

Viva the Vital

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Boomers and Berries

By John Martin

Business is good these days for Scott Smythe, who runs two berry farms in Caroline County. He opens his fields to Richmonders who pick their own blueberries and strawberries and delivers fresh produce to farmer's markets in Northern Virginia. People aren't content anymore just to gather fruit from his fields like they used to, he says. Today they're going home with live bushes so they can pick berries at home. Scott's now shipping berry bush plantings as far as New England.

Molly Harris and Lisa Goldstein have built a business enterprise around a Goochland County cottage that they converted into a restaurant. The Edible Garden provides a gourmet menu prepared by a professional chef from organic, locally grown produce. The two women also have organized a co-op of 20 organic farms from around Virginia to supply fresh produce to a growing list of Richmond-area buyers.

Ellwood Thompsons, an organic grocery business, is expanding its Carytown store and is opening an organic foods café. Besides selling free-range poultry and organically grown veggies, the company commits to buying its food from local farmers. "Local" means located within 100 miles of the Richmond store. On a larger scale, Ukrop's, the Richmond region's perennial grocery leader, carries organic produce from the Appalachian Harvest Growers Network, a nonprofit that helps farmers grow and sell organic fruits and vegetables.

The United States may be gripped by the worst recession in 30 years but the locally grown, natural-foods industry is thriving. While the growing taste for local produce cuts across all generations, Baby Boomers are driving this Agri "cultural" Boom. Through their sheer numbers and buying power, they are leading the transformation of the farm-to-grocer supply chain, just as they have reinvented so many other American institutions and industries.

| Generation | Buys organic products "occasionally and regularly" | Size of Generation (millions) | Numbers behind the trend (Millions of People) |
|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Gen Y or Millennials <i>8-27 years old today</i> | 67.2% | 43 <i>(For Gen Y – number 18-27 years old today)</i> | 29 |
| Gen X <i>28-44 years old today</i> | 61.7% | 62 | 39 |

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|---------------------------------------------|-------|----|-----------|
| Baby Boomer <i>45-63 years old today</i> | 60.5% | 76 | 46 |
|---------------------------------------------|-------|----|-----------|

Source: *BIGResearch*

Several factors are conspiring to cultivate this micro-trend. First is the rising cost of energy. According to Barbara Kingsolver, author of “Animal, Vegetable, Miracle,” modern industrial agriculture accounts for about 27 percent of the nation’s energy use. The average grocery item is shipped 1,500 miles, which consumes energy in transportation and refrigeration. As energy costs rise, lower energy inputs will confer a big competitive advantage to locally grown produce.

This is playing right into the minds and wallets of Boomer. Pondering the melt-down of their 401(k)s and realizing that time is running out to save for their future, Boomers have rediscovered the virtue that inspired their Silent Generation parents – *frugality*. Conspicuous consumption, along with luxury foods and beverages are out. Patronizing the produce of local farmers allows Boomers to indulge refined culinary tastes, but on a budget. The Agri “cultural” Boom is part of the Boomer-led *New Fru* movement that we have described elsewhere in this column.

Second is the spread of environmental sensitivities. Our Boomer Project research indicates that 84 percent of Boomers perceive themselves to be “green” – more than any other generation. There is growing recognition that energy consumption is associated with the release of greenhouse gases implicated in global warming. Industrial agriculture also requires massive inputs of fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides, which create environmental hazards of their own. Buying and growing locally is one way that Boomers can reduce their environmental footprint.

Third, a spate of food-contamination headlines has engendered mistrust in supply chains that originate outside the state – sometimes outside the country – and funnel through anonymous and unaccountable intermediaries. By contrast, locally grown food passes through fewer hands and travels shorter distances before landing on diners’ plates, reducing the chances that it will get contaminated and making it easier to track down the source if it does. Wrestling food back from the domination of giant agribusiness plays into the Boomers’ deep-seated need to be in control.

Finally, the trend to local, natural foods has roots in Boomers’ sense of personal health. In a recent health care study we found that Boomers are realizing they don’t come with a lifetime warranty. They want to stay healthy but few follow the owner’s manual. For most Boomers, healthy living means taking vitamins and drinking water. The “regular exercise thing” is pretty hard. We think Boomers will segue into natural and/or organic foods in a nod to healthy nutritional choices that, like popping vitamin pills and taking shots of Evian, can be purchased with a credit card rather than acquired through a change of habit.

It doesn’t hurt that an additional benefit of locally grown food is freshness and stronger flavor. “The taste is a lot better when it’s picked ripe and sold in a day or two,” observes Smythe, the berry farmer. Big agribusiness farms breed varieties for shipping, not for taste. “Once people are exposed to the

locally grown, they realize it tastes better and it's probably better for you." A spoonful of naturally occurring fructose does help the medicine go down.