Eating is an agricultural act,” says essayist, novelist, and farmer Wendell Berry. What does this mean? Berry is renowned for his passionate belief that farming is key to the health of a culture and a society. His assertion forces us to reconsider an act that we generally assume to be commonplace: Eating. Is eating about sustenance, health, and commensality, but agriculture?

Berry’s assertion would appear to make sense, but our current globalized food system allows many, especially those of us living in North America, Europe, and metropolitan centers around the globe, to forget that our food comes from the land. As Berry says in *The Gift of Good Land,* “Might it not be that eating and farming are inseparable concepts that belong together on the farm, not two distinct economic activities as we have now made them in the United States?”

For Berry, the loss of farmers and small farms in most of the United States and, increasingly around the globe, is key to the health of a culture and a society. His assertion forces us to reconsider an act that we generally assume to be commonplace: Eating is an agricultural act.”

**BUCKING THE SYSTEM**

Our food system is structured on the fundamental assumption that production should be geared toward creating commodities that can be sold nationally and globally. One in every three acres in agricultural production in the United States today is dedicated to export production. A commodity approach to producing food means that farmers are pushed to adopt the classic formula for economies of scale: The more farmers can consolidate, centralize, and create efficiencies of production, the more commodities (and, it is argued, potential profit) they can produce.

Given this commodity approach to food, the perception that all food should be available year-round, whatever the season, seems reasonable. In that sense, a tomato is like a pen or a pair of socks: always at the store. What does this mean for Murphy’s business? He aims to open five diners and a central commissary in Vermont. The Farmer’s Diner’s mission is to purchase more than 50 percent of its food from farmers within 100 miles. It means a lot of work, because buying locally takes extra effort.

Take the hamburger, the quintessential American dish that’s probably on the menu of every diner in the United States. An iconic hamburger usually has ground beef, lettuce, tomato, often onions and pickles, and sometimes cheese, on a bun. Three hundred and sixty-five days a year. Everywhere. As the McDonald’s Corporation has learned, with billions of hamburgers sold since beginning operation in 1955, Americans love a hamburger. To us, the combination of these ingredients makes an authentic hamburger — the real thing.

A local hamburger, where the ingredients come from within 100 miles of Barre, will be a popular dish with customers and not a very difficult one for the cooks to prepare. Where is the problem? The ingredients. Vermont is a northern state with a cold climate. How do you provide fresh, flavorful tomatoes for your hamburger in January, when all of Vermont is blanketed with snow and the sun is low and weak in the sky? Lettuce poses the same problem.

Most restaurants purchase tomatoes and lettuce grown in Mexico or California or Florida during the winter. The produce is shipped to Vermont in large tractor-trailers, traveling from 1,000 to 3,000 miles from farm to plate. To remain true to his vision, Murphy needs a different resolution to the constraints that the long Vermont winter creates. For the time being, he has no choice.

During a conversation in January about the difficulties of purchasing local fresh vegetables in the winter, he told me this story: “These days, I go into the diner kitchen, grab a California tomato from the box, and stand on a crate to drop a tomato on the ground. Nothing happens. No splash. No splurt. The tomato just rolls away.” The cooks are surprised, but he makes his point. Since Murphy is seeking to create the local hamburger deluxe sandwich, tomatoes from somewhere else do not make him happy.

By next year he hopes to contract with Vermont farmers to grow tomatoes and lettuce in greenhouses. Currently there are several entrepreneurial farmers growing tomatoes in greenhouses year round in Vermont and shipping them to markets throughout the East Coast. The juicy, red, ripe, and flavorful tomato grown in Vermont may be available to Murphy by next winter, but his pursuit of local flavor will require more effort and will cost him more money.

Obtaining a consistent supply of local ground beef creates a lot of work for Murphy as well. The
Today, a small group of powerful corporations dominates the livestock industry. Tyson Foods, which recently purchased Iowa Beef Producers, is the world’s largest processor and marketer of beef, chicken, and pork products. Four meatpacking companies process more than 75 percent of all cattle slaughtered in the United States. Over 98 percent of all poultry in the United States today is produced by a handful of large corporations. The theme for most of these businesses, as with many large corporations under our present incarnation of capitalism, has been vertical integration. Ownership of all components of livestock production is the goal, from the grains used for feed, to the slaughtering houses and processing plants that turn the live animals into meat for the supermarket, to distribution of the finished product. As the corporate history of one meatpacker proclaims, “IBP’s facilities were more than just slaughterhouses; they were automated meat factories.”

A by-product of this approach is a push toward centralization in production. Vermont, traditionally a state with only a small number of small farmers raising cattle, has not benefited from this shift in production strategies. In attempting to serve local beef to his restaurant, Murphy faced challenges at every level: finding farmers in the area who are still raising cattle and pigs; locating a small slaughterhouse that can accommodate occasional small numbers of animals, and finding a meat processing plant still in operation. During the past 20 years, with the consolidation of the livestock industry, the number of slaughterhouses in Vermont has declined from 20 to 12. Several meat processing plants have closed as well.

As Murphy developed his business plan, he realized he would need to address these obstacles. Otherwise, he says he would never be able to meet his goal of using over 50 percent local meat. When I visited the facility, I was struck by the complex decisions Murphy is forced to make every day in order to preserve his ideals and goals. On a tour of the small plant, we stopped at the smoke box, where bacon is prepared. Larry Tempesta, the plant manager, explained the differences between smoking commercially grown pork belly and the local pork belly brought in by farmers to be processed into bacon: “Locally, every farmer has a different way of doing things.” Some keep their pigs in the barn; some fatten them up with grain right before slaughter; some let them roam freely. There is no uniformity to the pork belly. Commercially produced swine, on the other hand, are bred, raised and slaughtered to be uniform, so it takes Tempesta much more time to brine and smoke local batches to make bacon. The machine that slices the bacon also likes nice, long, even rectangular pieces of pork, which means that the local batches require an extra step; after smoking the pork belly from the farmers down the road, workers need to trim the meat to fit the slicing machine. To keep the business viable given such complexities, Murphy and Tempesta produce three lines of processed meats: commercial, private-label, and Farmer’s Diner brand. Their private-label business is doing very well, as the small farmers in New England hear about the tremendous benefits to a food system that values artisanally produced foods shows that people are beginning to see the tremendous benefits to a food system that values the connection between eating and farming, that cares where food comes from and how it was grown or raised.

The idea that locally produced food benefits everyone is becoming part of a new type of common sense. As Wendell Berry writes in The Art of the Commonplace: “[C]harm and community — that is, culture in the broadest, richest sense — constitute, just as much as nature, the source of food. Neither nature nor people alone can produce human sustenance, but only the two together, culturally wedded.” Despite the pressures of industrialization, consolidation, and globalization, there are people like Tod Murphy all over the United States aspiring to this vision of the role of food in American culture. This biosphere of food is a refuge for food professionals, as well as consumers, in locally grown and community food systems in the United States.

Amy Trulek has been cooking since she was a high school student. After college, Amy worked in restaurants and eventually went to the Cordon Bleu Cooking School. She then went on to earn a Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Pennsylvania in 1995. Her research interests include the history of the culinary profession, cultural ideas about taste, and the contemporary food system. She is the author of Haute Cuisine: How the French Invented the Culinary Profession (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000). Currently, Trulek is a Food and Society policy fellow in a national fellowship program designed to educate consumers, opinion leaders, and policymakers on the need for reform in sustainable agriculture and local food systems in the United States.