that it can, La Montañita and other organizations are devising creative ways to help local and regional producers. La Montañita's Regional Food-Shed Project, a distribution and economic development initiative begun in 2006, operates with two drivers and trucks. In the first year, it collected more than \$100,000 of locally produced meat, eggs, milk and produce from approximately 30 local producers, all to be sold through the Co-op. In 2007, La Montañita opened a distribution center in Albuquerque.

Will the Food-Shed Project bring down the price of local food? Pugh says not in the short-term. It has, however, allowed producers more time to concentrate on farming, and has made distribution of the products much more efficient.

For its part, the Santa Fe Farmers Market Institute's micro-lending program handed out \$16,000 to six local farms this year to help with things such as drip irrigation, greenhouse improvements and fencing.

"We want to be sure that our programs support small producers," Sarah Noss, executive director of the Santa Fe Farmers Market Institute, says.

Even though it doesn't buy much local produce, Whole Foods does set aside \$10 million annually for low-interest loans to local/regional producers. It recently gave out six regional loans, including one to Desert Blends of Taos, which makes bath and body products infused with native plants. (Desert Blends plans to purchase its own filling machines instead of shipping its products to Colorado for filling then shipping the products back to Taos for distribution.)

Which is all well and good, but what can be done to make local, sustainable, organic food affordable?

"There's no way to come up with a food system that is going to return a fair price to [sustainable] farmers while making food affordable to lower-income families," Mark Winne, Santa Fe-based food activist and author of *The Food Gap: Resetting the Table in the Land*



"Farmers Hands" was created by local artist and activist Bobbe Besold.

of Plenty, says. His solution? More aggressive participation by the public sector. And why should the public sector get involved? Well, in a way, it already is. "We spend \$325 million dollars a year on obesity-related expenses and those costs are borne by the taxpayer in many cases," he says.

The idea is that if we helped those who need it most to gain access to healthy food, we'd pay less later to treat the health problems brought on by cheap—but unhealthy—food.

One positive result of this year's state legislative session was the passage of the Manny Herrera Healthy Foods Act, a bill designed to fund projects that will help rural communities improve access to fresh fruits and vegetables through infrastructure investment or the organization of buying clubs for weekly or monthly deliveries. Gov. Bill Richardson signed the act with an appropriation of \$52,000.

To accommodate food-stamp recipients, the Santa Fe Farmers Market Institute, in collaboration with the state's Human Services Division and the USDA Food and Nutrition Service, began operating a wireless Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) device in late 2007. According to Noss, \$900 in tokens were issued, and \$800 worth were used in the last four months of 2007. At the Santa Fe markets, \$21,840 in WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) vouchers were redeemed in 2007 (\$7,556 at the Southside market and \$14,284 at the downtown market) as part of the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program. According to Gundrey, \$40,992 were issued in vouchers in 2007, but only 53 percent were used. There is obviously still some outreach needed.

Advocates say that more public-sector funding will not only benefit New Mexicans' health, it will also benefit the local economy.

"Look at the impact when you spend a dollar at the Market, a CSA or at La Montañita Co-op even versus Whole Foods. There's a huge opportunity to change the economic food dynamic by purchasing locally," Warshawer says.

What Can You Do?

To be conscientious of your food budget, local producers and the planet can demand buying in a patchwork fashion. As Besold says, "Eating consciously is not cheap, nor is it one-stop shopping. It takes time and energy." So what can you do?

- Join a CSA and buy direct from a farmer.
- Shop at the Santa Fe Farmers Market, where the farmer gets the majority of every dollar, and you get to put a face to your produce.
- Become a member/owner and shop at La Montañita Co-op, which buys extensively from local farmers and is committed to sourcing local, sustainable and organic products. According to the Co-op, farmers get "60 cents on the dollar if they sell direct or 50 cents if they use our distribution system."
- Shop for high-quality organic—but mostly not local—food at Whole Foods, Trader Joe's and other grocery stores.