

Taste of Place
Tech Session #1, Meeting #3
February 4th, 2010

Present: Helen Jordan-VAAF, Thomas DeSisto-CRS, Abby Smith-CRS, Patricia LeBlanc-Hazen Monument Farm, Neil Urie-Bonnieview Farm, Elena Gustavson-CAE, John DeMandeville-Incubators Without Walls, John Clark-Applecheek Farm, Monty Fischer-CAE, Roberta Gillotte-Fun Yum Farm

Introduction of Thomas DeSisto and Abby Smith:

Thomas and Abby are from the Center for Rural Studies. They will take questions presented and return with information and answers from experts in the field. They will also record the sessions.

Helen will be connection to tools and resources for our participants/producers.

Topic:

Taste and Natural Environment

- Observations or how it works in the group's experience
- Questions to Answer
- Tools to demonstrate/Educate/Market

I. Observations:

A) Change from a place based system to another type of system creates distinctions

- Grass-fed and grain-fed cattle
 - flavor change in milk
 - variation of taste in meat
- Carrots and soil
 - variation in flavor in spite of using same seed and carrot type

B) Product may change character with change in seasons

- French markets distinguish "first-run" cheese early in the season
- Beaujolais Nouveau
- Vermont tends not to market or classify these changes

C) Experiencing a Farm's Terroir

- Impact of damaged soils-degradation, heavy chemical treatments-all affect taste of product
- Change in season and place affects product
 - Grass types with sheep-an example is color of butter
 - Honey
 - Maple syrup, first run
 - Cider, first run

D) Change across places with the same growing system can be seen through cooperatives

- Vermont Northern Growers
- Sheep Cheese cooperative

E) Concerns related to taste issues

- Customers who grew up with a commodity product may not like the taste of alternatives, for example grassfed beef.
- Customers and particularly commercial buyers looking for consistency will also not like changes over seasons or over locations.
- Different countries have different values for the criteria used in buying foods – not just at the individual level, but also who is making the buying decisions for the stores. In the UK, for example, commercial buyers look for big lots and buy based on appearance, in France it's freshness and taste and appearance may be less-than-great.

II. Questions:

1. Can we identify common characteristics of changes artisan cheese experience across the seasons? So that there can be a collectively understood 'first forage cheese' or whatever common parameters make sense.
2. What is the legal framework for Taste of Place?
3. Can we do a soil study to show differences in Vermont / is the work happening with maple and soils of sugar bushes transferrable to other products
4. What is the value proposition that customers respond to when they buy Vermont?
5. What are the characteristics that producers should emphasize? Examples include taste, social values, environment, trust, "healthier and safer"
6. What are the trade offs between scale of a business and quality of product? Is there a size point where quality inevitably begins to decline?
7. What is the most compelling story about Vermont that can be sent out to the world/USA?
8. Definition of term "artisan"
 - Should there be a definition?
 - Legal definition or a trade definition?
 - Who sets and enforces?

- What studies or tests can be done topographically in Vermont? Regional? To prove differences?

III Tools and Resources Needed

A) Marketing is a big time sink and may not be within the primary skill set of many producers. Ways to provide platforms, materials to market would be helpful

- Using information about change in season and taste to help goat cheese makers (for one example) collectively say "This is spring chevre, here is why it's unique"
- Defining key terms like "artisan" – which introduces a variety of questions, who defines them? How would that definition be enforced? Can a definition in Vermont carry weight in other states? How would customers be educated about the definitions? Is this something that would be a legal definition or like a labeling program managed by trade associations? Do customers respond to labels?
- Providing basic information about Vermont agriculture that producers can use when talking about their products.
- Setting up a particular kind of cheese and working to reach a market for that cheese – and then new producers can come online, make cheese to the specifications established, have an existing market and work his / her way to eventually adding unique, individual cheese that is only their's.
- Trip planning guides for visitors.

B) Public education is an important backdrop, not only for why local customers would buy specific products but also so they understand the general importance of farms and the working landscape. These values come to play in policymaking from town meeting up to the legislature.

C) More incubation is needed. Core components: space for production, equipment, technical assistance on making cheese, business training, connections to investors for a new business, and assistance moving out of the incubator to be a stand alone business.

IV Immediate Next Steps

- Background literature & studies review by Abby will provide:
 - More details on how collective marketing around the taste change in seasons works in other countries
 - Branding studies for the "Vermont" brand
- Thomas, Abby & Helen will have a follow up meeting with taste experts at UVM to get more details on:
 - Options for "standardizing" the taste changes over the seasons, giving producers of the same type of cheese (eg goat) tools to talk about & market the shifts across months
 - How the soil mapping work for maple taste might be applied to a cheese context
 - Information on soil damage / poor soil nutrients affecting taste

- Questions about labeling systems – the value, trade offs, and possible ways to implement a labeling system will be part of the detailed market study happening next year.
- Questions about legal framework for Taste of Place are also on the 'to answer' list for next year.
- The idea of setting up a particular type of cheese production and having a market that a new producer can step into (and eventually build his/her own unique lines of cheese) will be discussed further in the 3rd session.
- The Agricultural & Culinary Tourism Council is taking up the issue of supporting trip planning guides around food, and should have a game plan by the end of the spring.
- The general public education about the value of farming will be part of the Farm to Plate and Working Landscape Project reports. Helen can bring more info on these projects (if you aren't already familiar with them) to the next meeting.