

# Reap

## What You

Local Burger owner Hilary Brown



## A Kansas college town revels in the latest food revolution—eating locally.

By Sarah Smarsh    Photography By Roy Inman

**L**ocal Burger, a fast food joint in Lawrence, Kan., lives up to its name. The patties of grass-fed beef and elk, the buffalo meat in the chili—even the cheddar cheese, tofu filets and honey—travel an average of 20 miles from family farms to hungry bellies at Local Burger. Compare that to the average 1,500 miles that food travels to most American consumers.

Following years of research on regional growing seasons, owner Hilary Brown opened the restaurant two years ago in the town, which is an hour southwest of Kansas City. She stocks the kitchen with organic lettuce and onions, and her mission statement includes the word “local.”

“I’m not a purist. We use coconut milk for our smoothies, and that’s not a Kansas product,” Brown says. “But I do what I can.”

Local Burger is just one of many links between Lawrence residents and area farmers and ranchers. The town, home to about 80,000 people and the University of Kansas, boasts a booming community food cooperative, the oldest and largest farmers’ market in Kansas, and a new, locally minded grocer in its historic downtown area. Several of the town’s independent restaurants put local produce on their menus. Even grocery stores owned by national corporations such as Hy-Vee and Kroger carry milk from local dairies at Lawrence locations.

## LOCAL IS GOOD

Area rancher Debbie Yarnell, who supplies beef to Local Burger, is quick to distinguish between “organic” and “local.” Though her grass-fed beef and lamb are raised without hormones and antibiotics, they don’t carry organic certification from the United States Department of Agriculture. That would require processing at a special facility more than 200 miles away.

“A label of ‘organic’ doesn’t necessarily mean the food is better,” Yarnell says. Most certified organic food travels hundreds of miles to grocers, guzzling resources such as fuel and packaging along the way.



Nancy O’Connor, education and outreach director at Lawrence consumer-owned food cooperative The Community Mercantile, says the top priority for shoppers should be a local connection with their food.

“An organic apple from New Zealand is great for being free of chemicals and pesticides,” O’Connor says. “But a locally grown apple is much fresher, and you can ask the farmer how he grew it.”

O’Connor says Lawrence is on the pulse of a broader shift in the collective consciousness. The co-op, known by locals as “The Merc,” began as a small group of free thinkers in 1974. Last year, the store took in \$8.5 million in sales of organic and local products.

“What originally started as a counterculture system has become something mainstream,” O’Connor says.

## FRESH FOOD, FRESH IDEAS

Bringing local food to mainstream consumers isn’t easy in a bustling urban culture. But Lawrence has tackled the challenge from many angles.

The local community has held town hall meetings, brainstorming ways to support “sustainable” agriculture that address issues like fair income for farmers, environmental concerns and respect for animals.

And area farmers themselves lobbied Lawrence grocers to stock their products. Laurel Iwig, who owns and operates Iwig Family Dairy, 15 miles west of Lawrence, contacted the corporate headquarters of several area grocery chains, hoping they would carry Iwig milk. The first call didn’t go so well. But another store agreed to give local dairy a whirl—and the ultra-fresh whole, two-percent, skim, chocolate and strawberry milk flew off the shelves.

“Once you get people to try it, they’re usually hooked,” says Iwig, whose third-generation dairy now supplies close to 30 stores in more than 10 towns.

Brown, too, had to create “new systems” to realize her concept for Local Burger. First, she approached growers at the Lawrence farmers’ market with her idea. Now, whereas her competitors receive all-in-one frozen food deliveries from global corporations, Brown checks off invoices from 40 local farmers and ranchers each week.





Stephanie Thomas pauses from setting flat posts on Spring Creek Farm in Baldwin City.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO



### VISIT LOCALHARVEST.ORG

The Web site provides an easy search option to locate markets, farms and eating alliances near you.

### SHOP AT A NEARBY FARMERS' MARKET.

You'll learn which foods are in season for your region and have the opportunity to ask farmers and ranchers about their farms and growing practices.

### TAKE A DRIVE TO AREA FARMS.

Most farmers are happy to directly sell you fresh eggs, milk, fruit and vegetables. Pick-your-own berry farms also make for a fun weekend activity with the family.

### JOIN A COMMUNITY- SUPPORTED AGRICULTURE PROGRAM.

Pay a lump sum at the beginning of each growing season and then share in the program's products year round.

### DON'T MISTAKE "ORGANIC" FOR "LOCAL."

While certified organic foods meet USDA regulations, they may have traveled hundreds of miles before reaching your grocer.

### THROW A LOCALLY GROWN DINNER PARTY.

Challenge your friends to bring dishes that include at least one locally grown ingredient.

Brown says her diverse network of suppliers now anticipates her restaurant's needs. And with a buyer they can count on, those farmers have begun investing in equipment in order to extend their growing seasons.

Yarnell says that as Local Burger began to attract national attention for its unique concept, demand for her product exploded.

"I remember the day that Local Burger was on 'The Today Show,'" Yarnell says. "Hilary called me and said, 'Bring more meat.'"

## BIG LOCAL BUSINESS

The entire city seems to echo the "bring more" call

would be a tuna burger," she says.

Right now, she's focusing on her flagship Lawrence enterprise, which caters to many groups, including children with food allergies, vegetarians and manly men seeking elk burgers.

"The research shows that people of all ages, races and socioeconomic classes are interested in healthy foods," Brown says. But, she admits that cost might be a deterrent.

Iwig says the higher cost of eating locally is warranted. "It gets to you fresher and is all coming from one place," she says. Her dairy's milk is just a day old—as opposed to the average of three to five days—when it reaches shelves. And the milk maintains



Sidebar: Karen Pendleton of Pendleton Country Market; above: Mark Lumpe and daughter Mia with produce from Wakarusa Valley Farms.

to farmers. The Lawrence farmers' market recently relocated its main Saturday event to a larger downtown parking lot to accommodate 80-plus local farmers, ranchers and craftsmen.

Yarnell, who sells at the market in addition to supplying Local Burger, believes that such successful initiatives might allow small family farms to be reborn, following decades of foreclosure and demise.

"This place has been here since the '20s," she says of her farm. "When I bought it six years ago, people around here were so happy to have this remain a working farm."

For Brown, whose restaurant recently was featured on Robert Redford's "The Green" program on the Sundance Channel, opportunities for market-specific franchising seem endless.

"If there was a Local Burger on the East Coast, there

its flavor due to the gentle processing and glass bottles. The product costs about \$3.15 per half-gallon—or \$1.65, if you return the glass bottle for the \$1.50 deposit.

Brown says she wants fresh, sustainable food to be accessible for the average person. As interest in local food grows, she says, options will become cheaper and more convenient.

"It's gonna take people who are committed to the environment, health and quality foods," says Brown, who recently handed out the first annual Miles Awards—named for the short distance of miles between Local Burger and area farms—to her long list of suppliers. "We can start to make a new market." ■

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