



Grow more of what we eat... Eat more of what we grow

Fi Martynoga traces the development of Nourish, Scotland's first sustainable local food network, and highlights some inspiring local food initiatives.

Our current way of importing and distributing food is precarious. This seems evident only to some. But Scotland is fortunate in that, among those prescient few, there are people who have banded together to form Scotland's first sustainable food network, Nourish. It is an umbrella organisation set up to connect the many local food projects, ranging from the now familiar farmers' markets to growing schemes, community supported agriculture and projects in local schools, which are springing up throughout the country. In October 2009, an impressive 80 project leaders from these initiatives came together in Dunbar to share experience and sort out some ways of cooperating. Nourish now embraces enterprises from Moffat to Shetland.

Following the first meeting, the 'Declaration of Dunbar' was proclaimed. The main tenet is 'We are working towards a sustainable Scotland in which, in every region, we produce more of what we eat, and eat more of what we produce'. Those at that initial meeting definitely had their eyes on the Transition approach, trying to prepare communities for the inevitable shocks to our food production and delivery system that must come about as society adjusts to the reality that the world cannot live for ever beyond its carbon budget. Oil will not be cheap for much longer, so Nourish is keen to help create a locally-based, seasonal food system with shorter supply chains that will be fair and accessible to all. Behind that is the belief that local roots and strong communities will

offer greater resilience than any panic measures. Though few of the schemes under the Nourish umbrella are actual co-operatives, all rely on people cooperating.

Tackling the veg-growing void

A classic food co-op might be a group purchasing scheme. Such groups, often using Green City as their source, have been going for years. They save their members money but they do not guarantee the local origin, or the manner of growing, of the produce. Jane Gray of Lets Eat Local in Moffat decided to go further with a purchasing co-operative that would strive to put together a weekly box containing locally sourced fresh produce. It has received start-up assistance from – and is to some extent modelled on – a London project called Growing Communities, and is the only one of several regional schemes that is intent on including both fruit and vegetables in the boxes. Bravely, she started this scheme to promote local food without a market garden in sight, save for her own

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vegetable patch! She laughed wryly when she explained that some of the first boxes of vegetables distributed to local households actually had very little in them that was locally grown.

Sadly, this reflects the demise of commercial horticulture in Scotland. To address that great lack of locally grown veg, Gray plans to encourage farmers and growers all over her region to revive the habit of putting down the odd field corner to basics like tatties, neeps or carrots. Thus, the thrust of the project is to shorten supply chains and strengthen the capacity of commercial producers to make a living. The memory of vegetable growing survives, and some of the equipment still languishes in barns. The incentive to farmers could be that such crops are now more valuable than they were 20 years ago, as the demand for genuinely fresh produce is going up. To record her findings, she has a regional food mapping project for her bio-region that seems likely to show up a great vegetable-growing void between Loch Arthur near Dumfries and Whitmuir Organics near West Linton.

In the meantime, before any truly local farmers get going, Lets Eat Local is purchasing from growers in East Lothian and from Whitmuir Organics. Gray has discovered that much organic produce in Scotland, if not grown by the likes of Whitmuir

Farm, often comes from continental Europe rather than the north of England, or Lincolnshire, though both these growing regions are nearer. Both she and Whitmuir Organics are addressing that broader supply chain problem. All this takes time and dedication. Currently the scheme is servicing 27 households but the idea is catching on, helped by the weekly newsletter included with the box. It tells people where their produce has come from and explains many complex food issues invisible to the average supermarket customer. Volunteers help make all this possible, and the intelligent, almost cost-free distribution system (using designated pick-up points instead of delivery) makes the whole scheme viable.

Shetland's unexpected bounty

On the most northerly inhabited island in Britain is another brave venture. Unst Regeneration Growers' Enterprise (URGE) is a private initiative with a community purpose. On a site that was formerly sour hillside above the North Sea, with a thin, stony soil, four people are demonstrating that it is possible to grow almost anything, almost anywhere. They describe themselves as "like-minded, slightly wrinkly, amateur gardeners with very little money and plenty of contacts". Having perceived a need, and with no grant money forthcoming, they just got going. They use three acres

of their own land and have great success re-using discarded material – old nets, barrels and wood – on the patch. With the help of poly tunnels and locally gathered seaweed and sheep manure, they are producing a prodigious amount of salad each summer and a good deal of other stuff year-round. Even in February they can offer their customers Brussels sprouts, kale, cabbage, rocket, spinach, carrots, parsley and eggs. It's a green oasis in what was formerly a wet desert.

