

Agricultural Documentary Film Provides Local Food For Thought

Brooke Beam, PhD

Ohio State University Extension, Highland County

Agriculture and Natural Resources/Community Development Extension Educator

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A few weeks ago, I attended the screening and accompanying local foods dinner of *Farmers For America*, a pro-agriculture documentary film focused on the trials and tribulations of young farmers in the United States. Being a young farmer myself, I could relate to the challenges discussed in the film.

Did you know that the average age of the American farmer is over 60 years old? Did you know that the startup for many aspiring young farmers is out of reach because of high land and equipment prices? Or that 50 percent of America's agricultural equity will change hands in the next 15 years?

The solution to these challenges that several young farmers are implementing in their operations are niche markets and diversification. There is a movement in society to want local foods, produced with niche practices, and for the consumer to have a personal connection with the farmer. Essentially, that is what several of the young farmers in *Farmers for America* are doing for their business strategies, and these practices were working for most of the individuals shown in the film.

Although the majority of the United States' population is disconnected from agricultural production, consumers are more interested in their food products than ever before. In 1991, consumers of meat products were most concerned with external fat, palatability, tenderness, and marbling. Fast forward to 2016 where consumer concerns about meat selections were focused on food safety, eating satisfaction, how and where the animal was raised, and the visual characteristics of the meat. The change in consumer perceptions and the concerns that are influencing their purchasing decisions are creating opportunities for agricultural producers.

One of the farms featured in *Farmers For America* was Keener's Family Farm from Dayton, Ohio. Matthew Keener and Amber Espey operate Keener's Family Farm and Keener Farm Butcher Block. They produce grass-fed beef, pastured chicken and eggs, and woods farrowed pigs. Their products are marketed through direct marketing at their butcher shop and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). They also have a working relationship with local restaurants and colleges to supply local foods to the greater Dayton area. Coincidentally, Keener and Espey attended the Highland County Soil and Water Grazing Workshop at the Millstone Creek Farm in July of 2018.

The screening of *Farmers For America* was paired with a local food dinner at Table 33, where many of the ingredients were sourced from Keener's Family farm. The food was excellent and was presented in an appealing manner. Several of the courses were not dishes I would have

normally selected from the menu, and certainly wouldn't have concocted on my own, but sometimes it is a good thing to be outside of your comfort zone and try something new.

How can consumers have a closer connection with farmers? Social media platforms provide a free and efficient method to market products and communicate with consumer audiences. It is also one way the next generation of farmers can easily diversify their marketing strategies by tying into technologies. Particularly for direct consumable products, photography and videography through social media or websites can help increase awareness of the company brand and products.

Whether you are looking to diversify your operation, expand your niche marketing, or expand your knowledge of local foods, exploring a new opportunity can provide an interesting and educational experience. For more information about niche markets specific to your operation, contact the Highland County Extension Office at 937-393-1918. Additionally, the Small Farm Colleges will be held in January, February, and March of 2019 in Montgomery, Vinton, and Adams Counties. The Small Farm Colleges provide education for agricultural producers on a variety of topics ranging from production to marketing.

Upcoming Events:

- Thursday, October 25, 2018, 6:30 P.M., Producer Stockyards, Hillsboro, Ohio

Call your local Ohio State University Extension Office to register for the BQA training. The Highland County Extension Office can be reached at 937-393-1918.

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