

# EAT Locally

Local Farms Benefit  
Local Wildlife and Economies

BY BRUCE INGRAM, FIELD EDITOR



Matt Sanders, manager  
of Harvest Table Farm

## The local-foods movement is about more than supporting local farmers. The goal is to create a sustainable landscape that also supports fish and wildlife and our sporting traditions.

**I** “I picked cucumbers, squash, and green tomatoes this morning,” says a tall man in jeans and work boots. “I happened to be in town this morning, and I thought you might want some.”

“Got plenty of cucumbers and squash,” replies Philip Newton, head chef at the Harvest Table Restaurant. “But we’ll probably have a pretty good crowd coming for lunch and dinner today, and fried green tomatoes are really popular this time of year. Bring me some of those tomatoes over in a little while.”

And so a transaction is made. It is a sultry, mid-July morning. My wife Elaine and I have just arrived at the Harvest Table Restaurant in Meadowview, Virginia — a hamlet in the southwest corner of the state.

In a country where much of our food comes from hundreds (if not thousands) of miles away, it is somewhat astonishing that a place still exists where a tomato can be growing on a farm at dawn and end up a few hours later on someone’s plate at

a restaurant. But if rural America is to remain rural — and fishing, hunting, birding, and other outdoor pursuits are to continue — more of this type of transaction needs to occur.

### Locally Grown

Harvest Table Restaurant bills itself as “the most dedicated farm-to-table restaurant in southwestern Virginia.” With just a few exceptions, the restaurant serves only foods with a “low carbon footprint” — seasonal produce and meats from local and regional sources. Even the wine list is regional.

The restaurant is part of the Meadowview Farmers’ Guild, a local enterprise working toward one simple goal: To create a local economy that benefits as many people as possible. In addition to the Harvest Table Restaurant, the Guild runs a small, organic farm and a general store filled with local products and crafts.

Meadowview Farmers’ Guild is the brainchild of Steven L. Hopp, an

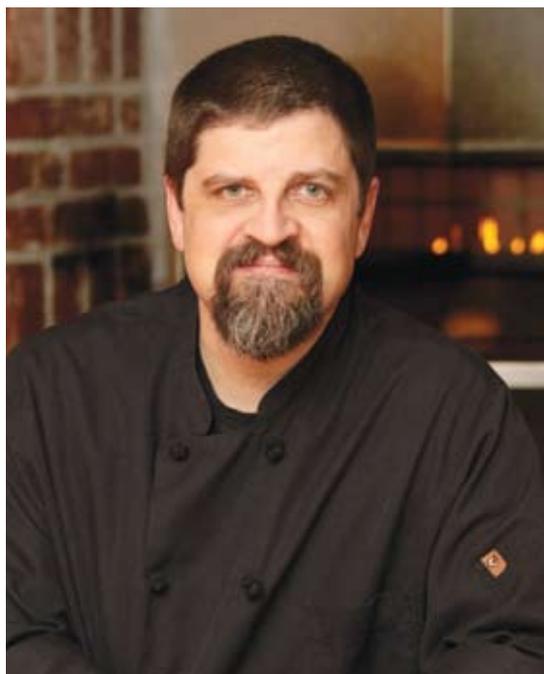


Elaine on the farm with Steven Hopp

environmental studies professor at Emory and Henry College and a renowned expert on vereos songbirds. He is perhaps more widely known as a contributor to the best selling novel, “Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year in Food Life,” which documents his family’s move from Arizona to their family farm in Virginia in a quest to sustain themselves for a year on locally grown foods. The connections Hopp made in this community broadened his local-foods vision to include supporting the local economy and conserving natural resources. He wanted to create a sustainability model for rural America that other communities could follow and improve upon.

**“Huge amounts of wildlife habitat could be restored if we change our way of doing things.”**

Philip Newton grew up with his own local-foods ethic. His parents were restaurant owners who worked directly with some half-dozen local farmers, which Newton recalls as a positive



Harvest Table Restaurant's Executive Chef Philip Newton

experience for both the farmers and his family that was also positively received by the community. So when Hopp came to him four years ago and explained that he wanted to start a restaurant and general store, working with nearby farmers and craftsmen to supply the vast majority of the goods and services, Newton eagerly accepted the chef position.

