

Bringing Sustainable Plant-Based Dining Options to Rural California

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Climate change and diet-caused chronic illnesses are two major issues facing the United States and the world as a whole. Government action and international accords are necessary for creating long-term large-scale change, however, small changes on a local level can have an impact and create a blueprint for others to take similar actions. This paper will outline how to begin making changes in a small-town America to help improve the health of the land and the people while working within the confines of the culture in the area.

Fallbrook is a small agricultural town in Southern California with a population of roughly 33,000 people. Primarily a conservative area, the idea of climate change is not readily accepted. There is, however, a strong focus on community. This community focused culture leads to the promotion of local businesses and coming to the aid of those in need within the community. The poverty rate of Fallbrook is over 16%, which is more than 5% higher than the national average (US Census Bureau, 2020). This high rate of poverty has resulted in food insecurity for a large number of families in the community. To address this, Fallbrook has a large food pantry which provides nutritionally balanced food boxes which includes a large amount of fresh produce. Along with the food pantry, Fallbrook has a community garden which allows individuals, families, and groups to reserve and use garden plots without payment. The climate in the area allows for the community garden to be utilized year-round.

Located in North County, San Diego, Fallbrook has hot summers and mild winters. This mild semi-arid climate has created the ideal environment for year-round mixed crop farming, of which the region has in abundance. Fallbrook has a mixture of large and small commercial farms, as well as small hobby farms. There are no meat or poultry producing commercial farms within Fallbrook. The only animal products produced are eggs farmed in the area by small

commercial producers. This combination of agriculture, food aid, and community responsibility create the perfect environment for a local café to improve the healthfulness of its meals while also reducing the amount of greenhouse gasses it produces.

The Fallbrook Art Center is a local art gallery that promotes local artists and provides funds for art programs in the community. The art center also hosts a small café called Café des Artistes, of which I am a weekly patron. As all my work and school is remote, I spend Friday afternoons doing homework in their outdoor seating enjoying a cup of coffee and getting to know the chef and staff. The café focuses on a European style menu that is full of rich foods, meats, and fish. Alcohol is served with each menu which includes brunch, lunch, and dinner. It sources some of the produce locally and will occasionally feature a local wine. This would be an ideal setting to begin making changes to create a healthier more sustainable future for Fallbrook.

A “Local Lunches” menu that features only local foods produced in Fallbrook would be a good start to produce healthy meals while tapping into the community sensibilities of the area. Consumers show preferences for locally produced foods, making this not only a healthier option but also financially sound one as well (Bonjec et al, 2019). Some of the produce used by Café des Aristes is currently sourced locally. This proposal will strengthen the existing relationships with local farmers while introducing the opportunity to create more. This will also increase the amount of locally sourced food items and reduce the amount of animal products available build the menu. The only readily available local animal product is eggs, including quail eggs. Quail eggs are often seen as a delicacy so the utilization of local quail eggs would be in keeping not only with the reduction of meat products used but also with the European flavors the restaurant is known for.

Wine is also a menu staple in this café. It is unlikely that wine would be removed from the menu at this time. Attempting to reduce the alcohol consumption, especially from local wineries, would receive pushback and could harm the reputation of the café. Promoting local wines only could have the opposite effect as it plays into the preference for locally sourced products and maintain strong community relationships. While wine is not the healthiest, if sourced locally it reduces the amount of carbon emissions from transporting wine from other regions while promoting the plant-based “Local Lunches” menu. Local beverages combined with a meat free local menu would reduce the amount of meat, processed, and unhealthy foods available, increase the amount of locally grown produce, and reduce the emissions used to transport food and wine to the café.

To tackle food insecurity and food waste, Café des Artistes should donate its unused produce, and all food scraps created from fruits and vegetables. Café Des Artists is only open for half of the week which means any produce that is not used by the end of the week must sit in a refrigerator for 3 days awaiting the next open day. Instead of risking the potential for this food to go bad it should be donated to the local food pantry instead. By donating this produce it increases the likelihood that the food will actually be eaten while reducing the amount of food waste that will end up in landfills. The next part of this proposal is to donate food scraps, such as onion papers and carrot tops that are created during food preparation to the local community garden compost piles. Composting creates a nutrient rich soil which can be added to gardens beds and reduce the reliance on ecologically harmful synthetic fertilizers. Donating these scraps to the community garden compost piles also reduces the food waste going into landfills. Food waste in landfills results in the production of the greenhouse gas methane due to anerobic decomposition (US Environmental Protection Agency [EPA], 2021). However, the open-air composting used in

the community garden does not undergo anaerobic decomposition and so reduces the amount of methane produced while also increasing carbon sequestration by soil trapping CO₂ (Kuittinen et al, 2016). Increasing access to free compost also reduces the cost of using the garden making it more available to those who need it. Studies also indicate, people who utilize community gardens are more likely to eat more fresh produce. In the case of the Fallbrook Community Garden, it addresses food insecurity, the need for greater access to healthy food, and the increased willingness to try a variety of fruits and vegetables necessary for a healthy diet (Carney et al, 2012).

The combination of these two proposals aids in efforts to reduce the amount of meat eaten during lunch while promoting healthier plant-based foods. Utilizing local produce and donating unused produce as well as food scraps helps to increase both food sovereignty and food security by bolstering the local farming community, putting the power of best farm practices in local hands, and increasing access to healthy foods to those who need it. This will also result in increased produce consumption not only by patrons and staff of the café, but also to those in the community who receive donations and those who participate in the community garden.

On an environmental level, this reduces the amount of CO₂ emissions of running the cafe by decreasing the amount of transportation needed to acquire food and increasing the amount of CO₂ sequestered by the soil through composting and gardening. Some studies have found backyard gardening results in an increase CO₂ soil sequestration by upwards of 8%, and the community garden is essentially large-scale backyard garden (Kuittinen, 2016). Lastly utilizing compost reduces the reliance on commercial fertilizers. Large scale use of these fertilizers releases the greenhouse gas nitrous oxide into the atmosphere (EPA, 2021). Compost is nutrient

rich and can take the place of some, if not all, of these fertilizers reducing not only nitrous oxide but also reducing the cost of gardening.

While one restaurant can really only make a minimal change, if it is successful in these endeavors, it can pave the way for other local restaurants to follow suit. In Fallbrook, local farmers set up booths at the weekly farmers market on the same street as all the restaurants. Customers can have lunch and see the direct relationship between the farmer that produced the ingredients and the restaurant that just served them a meal. Promoting a new menu that directly benefits these farmers will result in easy mutual advertising and feed into the culture of community that is so strong in this town. This could also lead to an increase in purchasing local produce if café patrons are introduced to new foods before they go to the market to buy them (Carney et al, 2012). In a town of small businesses, it is easy to see how one successful endeavor into sustainability and keeping dollars spent within the local community, can lead to other businesses creating similar programs to increase their own profits and promote the local farming community.

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