

# VIROQUA FOOD COOPERATIVE

PEAS O U P

## THE GOOD FOOD REVOLUTION Driftless Style

MARCH/APRIL 2010

“I don’t call this a movement anymore, I refer to it as a revolution”

Thus spoke Will Allen, founder of Milwaukee’s urban agriculture project “Growing Power.” Allen was the opening keynote speaker of the recent Midwest Value-Added Conference and Wisconsin Local Food Summit in Eau Claire that VFC produce manager Dani Lind and I attended. If one is going to be a part of a revolution, this is one that is exciting, intellectually stimulating, full of relationships with all kinds of people, and tasty. **The Good Food Revolution.**



Will Allen

Here in the Driftless we have been ahead of the curve in many ways, but the challenge of the missing distribution and processing infrastructure needed to market our products to local grocers, schools and institutions remains.

We are preparing to meet that challenge, now assisted by the award of a **\$40,000 Buy Local Buy Wisconsin Grant** to VEDA (Vernon Economic Development Association). You may have seen the photo of the ribbon cutting at Premier Meats in the Vernon County Broadcaster, with a short article announcing the award, presented that day by Wisconsin Ag. Secretary Rod Nilsestuen to develop the Western Wisconsin Local Foods Initiative. It is a story worth expounding on, one that is transforming our local food system and our local economy.

### 2006

In January of 2006 VEDA was formed by a group of community leaders and business executives from throughout Vernon County. VEDA hired **Sue Noble** as Executive Director, whose philosophy of economic development is to grow communities from within by creating the environment for economic development to occur. As a way to capitalize on the creative people and entrepreneurial spirit here, Noble partnered with Laura Brown from Crawford County UW Extension to start the Vernon/Crawford Inventors and Entrepreneurs Club.



Premier Meats co-owner Dan Jacobson, VEDA director Sue Noble, Premier Meats co-owner Terry Hoyum

### 2007

In April **Jessica Luhning** moved with her husband Macon to Viroqua from Bellingham, Washington. Luhning had finished her graduate work in Rural Land Use & Agricultural Planning and had managed a farmland preservation program. She and her husband wanted to move back to the Midwest, and found Viroqua through online research. Jessica was hired

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Jessica Luhning

by the Valley Stewardship Network days after arriving; Macon found a position with Organic Valley.

At this time, VSN was a quiet organization. Its focus was on water quality issues, and Luhning's 15 hours a week was plenty of time to accomplish her work.

In October the State of Wisconsin Legislature unanimously passed the Buy Local Buy Wisconsin Bill. The first statewide program supporting local

food, the goal of the BLBW initiative was to shift 10 percent of the state's consumer and business food expenditures to foods grown by Wisconsin's producers.

In the fall of '07 Vernon County was faced with its first CAFO issue. Luhning was passionate about preventing the contamination that industrial agriculture could wreak, and made a case to the VSN board that as an organization, they needed to take a stand. Suddenly the controversy thrust this quiet, unknown organization into the limelight.

The VSN board quickly realized that the CAFO issue was very divisive. Rather than focus on what they were against, they formed the **Food and Farm Initiative** in November 2007. "We want to support our small farmers, so they remain viable," says Luhning. "If we're doing something positive, we bring awareness to the issues." VFC's Dani Lind became an active member of the FFI steering committee, and General Manager Jan Rasikas came aboard as a member of the advisory board.

The first task of the newly formed FFI was to complete a community food assessment. "Although VSN had a strong knowledge of water quality," Luhning said, "We didn't have a solid background or understanding of our local food system. We needed to do the research to legitimize ourselves so we could really be a strong voice against industrial agriculture; at the same time providing a strong foundation from which to develop a sustainable food system."

## 2008

In January *Locavore* was named *2007 word of the year*, an indication of the acceleration of the local food movement. Luhning, Rasikas, and I attended the DATCP Value-Added Conference that was now combined with the 2nd annual WI Local Food Summit.

Unknown to us, Rick Beckler of Sacred Heart Hospital, Eau Claire also attended this conference, with the express intent of procuring local food for the hospital. (See March 2009 Pea Soup) That meeting resulted in the creation of the Chippewa Valley Consortium. Later this year the first BLBW grants were made available, and the Consortium received funding to support its formation.

In September VFC participated in the second Eat Local Wisconsin Challenge and the first NCGA-sponsored Eat Local America Challenge, and partnered with FFI to host a sold-out Community Harvest Dinner (featuring all local foods) at the Viroqua High School cafeteria, with over 200 attendees.