“More and more people want to know where their food is coming from. So when someone comes in here and wants to know, say, where the tomatoes were grown, I can answer, ‘Just down the road,’” says Newton with a smile. “This is a rural community, and everyone knows somebody who farms. It was an easy connection for people to make that this business would be good for our farmers’ pocketbooks and the local economy.”

Harvest Table Restaurant menus reflect these locally grown foods. One of the most popular items is pizza, and Newton offers Elaine and me sample slices from a pie. The flavor was unbelievably fresh. Unlike a chain restaurant, the ingredients don’t originate from Peruvian tomatoes or Canadian mushrooms. In fact, if we had dined there a month or two earlier, says Newton, we could have had “Molly Moochers” – wild morels that come from nearby forests – topping our pizza. The cheese comes from a southwest Virginia goat farm, as does the lamb sausage. And the tomatoes, peppers, mushrooms, and basil were all grown within a few miles of the restaurant.

When Elaine and I order lunch, we decide on a chicken salad and chicken sandwich, respectively. I ask jokingly which farmer provided the chickens. “The chickens either come from the Tilson or Templeton farm – which one that exact chicken came from I don’t know,” Newton replies. Seeing my astonished look, he adds, “There aren’t a lot of fossil fuel miles on the things we buy.”





### Know Your Farmer

While I am considering the odds of other diners in America hearing a similar response to such a question, Steven

Hopp joins us for lunch. “Our lamb, beef, and chicken all come from animals that are pasture based and where the farmers practice rotational grazing and grass finishing,” Hopp explains. “With rotational grazing, the cows never have a chance to eat all the best grass because they are moved every day or two.”

“Not to be disrespectful,” Hopp continues, “but the typical cow in America is finished in an industrial feed lot. With conventional cattle rearing, where the animals are initially raised in one large pasture, eventually that pasture becomes full of invasive species and less [beneficial] grasses. The stream that flows through that typical pasture becomes badly denuded and the riparian zone destroyed. If fish were in that stream or downstream, they too would experience declines.”

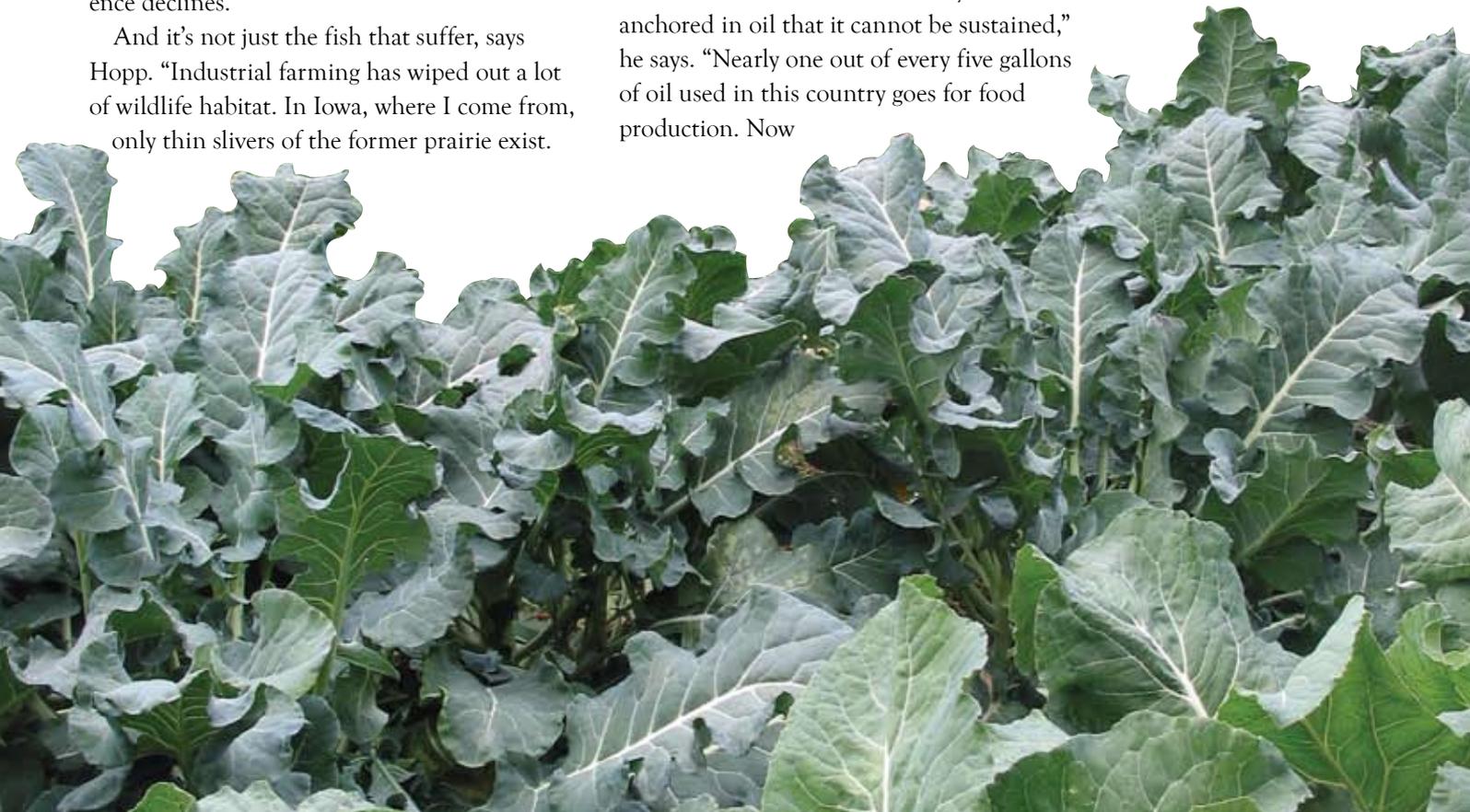
And it’s not just the fish that suffer, says Hopp. “Industrial farming has wiped out a lot of wildlife habitat. In Iowa, where I come from, only thin slivers of the former prairie exist.

