

Taste of Place: 2009 – 2010 Hardwick Region Feasibility Study

Background

The brand of “Vermont” is an important part of many food producers’ marketing strategies. There are specific products, such as maple syrup, that are recognized internationally as signature Vermont foods and other products that benefit from the general sense of quality, integrity, and human-scale production associated with our state.

We know there is much more to be done to make the most of place-based marketing and product development for Vermont foods. Examples of general Taste of Place project areas include:

- Agricultural and Culinary Tourism – using Vermont foods to tell the story of Vermont to visitors from both in-state and out of state.
- Food and Cultural Heritage – understanding a Vermont cuisine, as it reflects both Vermont history and new cultures in communities around the state.
- Local Foods – Restoring the connection between communities and the local food system.
- Geographical Indications – Studying the systems of geographical indicators used in other regions of the world to identify foods that are rooted to a place of origin in such a way that they cannot be replicated anywhere else. For example, the Champagne of France.

WHAT IS “TASTE OF PLACE”?

“Taste of Place” is a rough translation of the French *terroir*, which refers to the particular taste characteristics that a locality can contribute to its food products. It also refers to systems designating foods that reflect *terroir* – often in the form of geographical indicators.

Geographical indication frameworks allow farmers to identify specific, unique characteristics of a food and authenticate those characteristics through tracing back their connections with the natural environment, production practices and culture.

This concept is different from other standards because it focuses on not just quality, but also uniqueness, with an element of objective measurement to authenticate these claims.

The geographical indication component is central to the Taste of Place project in the Hardwick area, although all of the four areas overlap. More detailed information on geographical indication is on the following page. Some more general, background goals and opportunities from this project are:

- Improved marketing strategies for Vermont products.
- Technical assistance for developing place-based products that are both of superior quality and truly unique.
- Collaborative dialogue between producers, researchers, and policymakers.
- Producer-developed methods for authenticating truly artisan, community based foods.

This project is funded by a USDA-Rural Development Rural Business Enterprise Grant as a feasibility study to understand how the current international models of geographical indications do / do not match up with Vermont’s needs and the best approach for improving place-based marketing strategies around artisan cheese. The partners organizing this project are the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Center for an Agricultural Economy and UVM – Center for Rural Studies.

Geographical Indications

France offers the most famous example of a well developed Taste of Place cultural concept alongside a set of standards established in support of that concept. While the cultural idea of *terroir*- a dynamic engagement between people, place and taste - reaches back centuries, the formal system of geographical indication dates back to the early 1930's. The strictest level of this system is the protected *appellations d'origine* (AOP/AOC). These are given to products that fulfill the following conditions:

- Demonstrable links between unique environmental factors and the final taste of a product. Underlying research outlines geographical boundaries within which farmers share a common natural environment for their production.
- Collectively shared production practices and knowledge.
- Interaction of environmental and human factors to produce a food item that cannot be reproduced anywhere else in the world

There are many variations on the AOC concept that can lead to different frameworks for distinguishing different high quality products. Vermont needs to decide what combination to use for our own policies. The following chart illustrates some of the variables:

Outside of AOC Protocols	Contained in AOC Protocols
Quality Product (e.g. meets basic protocols for quality of ingredients)	Quality Product that is Unique in Addition to Meeting High Quality Standards
Taste Profile Controlled Almost Entirely by Manufacturing Process (trademarks protect this type of unique product attribute)	Taste Profile Strongly Influenced by Natural Environment in Addition to Manufacturing Process
Food Represents New Cultural Traditions	Food Represents a Longstanding Cultural Tradition (in Europe this is measured by centuries)
Production and Marketing Tied to an Individual Farmer or Farming Family	Production and Marketing Tied to a Collective of Producers
Product's Character May Change Over Generations or With Changes in Farm Owner	Protocols Are Established to Ensure Product's Character Remains Constant Over Generations (this is often linked to being produced by a collective)

In November, 2008, Vermont convened a conference with representatives from France and Quebec to discuss AOC, Vermont, and strategies for place-based marketing. A report from that conference, along with links to articles on *terroir*, can be found online at: www.vermontagriculture.com, linked from the Buy Local page.

Overview of Hardwick Area Initiative

The Taste of Place project planned for the Hardwick area will focus on three basic components of the French system:

- 1) Environment – how does the regional environment and climate shape the taste of a product?
- 2) Culture – how does the product represent ongoing traditions of a region? Does it reflect the *savoir faire* or collective practice of a region's producers?
- 3) Business Structure – how does that collective practice translate into a business and marketing structure that involves multiple producers, so that the future of a regional product does not depend on one person's skills and decisions?

Producers who take part in the project will attend a total of five meetings spaced about one month apart between October 2009 and April 2010. Meetings will last between 90 minutes (introduction) and 2 hours (technical). Each technical session combines producer participants with a selected group of researchers from UVM who have expertise in the topic being discussed:

Introduction to Taste of Place – Part One Introduction to the general concept, feedback from producers on their greatest interests / any questions they have, discussion of overall project.

Introduction to Taste of Place -Part Two Detailed discussion of geographical indication and specifically the system used in France, how it works, how producers have benefited from it, differences and similarities with what currently exists in the U.S.

Technical Session One – Environment Producers discuss how the natural environment shapes the taste of their product, questions about using environmental factors to develop unique products, questions about available research and technical assistance, ideas about tools needed by producers. UVM team will answer questions & follow up with relevant reference materials.

Technical Session Two – Culture and Heritage Producers discuss how their products fit into community culture past and present, what defines the food culture of the greater Hardwick area, questions about traditional food practices, questions about how historic Vermont foods fit into our cuisine today and role of new foods alongside those with a longer history. UVM team will answer questions & follow up with relevant reference materials.

Technical Session Three – Business Structures Producers discuss how to implement a strong place-based marketing and product development strategy, interest in working more cooperatively, questions about different business structures, questions about models that have been successful in other regions. UVM team will answer questions, provide reference materials & recommend resources for business planning.

The end results of this process will be:

- Identification of ideas that producers in the region share on place-based products.
- Information provided by UVM advisors on relevant research questions – including both references to existing studies that may answer questions and ideas for how to design / undertake more targeted research where new information is needed.
- Identification of next steps for implementing a Taste of Place project that will benefit artisan cheese producers in the Hardwick region. Vermont Agency of Agriculture will develop this framework into a proposal for future funding.