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CONTACT: Stan Wise, Communications Coordinator

PHONE: 605-368-4091

EMAIL: stan.soilhealth@sdconservation.net

Restaurateur promotes local food for community security

By Stan Wise

South Dakota Soil Health Coalition

PIERRE, SD – When Sioux Falls restaurateur Tim Meagher purchases local food, he doesn't do it because it's trendy. For him, it's about securing a future for his business and the community.

"If somebody else has control of our food system – if you were a bank, you would call that a threat or a risk," he said. "Well, I look at it the same way for our community. If Pandemic Two hits, as an example, how strong is the infrastructure around our food system to be able to have the trampoline effect where we can absorb and bounce with it? Or do we just get crushed because somebody else has control over what they're going to give to us, how they're going to get it to us, and what they're going to charge us?"

Meagher is the chief operating officer of Vanguard Hospitality and manages its properties: Grille 26, Minervas in downtown Sioux Falls, and Morrie's Steakhouse. In 2017 he began trying to form relationships with nearby food producers, largely because he believes locally grown food tastes better.

"There's a noticeable difference. If you have a producer that is quality focused and evaluates their entire process, they turn out a high-quality product," he said. "The contrast to that between what I get that's grown in other areas as far as California, Mexico, or even further, the flavor profiles and what those ingredients bring to a dish has more depth to it."

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, Meagher had another reason to rely on local producers. Prices for Meagher's ingredients were fluctuating wildly within short timeframes. "And I'm like, you know what? Let's just see what it looks like when we buy everything we can from a local producer," he said.

Meagher soon had delivery trucks showing up every day with local meat and vegetables. He found that working with local producers kept his costs more predictable.

"We agreed upon a price that worked for both of us. And so, they were whole. We're whole. We engineer it so it would work," he said. "We had agreed upon pricing. Well, I've never experienced pricing that would last six to nine months to a year."

While the initial price of local ingredients can be higher, Meagher said the arrangement led to lower food costs. “Next year, we ended up saving like 4% on food costs because we could manage other things, which I didn't even figure into my time. It’s what happens when you can focus on other parts of your business,” he said.

Sustainable production

Supply costs aren’t Meagher’s only concern. He’s also concerned about improving the local landscape.

“We have one farm that does pasture-raised, rotationally grazed Berkshire pork. I bring my cooks out there, and so they're learning about protecting the environment,” he said. “At the same time, they're learning about hog behaviors and seeing them face-to-face.”

Meagher is working to understand his business’s relationship with local producers and land management practices. “I took a grasslands class this summer from the [South Dakota] Grasslands Coalition. It was around rotational grazing and digging up soil and all that stuff. And one of the USDA guys was like, ‘What are you doing here?’” he said. “Because if I can make a decision on my purchase and have it be with stewards of the environment first, I'm going to make that purchase based on that. But I also have to be knowledgeable of what I'm doing. So, I take it very seriously to not mislead people. So that's why I take these classes.”

Meagher said that his business has been working to showcase the producers who supply his ingredients through QR code access. “What we're trying to do is support those individuals who are taking that leap forward, who are taking responsibility for, ‘Hey, I have to leave this land better than when I got it,’” he said. “So, we're actively working to share what it is we've learned and connect to other restaurants, retail, anybody to build basically a dome over our communities or South Dakota so that if we have hard times come again, our basic needs are on the cusp of being safe.”

Farm-to-school

The local food movement is taking off in South Dakota and not just in restaurants.

Karla Sawvell is the Farm to School Coordinator for Huron School District. She said Huron’s local food program started with watermelons from the Forestburg, SD, area being included in school lunches.

“The day they were delivered was the day they picked and brought them to us. Our students just went nuts over the fresh watermelon which, you know, I do, too. So then, some years later, we were able to apply for a grant program, a fresh fruit and vegetable program,” she said. “What it does is it gives all elementary students in our district a sample of a fresh fruit or a vegetable. Sometimes it's a whole apple. Sometimes it's just a leaf of spinach. The idea is to expose them to food that maybe they would not get a chance to taste.”

Sawvell attended breakout sessions devoted to local food at conferences and workshops. “These informational sessions just made us think we should be doing more local food. We should be doing more fresh fruit. And so really, it was just the idea of offering students fresh, real food is what was exciting to me.”

The Huron School District agreed and allowed Sawvell, who was nearing retirement, to work part time as the Farm to School Coordinator. In July of 2023, Sawvell began expanding the program. “I really just

started by searching, and I did a thousand Google searches, went to every site I could find that was affiliated with South Dakota,” she said. “By the time school started that fall, we really had some fairly nice varieties of produce with just what was kind of left over from people's gardens. So that's really how it took off.”

Since then Sawvell has partnered with other producers, including the Beadle Conservation District garden, to expand the types of foods she is able to include in school lunches.

“We want to be able to offer this type of food included in our meals and give our students a taste of food that is just grown locally and fresh. And so many students are responsive to what we're doing, especially watermelon and peppers and cucumbers,” she said. “We've done sweet corn, turnips, potatoes, radishes, tomatoes, spinach, cilantro, purple string beans. I just got some white beets that we're going to try. We've done kohlrabi.”

Sawvell said Huron is a diverse community with a student body featuring representatives from 25 countries, many of whom engage in gardening at home. She said a diet that includes fresh food is very familiar to some of them.

SD Fresh Connect

To help consumers access more locally grown food, the South Dakota Soil Health Coalition and its partners have recently launched the South Dakota Fresh Connect website (www.sdfreshconnect.com). It's a free, map-based website that lets users search for the food and goods nearest to them and lets producers list their products available for purchase.

Sawvell believes the website will be useful to other schools that would like to start their own local food program.

“When I first began this, I wanted to just know, OK, I'm in this county. Who's close to me? Who's 50 miles away? Who's 75 miles away? Who's close? What do they grow? How could I use that? What's their contact information?” she said. “And also, for producers, ‘Who else would want to buy these? All these tomatoes I've got left over. I should just go on this website and see who's interested.’ I think schools across South Dakota are going to become more and more interested in enlarging this as the years go on.”

Meagher agreed that the website will prove useful to consumers.

“The instant value that you guys have created with that is you make it easy to find what it is you're looking for. Because if you're faced with all these options or you don't know exactly where to go, it's a lot of time, and people don't have time,” he said. “People want to know where their food is coming from. They're health conscious.”

Soil Health Conference

To learn more about Tim Meagher's mission to create a sustainable local food supply system in South Dakota, sign up for the 2025 Soil Health Conference, Jan. 15-16, in Watertown, SD. Meagher will join many other speakers at the conference to offer a wide variety of regenerative agriculture information that will be relevant to everyone from backyard gardeners and small scale/urban ag producers to large

scale farmers and ranchers. Learn more about the conference and register at www.ssoilhealthcoalition.org/soil-health-conference.

To learn more about soil health, regenerative agriculture, and the work that SDSHC performs with partners like the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service and many others, visit www.ssoilhealthcoalition.org.



Courtesy photo

Tim Meagher is the chief operating officer of Sioux Falls-based Vanguard Hospitality. He uses locally produced ingredients for dishes served in the restaurants that he manages.

To download a copy of this photo, visit <https://bit.ly/49sqUsw>



Courtesy photo

Sioux Falls restaurateur Tim Meagher visits a farm where meat is grown for his restaurants.

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Courtesy photo

Karla Sawvell.

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Courtesy photo

Locally produced melons, sweet corn, and kale are delivered to Huron School District.

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