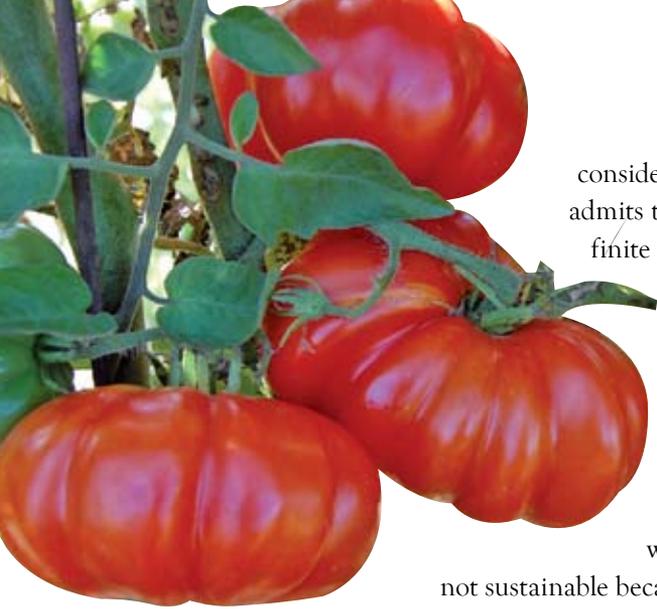
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### The Energy Equation

I ask Hopp about the inspiration for the Meadowview Farmers’ Guild. “I really wanted to do something for this community,” he replies. “I thought, ‘Let’s have a restaurant and general store where the local farmers and craftsmen can have an outlet and where they would be invested in the process.’” Hopp explains that his interest in local foods is also based on broader concerns.

“Our current industrial food system is so anchored in oil that it cannot be sustained,” he says. “Nearly one out of every five gallons of oil used in this country goes for food production. Now





consider this: Even OPEC admits that its supply of oil is finite and that the world has used about half of it – the easiest half to extract, in fact. Most experts agree that the world has less than a hundred years left of oil. The current way of doing things is not sustainable because it's based on a never-ending supply of cheap, easy-to-get oil. The walls of this type of system will eventually come tumbling down." Think of the energy saved when food only has to travel two or three miles instead of two or three *thousand* miles – and the decreased impact this would have on the environment.