The FFI steering committee was working hard on the community food assessment. Quickly realizing that they did not have the economic expertise needed, VSN hired **Ken Meter** of the **Crossroads Resource Center** to complete the economic assessment. While they had no intention of starting any other projects until the research was done, Americorp grants to provide positions for **Farm to School** projects became available, and with strong support from local schools, they jumped in. (See *Farm to School*, pg. 4)

## 2009-2010

In January Rasikas, Lind, representatives from two other Food Co-ops and I participated in a panel presentation "Retailers and Your Local Product" at the Value-Added Conference in Rochester, IL. While at the conference I met Rick Beckler at the Sacred Heart Hospital Booth. I learned that the hospital had committed to buying 10% of their food (\$200,000) from local sources, had formed a consortium of buyers & producers and received the BLBW grant. By June the consortium had transformed into the Producers and Buyers Co-op, a multi-stakeholder cooperative. This would prove to be a vital piece in providing VEDA with a working cooperative model of scaling up local food systems.

In May FFI completed the Community Food Assessment, (an impressive study well over 100 pages, available on the VSN website). Luhning stated that VSN gained a much better understanding of the food system through the assessment process, but "the number one benefit was the relationships we developed."

The study was presented to the community on May 21<sup>st</sup>. Ken Meter, who had done reports in 38 regions of 18 states, praised the efforts in the region, saying he believes "**local food may be the best path toward economic recovery.**" For example, consumers in Southwest Wisconsin spend \$208 billion on food from outside the region. If those consumers would purchase 25% of their food directly from local farmers, it would produce \$33 million of new farm income every year - enough to offset current farm production losses.

"The discussion here has been one of the more advanced discussions I've had on local food anywhere in the country," said Meter, "With the success of CROPP in this county, and other organizations and people, you have a lot of foundation to work with."

Now that the assessment was complete, FFI decided to focus on the **Gleaning Project**, one that they could do with the resources they

had - volunteer labor and relationships with the schools and farmers. Luhning had volunteered for a gleaning project back in Bellingham, and Becky Comeau, FFI member, had visited a gleaning project in Vermont.

Through the gleaning project FFI learned first hand about surplus food in the area going

to waste - they harvested 3000 lbs. of produce that season that otherwise would have rotted in the field. (See Sept. 09 Pea Soup). These "seconds" are high quality, sometimes odd-sized, but in the case of bumper crops, are simply "firsts" that would cost the farmers more to harvest than they would be able to sell them for. The lack of a market for seconds was very evident.

The Ohio-based NCR closed its Viroqua manufacturing plant in March. In July VEDA acquired the 100,000 square foot facility and its fifteen acres of land. "We have been working in partnership over the past several months with many local, regional, state and federal organizations to lay the foundation of support and funding for this project," said Noble. VFC's Jan Rasikas serves on the steering committee for the building project.

Over the summer Sonya Newenhouse of Madison Environmental Group had been hired by WTC-La Crosse to facilitate conversations



Nichole Penick with baby Cosmo, Sara Martinez, Dani Lind, Mary Lake

## good food revolution...continued from page 2

with other La Crosse institutions that wanted to increase local food in their food service programs and invited Sue Noble to participate. VSN had identified the need of a processing facility for seconds and developed relationships with area schools that were seeking local food through the Farm to School Program. All the pieces were coming together when the BLBW grant funding was announced. With the example of the Chippewa Valley Producers and Buyers Co-op in mind, they applied for the grant.

Luhning and Noble put the initial proposal together in two weeks and were one of 70 applicants. They were one of 30 invited to submit a full proposal. 22 letters of support from local institutions, business, NPO's and Farms were included in the grant proposal that would form a Local Foods Initiative to serve a five county region - Vernon, La Crosse, Crawford, Richland and Monroe.

A key part of the proposal was the development of a multi-stakeholder cooperative consisting initially of **five local producers**, **three large producer groups** (Organic Valley, Harvest Moon Farms and Keewaydin Organics), **four processors** (Keewaydin Organics, CROPP Cooperative, Westby Co-op Creamery and Premier Meats, Inc.) and **six institutions** (Western Technical College, UW-La Crosse, Vernon Memorial Hospital, Three Rivers Waldorf School, Viroqua Area Schools and Pleasant Ridge Waldorf School) to market, sell and distribute fresh and value-added food products. Four of the five institutions committed 10% of their food budgets to purchasing local food. VEDA received the largest grant of the nine proposals that were funded: **\$40,000 for two years**.

