

# Food Hub of the Month Highlight

by Abbey Willard, VAAFAM Local Foods Administrator

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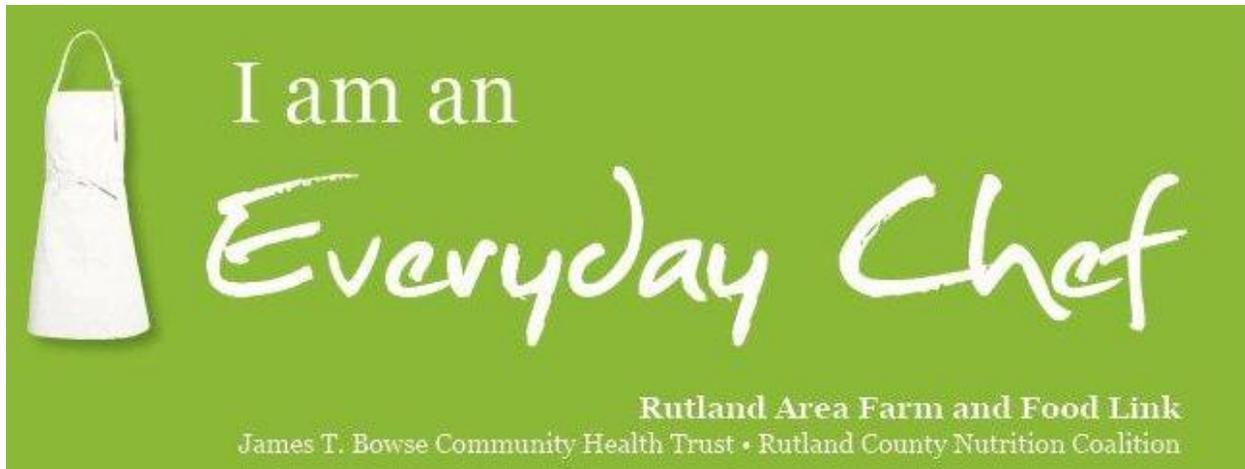
Vermont's agriculture is very connected to community, and these communities are committed to creating a successful environment for producers and consumers to engage in local commerce. Currently, over twenty organized groups across the state are facilitating local food connections. Some are incorporated as 501c3 non-profits, others as for profit LC3 educational organizations; some call themselves food hubs, while others remain more loosely defined and organized.

A food hub is currently defined by USDA as: *"a centrally located facility with a business management structure facilitating the aggregation, storage, processing, distribution, and/or marketing of locally/regionally produced food products"*. In Vermont, over twenty community groups have formed with the goal of supporting local agriculture. Their range of organizational structure and specific responsibilities are wide-reaching.

As the Local Foods Administrator with the VT Agency of Agriculture, Food, and Markets, these organized community groups are of particular interest to me. While my position provides integral support for the development of a viable Vermont food system, collaborating directly with the over 7,000 individual agricultural entrepreneurs in the state is not feasible. But, communicating with the 20+ community groups to learn more about their programs, share success stories, and assist with overcoming challenges is completely reasonable. Through thoughtful intention in the development of relationships and engaged communication with these groups, the information shared provides a valuable network of resources and opportunities to support local agriculture in Vermont and the North East region.

Food Hubs hold the potential to deliver a variety of services based on community need and organizational interest. USDA's 'Know your Farmer, Know Your Food' Regional Food Hub subcommittee identifies these possible roles:

- Aggregation and distribution assistance for producers by accommodating a convenient pick-up location or distribution point for customers to access local foods;
- Marketing and business planning assistance to help producers coordinate with distributors, processors, and buyers;
- Facility infrastructure containing space and equipment for food processing, storage, and packing; and
- Consumer education about the importance of buying local, supporting Vermont farms, implementing organic production practices, or stewardship of healthy soils and clean water.



Rutland Area Food and Farm Link (RAFFL) started in 2004 with the goals of keeping the Rutland region's working landscape vibrant, and with increasing economic development opportunities for local farmers. After 6 years of publishing and distributing a "Locally Grown Guide", their programs have expanded to include: supporting new and beginning farmer interests in acquiring workable agricultural land, organizing support for workplace CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture), and approaching 'local food' and the need for a connection with local farms through cooking tips, nutrition education, and recipe sharing.

Their "Everyday Chef" program creatively incorporates food and nutrition information and puts it in the hands of their workplace CSA members through cooking. Various local workplaces host hands-on cooking demonstrations by local chefs where participants prepare new recipes using a variety of cooking techniques. Everyday Chef coordinator, Jill Perry Balzano, explains, "We love focusing on techniques, like sautéing or roasting, where a few simple tips can help folks enjoy more foods that we grow here in Vermont." RAFFL staff have instituted a strong messaging campaign by posting recipes online, participating in a holiday season "Localvore Challenge," and by increasing comfort with local foods through the understanding of their nutritional benefits.

Workshop, blog, or web participants find helpful everyday tips for cooking with and preparing local foods at RAFFL's new blog [www.everydaychef.org](http://www.everydaychef.org). This site receives 700-800 hits each month as community members seek out improved cooking techniques like proper sauté etiquette or assistance choosing the best cooking oil, as well as discovering simple nourishing recipes like roasted winter root vegetables, apple tart, and homemade salad dressings, all which use local ingredients.

As VAAFM's Local Foods Administrator I look forward to sharing with you, in this *Agriview* column each month, other examples of successful community organized programs, visions, and services which together help sustain Vermont's agricultural working landscape and are moving our food system into the future.