## Since the Meadowview Farmers' Guild opened in 2007, it has put more than \$600,000 back into the region's economy by sourcing goods locally.

Elaine and I start eating our meals and, frankly, it is the best chicken that we have ever tasted – moist, tender, and flavorful. I ask Hopp about the challenges and successes of his venture. "One of the biggest challenges for a restaurant like this that depends on local farmers is that we are never going to have prices as low as regular restaurants or have as diverse a menu as they will," he responds. "I can say that many people have come here and told us that the burgers that come from our local cows are the best tasting burgers they have ever had."

Steven Hopp gives Elaine a tour of the General Store



"But will people be willing to pay an extra dollar for a burger or a chicken entrée?" Hopp asks. "And when we run out of rib eye steaks, there won't be any more until a farmer delivers some, since none of ours come from a restaurant service truck. So will people be content to order meatloaf or hamburgers until then? Hopefully people will understand that paying another dollar for a sandwich means that doing so will help protect fishing and the environment and keep a farm operating as a farm. On a larger scale, eventually America will have to ask itself if having a sustainable system is worth paying an extra dollar for a meal."

"We carefully consider what we ship from far away, with lemons as an example," he says about the restaurant. "America is using part of the remaining oil to ship water [to irrigate crops] so people can have a slice of lemon in their water. Here, we'll gladly put in a sprig or two of fresh lemon mint."

### A Ripe Idea

After lunch, Hopp, Elaine, and I walk to the General Store, which is adjacent to the restaurant. "The General Store is another venture that has helped people develop a sense of community here," Hopp says. "For example, Ida Minnick, who is in her 90s, periodically brings in her hand-knit stocking caps to sell. And a number of women have brought in their hand-made quilts. All in all, about 130 local folks have brought in their crafts and produce to sell on consignment."

I ask Hopp how other communities around America can duplicate what is being done in Meadowview. "They will need two things," Hopp replies. "First, a person or persons with relentless energy who will keep pushing. Really, any new project needs this type of person. Second is financing. Sixteen people own shares in our farmers' guild; it's set up like a local stock market with shares in the business."

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

**Meadowview Farmers' Guild:** [www.meadowviewfarmersguild.com](http://www.meadowviewfarmersguild.com)

This Web site provides links to the General Store and Harvest Table Restaurant, where you can find a sample menu and information about upcoming events.

**Local Harvest:** [www.localharvest.org](http://www.localharvest.org)

This Web site offers links to farmers markets and farms across the country and lets you shop for a variety of sustainably produced foods and products.

**Slow Food USA:** [www.slowfoodusa.org](http://www.slowfoodusa.org)

One of the most prominent boosters of the local food movement, Slow Food USA links “the pleasure of food with a commitment to community and the environment.”

***Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life***

This book, written by Hopp's wife Barbara Kingsolver with assistance from Hopp and daughter Camille, inspired Elaine and me to contact Steven Hopp. The book is about the family's quest to wean themselves from industrial food and learn to grow and buy locally – or learn to live without. The book has a Web site of the same name ([www.animalvegetablemiracle.com](http://www.animalvegetablemiracle.com)) with links to numerous resources around the country for people wishing to support the “locally grown” movement.

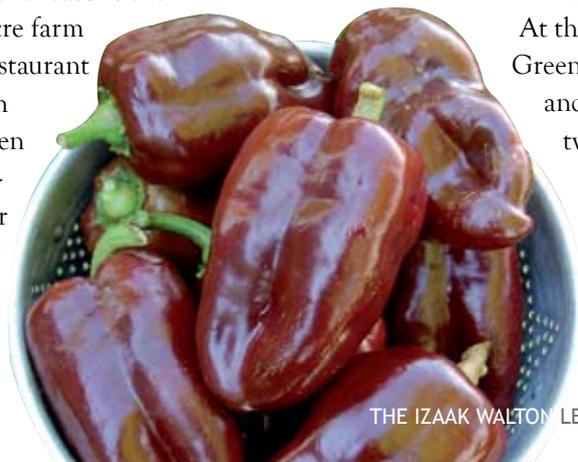
**Seed Savers Exchange:** [www.seedsavers.org](http://www.seedsavers.org)

Seed Savers Exchange is a nonprofit organization dedicated to saving and sharing heirloom seeds. Since 1975, their members have collected and distributed thousands of samples of rare garden seeds. Visit them on the Web to get your garden started.



