

I BELIEVE

'Get to know who and where your food comes from'

Food at its best is the essence of place and a celebration of the human spirit. Food is a story. The more we partake in this tasty narrative, the healthier we are and the healthier our communities. In Vermont, it's easy to explore our edible landscape. With more cheesemakers and craft breweries

Chris Howell

Chris Howell is the founder of Vermont Farm Tours. Contact him at 922-7346 or chris@vermontfarmtours.com.

per capita than any other state, seeking out the source of our food is not only possible, but a delicious endeavor.

I recently started Vermont Farm Tours, a culinary tour company that allows guests to enjoy Vermont's beautiful landscape while connecting with the artisans and farmers that make our food. Eating real food with the person who made it on the land that produced it is a powerful experience. And that experience is increasing in demand.

According to the USDA Census of Agriculture, agri-tourism in Vermont grew from \$12.5 million in 2002 to \$24.4 million in 2007. We are all hungry to explore new places — and when that journey highlights the taste of place, we discover a lasting appreciation for the land, our food, and the people who grow it.



GLENN RUSSELL, Free Press

Chris Howell, owner and guide at Vermont Farm Tours, pulls weeds in a community garden on Archibald Street in Burlington on Thursday.

However, satisfying our culinary curiosity is not the only reason to seek out local foods. Evidence suggests our health is intimately connected to the health of our food system. According to Michael Pollan's "In Defense of Food," in 1960 Americans spent 17.5 percent of their income on food and 5.2 percent on health care. Today, those numbers are nearly reversed. We currently spend 9.9 percent on food and 16 percent on health care. One piece of this puzzle is certainly the hidden long-term health costs of cheap processed food.

Part of the solution is quite simple: Get to know from whom and where your food comes. Putting a face and farm to your food imbues it with a sense of place that makes it more rewarding to buy, prepare and share. With the Queen City's thriving local foods scene, it is no surprise that in 2008 the Center for Disease Control rated Burlington the healthiest city in the country.

Whatever your reason for getting to know the food on your plate, the act of reconnecting with your

agricultural community can be as easy or involved as you choose. Whether you grab an heirloom tomato from a farmstand on your way home from work, or join an eat local challenge and consume only foods produced within 100 miles of your home, your life is sure to change for the better.

A friend and I have a Tuesday tradition of buying veggies at Burlington's Old North End Farmers Market. Later in the week we get together to have a small harvest celebration and glory in our bounty. We connect with friends, learn about what's in season, explore new flavors, and spend both cash and food stamps in our own neighborhood.

So, dig in to Vermont's cornucopia and become a part of a rich culinary story. Invite a friend over to garden. Try a new vegetable. Take a farm tour. Get involved in your local community garden. Prepare a meal with your kids. Make it so that dinner is not a chore but rather an opportunity to reconnect with friends, family and your own backyard.

After all, you are where you eat.

■ **ON THE NET:** Visit www.vermontfarmtours.com to find out more about the organization and its mission