**Premier Meats** opened in December, a 12,000 square foot facility between Westby and Viroqua. A \$1.9 million dollar success story from VEDA's Entrepreneur Club, it added tremendous momentum to the local food activity in the region. Two-thirds of the building is dedicated to the processing of meat while the other third includes a retail shop hosting many local food items. The facility offers fresh and frozen beef, pork, lamb, dairy and additional products. It has the capacity to process 150 head of beef, as well as hogs and sheep.

Plans for the use of the former NCR building continue - the building will serve as a central distribution point for local produce in the BLBW grant. It will also house other local food businesses and provide space for local food community activities.

**Nicole Penick**, who was now the coordinator for FFI, became the coordinator for the new Western Wisconsin Local Foods Initiative. Nicole has a BA in Community Leadership & Development, and is working on her thesis project on Farm to Institution Food. Her work for FFI will also apply towards her Masters degree.

Even with the example of the Chippewa Valley Producers and Buyers Co-op, developing a multi-stakeholder cooperative is really breaking new ground. While this type of co-op is common in Europe and Canada, it is extremely rare in the US. Producers, Buyers, Processors, Distributors and Employees will all have a seat at the table in determining fair prices and co-op policies. It truly is a new paradigm for building a sustainable food system.

Noble and Luhning are excited about the prospects. **"We have the opportunity to be a showcase region for rebuilding rural economies in a sustainable way,"** says Luhning.

"The motivation to go for the grant was based on more than a year of work, planning and discussions about local food together," adds Noble. "The grant is also a great next step for a lot of the local businesses I'm working with, who focus on food and agriculture."

In addition to the crucial leadership provided by Luhning and Noble, nearly all the work from the Valley Stewardship Network's Food and Farm Initiative to this point had been done by volunteers - and without those committed enough to roll up their sleeves and take action, our community wouldn't be ready for the next steps in the Driftless

**Good Food Revolution.**

Nicole Penick



## OWNER CLASSIFIEDS

**FOR SALE:** BEVELED GLASS  
24"X48"; in excellent condition, \$50.  
608-489-2812.

**FOR SALE:** Chest of Drawers, Antique, Oak, Solid wood panel construction. Sturdy & in great condition! 37"x18"x47", 5 dovetailed drawers w/two oakwood knobs on each drawer, \$450, 608-489-2812

## JOIN AN EMAIL LIST

at <http://viroquafood.coop>

Sign up to receive email alerts:

- **Pea Soup:** You are notified when Pea Soup/bimonthly flyer is ready to download and taken off the snail mail list.
- **Fresh and Local Alerts:** Weekly email featuring unadvertised sales, arrival of local & fresh produce & Co-op events.

## NEW OWNERS WELCOME

We want to welcome the following new owners who joined the Co-op between Dec. 5, 2009 and Feb 9, 2010:

Eugenia Nordskog	Gary Noble
Donna Davis Oselka	Susan Noble
Andrew Berkshire	Larry Coleman
Laurel Bowers	Lynn Foster
Dawn Lewis	Greg Plotz
Kathryn Ashley-Wright	Elizabeth Ugo
Keith Wright	Eric Filter
Dian Krause	Mike Alexander
Samantha Laskowski	Angie Alexander
James Kell	Karla Cade
Dorothy M. Nehring	Erin Jorgensen
Ann Sherry	Wendy Fulwider
Catherine Shaw	Kari Anderson
Gary Leahy	Annie Coleman
Carol Lemoine	Judy Frydenlund
Kathleen Sullivan	Martha Miller
Robert Jackson	

## MOVED? MARRIED? CHANGED PHONE OR EMAIL?

Please notify VFC so we have accurate records & mailing information for you. Fill out the form at the member services counter or email Charlene at [marketing@viroquafood.coop](mailto:marketing@viroquafood.coop).

## CELEBRATING THE FOLLOWING STAFF ANNIVERSARIES:

- ★ Pam Marshall-Neil - 11 yrs - 04/08/99
- ★ Arwynn Wildingway - 6 yrs - 3/31/04
- ★ Luciana Felton - 3 yrs - 3/26/07
- ★ Sarah Peltier - 2 yr - 3/30/08
- ★ - 1 yr - 4/26/08
- ★ - 1 yr - 4/30/08