

Kaitlyn Gengarely Explores Locally Sourced Food for Neilson Dining Hall

It was the mealy, tasteless tomatoes at Neilson Dining Hall that got to Kaitlyn Gengarely. She figured they had been picked in California or Mexico while still green, gassed with ethylene to ripen them, and trucked across the country. That didn't make sense, she thought, when lush, juicy tomatoes are grown right here in New Jersey. Like any good scientist, the environmental policy major from Hamden, Connecticut, decided to investigate. Could Neilson serve locally grown food?



"I wanted to do something that everyone can understand," Gengarely said of her George H. Cook Honors Program thesis. "Everyone wants to eat fresh food." It's not just a matter of quality, she added. Local sourcing, although not always less expensive, supports area farmers, saves energy, and is easier on the environment. "It's the right thing to do."

Gengarely took her idea to Andrew F. Pleasant, assistant professor of human ecology at the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences. He and Kevin Lyons, the university's purchasing director for New Brunswick and Camden, helped her design a study that would analyze existing local food sourcing programs at Yale, Pennsylvania State, and Brown universities, as well as the University of Connecticut, to see if they held any lessons for Rutgers.

Gengarely found that local sourcing can be more expensive. Local and regional farmers cannot always reliably supply big institutional buyers like Rutgers with seasonal produce, nor can they capture the economies of scale and government subsidies available to large corporate farmers. The result is that they often need to charge more despite shorter shipping distances.

However, Gengarely did discover some positive potential of local sourcing. At Brown, for example, higher startup costs were mitigated in a few years as more students, attracted by higher-quality food, enrolled in dining plans. Kitchen staff developed their skills and pride in their craft as they work with less processed foods. For instance, they learn to peel and mince whole garlic instead of opening a jar. "They feel more like chefs than cooks," Gengarely said.

Gengarely is quick to point out that Rutgers is already exploring local sources. "They buy some things locally and do a couple of events that showcase local food and businesses," she said. But New Jersey's food distribution system does not favor the state's farmers. And changing the way things are

done at a large institution like Rutgers can be challenging. “Sometimes, it’s just a matter of perception,” Gengarely said.

Gengarely’s Abstract:

“Locally grown foods at Rutgers University: A pilot program for Neilson Dining Hall”

Locally grown food purchasing is a response to the dominant food system in which few food producers provide many people with what they eat, nutrition can be compromised, family farms are lost and food is transported long distances. However, there is a lack of practical projects to introduce local food into purchasing at colleges and universities. The goal of this study was to design a local farm-to-college program to support the farming community and economy of the Garden State that will be able to persist without adding costs to Rutgers. My strategy involved a combination of in-depth, semi-structured interviews and academic literature research to determine benefits, barriers, and methods other universities have encountered or used successfully to implement local food purchasing programs. The findings of this research will contribute to the growing movement towards eating locally.