

Opening of the Winter Farmers Market, Rutland, VT. November 17, 2007

Local Food

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A few years ago, I looked up in wonder at this old Strand Theater, and thought to myself: it must have some use! So it is a real delight to celebrate today the opening of the Rutland Winter Farmers Market!

Many, many years ago, back in 1844, a group of pioneers started the world's first successful Co-op on Toad Lane in Rochdale, England (photo, right) to provide wholesome food at fair prices to the people of the town. They had a remarkable vision of cooperation that has spread around the world.

“Quality goods and services, Open and voluntary membership; Democratic control (one member, one vote, including women); promotion of Education, distribution of surplus to members in proportion to their purchases (this incidentally became the first savings bank for women, because they got back a percentage of their grocery purchases every year as cash)”.



My grand-parents were members of that first co-op, and as a child they proudly showed me that store in Rochdale where the co-op movement began. As a lifetime member here, I am delighted to see this co-op, the Rutland Natural Foods Market, and the Farmers Market start on this grand adventure with the backing of so many in this community. It is one vital step in the re-localization of our food supply.

You all know the challenges we face as a community. Oil prices are spiraling, as supply is not keeping up with global demand. Transporting food thousands of miles no longer makes any sense. Climate change is accelerating as our leaders are dragging their feet in shifting our economy away from fossil fuels. The bitter truth is that despite all the rhetoric, global CO₂ emissions are currently running higher than the highest IPCC emissions scenario, with consequences for our children and this earth, that today I will just recognize with a silent prayer. This summer, 40% of the Arctic icecap melted by September.

We have to change direction as a society. We must focus our attention clearly on where we need to go, and work with the earth not against it. This winter Farmers Market is a perfect symbol of our hopes. The melting of the frozen north means that our growing season has lengthened nearly three weeks in the 30 years I have been gardening in Vermont, and what a difference that makes. Let me tell a little story, and make a presentation.

Back in the depths of last winter I was at a show at the Paramount Theater, and I overheard Carol Tashie sitting a few rows behind me, regretting that the coop had no one to compost their waste produce: it was still going in the trash! I turned around and said “I will collect it weekly and compost it”! And I have, and this spring I put the first batch of compost on my sweet potatoes; and of course they grew even better than last year. So in gratitude, to complete this circle of life, I wish to present this gift of Pittsford organic sweet potatoes grown with co-op compost to Becca, the general manager of the Rutland Natural Foods Market. Thank-you!

Do you remember the inspiring words of Frances Moore Lappé last year to the Rutland Area Farm and Food Link. They have echoed in my mind all year. She summed up her 35 years work on global food issues with a motto of just two words

“Bold Humility”,

Bold because it takes courage to face change, and

Humility because we have no idea of all that is possible, once we start to work creatively with the earth! We need this Winter Farmers Market. Let us work together to make it a great success!

Dr. Alan Betts is the past-president of the Vermont Academy of Science and Engineering