Much of URGE's produce goes to the restaurant at the Saxa Vord Resort, a former RAF base. Together, they won the Highlands & Islands Tourism Award 2011 for Best Working Together Partnership. Other big purchasers are the village shop and Unst's only hotel, while people also find their way to the garden gate to buy. So this venture, like Lets Eat Local, does not have significant distribution costs. And Sarah McBurnie, the spokesperson for the group, is pleased at the great reduction in food miles that the growing scheme has brought about for the island. "Before we set up, all fresh produce was coming via

Opposite page, clockwise from left: URGE produce for Saxa Vord resort; building raised beds at the new Lochend Secret Garden; Breadshare breadbasket. This page, below left: riddling compost in URGE's polytunnel; organic cattle at Whitmuir Farm. Photos: URGE, Ally Hurcikova, Geoff Crowe, Whitmuir Organics.



mainland Britain. It was probably old by the time it got to Scotland and, after many miles and two more ferries to get to Unst, it was scarcely worth eating. Now both local people and visitors can enjoy really fresh, good quality produce. We don't make any money on the venture but we have good food ourselves, and anyone one on the island who desires it can enjoy our produce, too."

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Communities growing and baking

Lochend Secret Garden in eastern Edinburgh is a new community-led project that hopes to create an inclusive community greenspace where people can come together, grow vegetables and learn about sustainability, as well as attend sessions on storytelling, cooking, art and music... or simply relax in the sensory gardens. The project was set up by Carr Gomm – a national charity that supports people with learning disabilities, mental health problems, addictions and other issues to lead more independent lives – so the particular emphasis is on inclusion of harder-to-reach, vulnerable people. However, the garden is entirely community-led and built. Having received planning permission for the site last year, 50 raised beds, a poly tunnel and community shed were constructed this spring. In addition, local residents have installed a forest garden and will be caring for, working in and learning in the garden all year. Free Grow your Own classes

Above: Organically raised chickens at Whitmuir Farm in the Borders. Photo: Whitmuir Organics.

for residents have begun and will continue throughout the season. Ally Hurchikova, the community project worker, says: "It's wonderful to see Lochend Secret Garden really starting to blossom now, thanks to hard work from folk across the community. The best is yet to come, though, and we always welcome new faces."

Another new venture, the Breadshare Bakery, is getting going at Whitmuir. Inspired by Andrew Whitley, author of *Bread Matters* and former owner of the famous Village Bakery at Melmerby, it is a Community Interest Company that is raising some of its capital from the public in the form of 'Loaf Loans' that will pay interest in bread, by means of six-monthly vouchers. Andrew's naturally fermented bread earned a national reputation when he was at the Village Bakery and the baking done for the project launch a few months ago showed that the Breadshare team are adept at using his well-tried recipes and techniques. It was delicious and varied, with wonderful, moist wholemeal at one end of the range and some sophisticated Italian loaves at the other.

Breadshare has a group of community bakers, all trained by Andrew. The group has created a signature sourdough bread, called the Border Country loaf, which already contains 20% flour milled from wheat grown on Whitmuir farm. The rest of the Breadshare flour comes from Yorkshire Organic Millers and from Gilchesters, just over the border in Northumberland. It's lovely stone-ground, organic flour, and from the local bio-region, but Pete Ritchie at Whitmuir would like to shorten that supply chain even further. He is encouraging some East Lothian farmers to sow Aszita biodynamic winter wheat, which should do well in the relatively sunny east, and he also hopes to produce some more wheat at Whitmuir. Breadshare has plans to demonstrate the 'grain chain' throughout the local area, helping

groups to experience real bread from planting, through harvesting and milling to sharing their loaves.

The food fight is on

No account of Nourish and its activities could be complete without due homage being paid to Pete Ritchie of Whitmuir, and to Mike Small. Ritchie works tirelessly to promote local, organic food for Scotland while Small, the initiator of the Fife Diet, was one of the first to raise the profile of local food in Scotland and has helped inspire many subsequent projects in other localities. He is still an active member of the Fife Diet team and a wonderfully well-informed speaker who can set local communities going. Both he and Ritchie are determined that Nourish should become a strong voice for influencing the Scottish Government's food policy, currently dominated by conventional farmers and the big six supermarkets.

Ultimately, the key to long term food sustainability is restoring the production and distribution of food to our neighbourhoods; the big voids that have yawned in the last 50 years must be filled again. Instead of an 80/20 split of imported to UK-produced food, we need to work towards the reverse, 20/80. Moreover, most of the larger proportion should not merely be Scottish but as local as possible. That would make a radical and positive change for the Scottish economy. With supermarkets continuing to expand their domain, the struggle is on. But the lively forum of Nourish is bringing together those active in the fight, and hopefully their push for a change in legislation will see European agricultural subsidies diverted from the largest and wealthiest land owners to the small farming concerns that need them most, and bring about new laws to enshrine communities' rights to grow.

www.nourishscotland.org.uk
www.letseatlocal.org.uk
www.unstmarketgardens.shetland.co.uk
www.lrcommunitygrowing.ning.com
www.whitmuirtheorganicplace.co.uk
www.fifediet.co.uk

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