

[Article courtesy of Napa Valley Life Magazine]

## **The Napa County Local Food Forum – You shoulda been there. But it was only the beginning.**

**By Mick Winter**

Okay, right up front. I'll admit it. I almost didn't go. I was really sleepy and wanted to go back to bed. But, I told myself, maybe it'll be more interesting than I expect.

Don't get me wrong. I've very interested in sustainable food, local food, and connecting the community through food. But I had strong reservations about spending the entire day listening to people talk about the nitty-gritty details of growing it, transporting it, selling it. But I went because...well, just because I thought it *might* be more interesting than I expected.

It wasn't. It wasn't just *more* interesting than I expected, it was *incredibly more* interesting. It wasn't just an all-day forum; it was an all-day *experience*. Something happened on April 28, 2010 at Napa Valley Expo. Three hundred people came together who were all interested in one thing—good, healthy, locally-produced food. For everyone.

Many, perhaps most, were like me. I knew there were people in the valley who were also interested. But I assumed it was a pretty small group. It isn't. Those people who walked into Chardonnay Hall thinking they were part of a small segment of the community quickly realized that not only were they not alone, they *really* weren't alone. In that room were 299 other people with the same interest. Maybe not the *exact* same interest – some were chefs and restaurateurs, some were vineyardists, some were retailers, some were health professionals, some served thousands of people a day, others fed two or three, some were farming already, some wanted to *become* farmers, and others wanted farmers to work their land. Some wanted home or neighborhood gardens, and many just wanted to know how all of us in Napa County could have access to healthy, tasty and nutritious locally-grown food.

So although each of us may have had our own particular interest in local food, we all quickly recognized that our own pet interest was just one facet of the entire *farm to table food system* of our community. None of us can have our special interests and needs properly filled until and unless everyone else also has theirs equally filled. We are all connected through our need for food, and our desire for the food that nourishes the spirit as well as the body. Representatives of every aspect of our county's food system and its possibilities were present in the room. We were all there. Even though there were more than 120,000 others of us who couldn't make it to Expo that day, we were there on their behalf.

I never thought I'd be interested in a panel discussion on institutional food. But it was fascinating. Can you imagine the problems in feeding more than 300 inmates in the county jail, most of whom—likely *all*—don't particularly want to be dining there in the first place? “Let them grow their own food” suggested one member of the audience. “Put in a rooftop garden,” said another. A nice idea, but rooftop gardening on a jail does involve certain security problems.

Or the difficulties encountered when you tell indignant medical professionals or teachers that they can't have sugary drinks in the cafeteria or teachers' room, even though they've spent the day telling their

patients (or students) about the dangers of sugar.

How would you like to tell the guests at your high-end resort that they can't have asparagus because it's not in season? (Yes, and they do know that there are other nearby restaurants that don't care about seasonal food and are quite happy to import that asparagus 6,000 in the middle of (our) winter.)

Or the problem of local ordinances. Want to have your own fresh honey by raising bees in your backyard? Not in this town but it's okay in the next one. Chickens are okay, but not more than eight. And get rid of the rooster.

How about planting veggies in your front yard? The city says it's okay, but your neighbors are still upset. Want to sell your homegrown vegetables from your front yard? No problem if you live in the county. If you're inside city limits, it depends on the city.

Not everything was about obstacles. Tales of gleaners, people harvesting extra fruit and vegetables and taking them to the Food Bank. People going beyond xeriscaping and planting edible landscaping. Master Gardeners giving free advice to residents. Wineries such as Trefethen and Frogs Leap making space for employee gardens. Grape growers such as Long Meadow Ranch and Hudson Ranch supplementing their vines with foods and creating year-round jobs in the process. And possibilities, such as reducing our overall carbon footprint when people choose the “food less traveled.” Reducing the 70% plus of typical food price that goes to food middlemen, so that farmers get higher prices and families pay less.

Other highlights included compelling talks by Dave Whitmer, Agricultural Commissioner and ringmaster for the event, who spoke on the need for food access for all; Napa County Public Health Officer Dr. Karen Smith on the relationship between food access and health; and keynote speaker Paul Muller from Capay Valley's Full Belly Farm ([www.fullbellyfarm.com](http://www.fullbellyfarm.com)), who talked with passion about family farms, local food, and our relationship with the earth—both planet Earth and dirt earth.

The day was filled with useful information, humorous anecdotes, and occasional regulatory horror stories. But what came out of all of it was the spirit that emanated from the entire assembled group: Yes, there are problems and obstacles, but they can all be overcome. And we, working together, will overcome them. Whatever we think possible can be achieved. Regulatory problems? The attendees from city and county governments made it clear they intended to do everything they could to make it work. They weren't just paying lip service to the idea. They meant it. So did the agricultural folks. And the nutritionists. And the educators. And the sellers. And the consumers such as you. And me. And of course everyone else in the room as well. Because more than anything, it was the audience that was most impressive. They cared. They shared. And it was clear they were ready to help make it happen.

There was also a recognition that some people were absent from the room. Those who even in this land of plenty can't always put food on the table for their families. People of all ages and all ethnicities. And their number, currently at least 8% of our population, is growing. It was very clear to the group that if some members of our community aren't getting the healthy, affordable food that they need, all of us are affected by that lack. They are our fellow citizens, our fellow humans, and each of us has a responsibility to change the system so that such food inequality no longer exists.

That day in April there was one community spirit, with 300 shining, inspiring facets. It was unforgettable. And it was only the beginning.

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To visit the Napa Local Food website, go to [www.napalocalfood.com](http://www.napalocalfood.com) or scan this QR code with your smartphone:

