



# **SAINT LOUIS REGIONAL FOOD STUDY**

Missouri Coalition for the Environment

**2014**



**The Missouri Coalition for the Environment is grateful for the valuable support of its many individual and foundation donors who make our work possible. Thank you.**

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**Publisher:** The Missouri Coalition for the Environment, a statewide environmental advocacy organization working on a variety of issues that affect human and environmental health since 1969.

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## Acknowledgements

This report would not have been possible without the help of many individuals who assisted with research, data collection, writing, and editing. First and foremost, the Saint Louis Regional Food Study would not have been possible without Megan Brock, Sally Rausch, and Sarah Saunders who were part of the Saint Louis Regional Food Study's Research Team in the summer of 2012. Megan Brock and Sally Rausch were also co-authors of the beginning drafts of the report and made it possible for this report to encompass expansive data in articulated well-organized manner. MCE is grateful to Adam Hundelt for his contributions reviewing and researching for the report at the end of the summer of 2012.

MCE expresses gratitude to Victoria Lubner and Michael Hundelt during the summer of 2013 for providing open ears and helping organize the discussion of historical crop production data and historical livestock production data.

We express many thanks to Erin Moore for her contributions during the summer of 2013. Her attentive proofreading and editing of legal citations and her writing of the segment describing the format of the legal citations was invaluable. The discussion of historical crop production for both the Saint Louis Regional Foodshed and the bi-state area of Missouri and Illinois would not have been possible without Erin's help with data collection and organization.

Certain portions of the Food Study would not be possible without the conversations MCE had with various local experts. Thanks to Andy Ayers of Eat Here, Saint Louis for his perspective on challenges facing local food. We express our gratitude to Martha Vatterott R.D., L.D. for peer-reviewing Chapter 2 and providing information on nutrient content of fruit and vegetables and on the importance of consuming a diverse array of fresh produce. We appreciate the insight that Andrea Mayrose of Gateway Greening, Dave Thies of Thies Farms, and Jim Eckert of Eckert's Orchards provided on small farm crop yields by providing MCE with their farms' estimated yields.

MCE would also like to thank the following individuals from various organizations, businesses, and government agencies who assisted in various capacities:

**Mark Abbott**, Ph.D., Harris Stowe State University

**Audrey Ball**

**Nina Balsam**, University of Missouri Extension, Saint Louis County Program Director

**Darvin Bentlage**, Angus beef producer.

**Angelique Chaverri**, M.S.Ed., IMAP/IMC

**Terence Cooper**, Associate Professor from the Department of Soil, Water & Climate of the University of Minnesota for use of illustration of Capability Classes by Land Type and Slope

**Jenna Davis**, Communications & Design Coordinator of Gateway Greening for use of Figure 1. Photographs taken of Gateway Greening's City Seeds Urban Farm

**Julie Fisher**, for images of her chickens

**Diane Fitchner** of Fitchner Farms for use of images

**Tom Flood**, Properties and Sustainability Manager of The Saint Louis Brewery for use images of Schlafly Gardenworks in Saint Louis, Missouri

**Tim Gibbons**, Missouri Rural Crisis Center

**Bill Heffernan**, PhD.

**Nadim Kanafani**, MD

**Stephanie Kessler** of Five Bistro for use of images of Five Bistro's logo, and Roasted Beef Tenderloin

**Robert Kremer**, PhD, University of Missouri-Columbia

**Russ Kremer**, Frankenstein, Missouri, for images of his happy hogs

**Freecia W**, a Flickr account holder for use of images of the mini, regular, and large size concrete cups at Ted Drewes

**David Lobbig**, Curator of Environmental Life, Missouri History Museum

**Ted C. Macrae**, an agricultural entomologist, for use of Images of Loess Covered Hills

**Bryan Mayhan**, CARES Research Associate of the University of Missouri for use of image of Distribution of Soil Orders in Missouri

**Ron Collman**, Acting State Soil Scientist of Illinois NRCS for use of image of Distribution of Soil Orders in Illinois

**Danny McMurphy**, trail volunteer of Ozark Trail Association for use of photograph of Ozark Highlands

**Amanda Morgan**, Marketing & Human Resources Manager of Eckert's Farms for use of Images of Eckert's Orchards

**Millie Mattfeldt-Beeman**, PhD., St. Louis University, Doisy College of Health Sciences, Nutrition & Dietetics,

**Christina Popp**, MPH, RD, LD

**Martha Vatterott**, RD, LD

**This Study is dedicated to the people of the Saint Louis region who are working to feed themselves and their neighbors, to promote healthier food, and stronger communities and who appreciate the taste of a fresh picked, ripe peach.**

# Prologue

By Dr. Nadim Kanafani

Three years ago, I led a small but dedicated team of staff on a mission to assist a local at-risk school district in their efforts to implement healthier school meals. We met with staff, parents, students, and administrators to discuss the issues involved in delivering school meals to over 2500 students, all of whom qualified for free school meals. We conducted in-depth analyses of the nutritional content of the school meals, the presence of fresh fruits and vegetables, and the processes for contracting and procuring food for the district. Most importantly, we took pictures, lots of pictures. School meals have received enormous attention in recent years, and it was not until I actually saw what children in this district were being served, that I understood why. What we saw in pictures shocked us more than any collection of numbers and facts could ever do. We simply could not understand how beautiful, growing, vibrant children could be served macaroni and cheese that looked more like yellow soup with a few noodles in it, ham and cheese “wraps” served on dried, cracking plain tortillas, or grilled cheese sandwiches with large circular blotches of unmelted butter stamped in the center of the bread. Why were 1st and 2nd graders given whole, wrinkled, spotted oranges to eat? In an era when sugar-sweetened beverages are increasingly vilified, children in this district were served orange and fruit-flavored drinks containing high-fructose corn syrup. Most of us had no idea what fried potato stars were until we saw them being served to children, often times alongside nachos or corn dogs. The use of Styrofoam trays, bowls, and plates was commonplace in most of the schools.

Initially, it was easy and convenient to blame the atrocious quality of food in this school district on the usual culprits: poor administrative leadership, lack of funding, and poor understanding of basic nutrition concepts and guidelines by school staff. These relatively “local” circumstances certainly play a role, but a larger picture began to emerge as we gained a greater understanding of the role that large food service companies play in providing school meals. This school district, like many others, is a microcosm of the community it serves. Struggling to control violence, academic failure, and poverty, this school district allowed their school food service quality to decline to the lowest possible standard. Few if any parents complained, and since school district administration never ate with the children, they were unaware that their school food service program was in a severe crisis of quality. And not without consequence: In one school, we found that 40% of the boys were obese and that high blood pressure was highly correlated with this obesity. As the data in the St. Louis Regional Food Study show, our food supply and the capacity to produce our food locally have been co-opted by large, powerful agribusiness companies. Just as certain communities in our region are more prone than others to allow their food supply to erode in quality, so too are certain school districts particularly vulnerable to the systemic and powerful influences of large corporate food service providers. Year after year, contracts for school food service, some of the most lucrative for food service providers, were renewed with absolutely no oversight and no specific provisions for ensuring quality and adherence to basic nutrition guidelines. In short, no one was watching, and no one complained. In the meantime, children ate mindlessly and most parents in this struggling district were simply happy that their children were being provided a school lunch.

Two months prior to the completion of our project, after the results of our efforts were widely disseminated, school district administrative leadership, including the superintendent, finally decided to travel to one of their schools and eat with the students. In personal communications to me, they voiced their shock and dismay at the practically inedible nature of their school district’s food and vowed to revamp their food service, beginning with a critical appraisal of their food service contract. What are the lessons learned from our project for our region’s efforts as a whole? What are the analogous “eye opening” processes that our region must undertake to start to fundamentally change our food culture? These are daunting and important questions. Perhaps the first step is to have a “common table” so to speak, a large scale effort to share our region’s “menu.” To do this, we need to know what our region’s food landscape is. This study provides that critical perspective on our region’s food landscape, ranging from economic challenges to agricultural practices to health outcomes. Unlike a school district, our entire region does not have one superintendent, one food producer, or a single food service contract governing our food supply. The St. Louis Regional Food study however highlights just how many stakeholders are involved in the complicated web of providing food for our region. This study has something for everyone. Whether you are a farmer, a legislator, a consumer, or a healthcare provider, the information in this study will help you bring health local food to your table.

“Eaters, that is, must understand that eating takes place inescapably in the world, that it is inescapably an agricultural act, and how we eat determines, to a considerable extent, how the world is used.”

-“The Pleasures of Eating,” by Wendell Berry  
Kentucky farmer, poet, and philosopher

## Introduction

Beginning in the summer of 2012 and ending in the summer of 2013, individuals at the Missouri Coalition for the Environment in Saint Louis, Missouri conducted this Study to examine what the people of Saint Louis, Missouri and surrounding communities within a 100-mile radius<sup>1</sup> consume and produce in the food sector. We identified 59 counties in this circle– 32 in Illinois and 27 in Missouri – and dubbed the region our “foodshed”. We chose 100 miles as a starting place and a reasonable distance from farm to market.

The Saint Louis Regional Food Study contains available data from the United States Census of Agriculture, National Agriculture Statistics Service, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Economic Research Service, the University of Missouri’s Center for Applied Research and Environmental Systems (CARES) and others to illuminate our regional food system. Please note that data from the USDA’s 2007 Census of Agriculture and the USDA’s National Agriculture Statistics Service considers Saint Louis City to be within Saint Louis County. Therefore, 2007 data from USDA divides the region into 58 counties while older reports divide the region’s data into 59 counties.

<sup>1</sup>For border counties of the “100-mile radius” region, those with more than half of their total area in the region were fully included in our study. Those counties with less than half of their total area in the region were fully excluded from the study.



## The Study

In compiling this Study we began with the people who live on this land. We looked at the Foodshed to understand how many of us live here and how we eat. We looked at existing data to provide a picture of our food system while we have also invited additional research to refine that picture and clarify specifics in our region.

Chapter 1 focuses simply on where we live and work. Chapter 2 examines food-related health issues and food access challenges. We have been struck by the chasm between the abundance of calories and the scarcity of fiber and vitamins in our food. We eat too much of foods that are less healthy, and too few of the fruits and vegetables we need for good health. The consequences of our food choices are evident in our health.

In Chapter 3, we ask what do we spend on food and where does that money go. We learn about how our food dollar travels. Our global food system is packed with irony: we are aware of the ease with which we can get produce from the other side of the planet and yet there are some areas within 100 miles that lack ready access to fresh produce.

We look at our land and farms in Chapter 4 to see where our best agricultural land is and what our regional geography supports. In Chapter 5, we examine what our farmers are growing today, what they once grew, and what they might grow. This has shown us the

links between what grows on our farmland and our growing waist lines. In Chapter 6, we also look at livestock raised and consumed in our region. In Chapter 7, we acknowledge the relationships upon which our health and the health of our environment depend.

Finally, we offer Conclusions and Recommendations citing promising examples both in and outside our region.

This Study aims to be a step in the journey to a food system that sustains our bodies, conserves our water and land, restores our ecosystems, and strengthens our economy. We have written this Study in the belief that if we nourish the land, the land can nourish our communities.

MCE hopes that this Study is informative, useful, and motivating. We hope it encourages you to think about your health, your family's health, your community, and our food system. We hope it gets you talking with your neighbors, family, local restaurant owners, government officials, and entrepreneurs about making the people of the Saint Louis Regional Foodshed healthier, more mindful of our food choices, more connected, and more self-sustaining. We hope it inspires you to grow and eat local food that's good for families and for the planet.