“Of course, other communities are already accomplishing this type of thing,” he says. “I saw a community-based restaurant in Alaska serving local foods and musk ox burgers, so it can be done anywhere. Remember that the ‘locally grown and made’ concept benefits the community. Just as importantly, it is the right thing to do.” Since the Meadowview Farmers' Guild opened in 2007, it has put more than \$600,000 back into the region's economy by sourcing goods locally.

After leaving the General Store, we drive with Hopp to the Harvest Table Farm, which is less than three miles away. Earlier, Newton had told me that one of the reasons the Guild bought the four-acre farm was to grow foods the restaurant was not receiving enough of. Those items could then be frozen, canned, or dehydrated and served later in the year when they would not be available locally.



Another part of the farm's mission is to engage in the latest research on sustainable agriculture and share the joy and knowledge of farming with the greater community. Our first stop is the tomato patch. “Five varieties of tomatoes produce a vast majority of the commercially grown tomatoes in this country,” says Hopp. “They are picked when green, then gassed with ethylene gas to make them turn red. It's no wonder these tomatoes are tasteless and have just 15 to 30 percent of the vitamins and minerals they had before the breeding program began. We'll let the commercial growers have those five varieties and leave the other 5,000 varieties to the locally based farms across this country.”

At that, Hopp picks some Green Zebras for Elaine and me and points out two heirloom varieties ripening on the vine: Brandywine, a tomato with pink flesh and skin and a sweet flavor, and Cherokee



## Using locally grown foods helps keep those farmers farming instead of their places being sold for development.

Purple, easily identified by its bluish-purple skin and heady texture. These were the tomatoes people grew back in the 1800s, but they are not grown much today.

It's now time for farm manager Matt Sanders to give us a tour.

### The Nature Connection

Sanders explains that to make the farm more environmentally friendly, he has planted moisture-loving vegetables such as celery, fennel, and chard down in the bottomland and full-sun-loving plants such as tomatoes, peppers, and eggplant on the hillside above. That way, less water is required for both plots. The fertilizer comes in part from the resident flock of chickens.

I note that the bottomland stream has a wide buffer zone between it and the vegetables. "No chemicals will be leaching from this garden into the ground water or the creek," says Sanders. "And that leads to better fishing downstream. The songbirds are really thick in that riparian zone too."

"I visit all the farms that we buy from," Newton told us. "I wouldn't want to purchase produce from someone who plants his crops down to a creek bank and has all kinds of pesticide runoff and sedimentation problems. That's not a sustainable

way to grow food, and it's not good for our local streams, either. Trout like clean, clear, cool water, and all kinds of those streams exist around here. What we're doing here, by using locally grown foods provided by farmers who are good stewards of the environment and practice sustainable agriculture, helps keep those farmers farming instead of their places being sold for development. Which helps keep those nearby trout streams in a natural state."

Keeping farms in place also benefits hunters. In my corner of southwest Virginia, many farmers and other landowners give permission to hunt their lands, providing access to an abundance of wildlife. In return, a hunter may offer to help out on the farm – fence cattle out of a creek, plant food plots, provide extra hands during harvest time – and become something of a local partner. Last year, one of our neighbors helped Elaine build our chicken coop in exchange for hunting deer on our property.

Buying local produce to support local farmers and in turn improve fish and wildlife habitat sounds like an easy sell. But it may not be obvious to sportsmen that the locally grown foods movement is a boon for the future of our outdoor pursuits. With the Izaak Walton League's history of sustainable agriculture and outdoor sportsmanship, Ikes can encourage their communities to support this movement.

– Bruce Ingram is a life member of the Izaak Walton League from Troutville, Virginia. He has written four books on river smallmouth fishing and writes a weekly outdoor-themed blog at [www.bruceingramoutdoors.com](http://www.bruceingramoutdoors.com).

