

Virginia Tech and the Town of Blacksburg Take Strides Toward Sustainability

By: Lindsey Flowers

BLACKSBURG, Va., Oct. 14, 2015—Virginia Tech and the Town of Blacksburg have become leaders in the local and sustainable food movement. Virginia Tech has a population of over 30,000 students. Despite this, Virginia Tech Dining Services manages to designate 13 percent of its food and beverage budget to locally grown produce and meat.

Virginia Tech has remained at the top of The Princeton Review's ranking of Best Campus Food while providing these sustainable options.

The sustainable options are received so well by the students because "[locally grown options] are something that students have asked for," said Rial Carver, the sustainability coordinator at Virginia Tech Dining Services. Virginia Tech answered the students' plight and gave them locally grown menu items.

Virginia Tech Dining Services considers the food to be local if it was grown within 250 miles from the Virginia Tech campus. Students can find locally grown food in the majority of the dining halls.

Virginia Tech Dining Services is proud of the local and organic options. "The biggest focus over the last couple years has been finding specific ways to showcase local foods and not hide them among other foods," said Carver. This is done to make students aware of the great local options that are available to them.

The Hokie Hi! Picnic welcomes freshmen to Virginia Tech annually and serves 1,600 pounds of watermelon. All of the watermelon is grown at Kentland Farms. This introduces new students to Virginia Tech's sustainable mission immediately upon their arrival.

Dietrick Hall only serves milk that is produced in a dairy farm right off campus. Much of the dining hall's produce is from Kentland Farms, Virginia Tech's farm.

Burger 37 introduced the sole use of lettuce harvested from Kentland Farms in their burgers in fall of 2015. "That is 1,100 pounds of lettuce specifically being used for Burger 37," said Carver.

Farms & Fields is a food kiosk located in Owens Hall. It serves food made solely with ingredients from local farms and bakeries. "The food is delicious and locally grown. It's a break from eating the other greasy food. You feel good for eating things grown by farmers from the New River Valley," said Meredyth Ellington, a junior at Virginia Tech. The menu rotates every day, providing students with a variety of wholesome foods made with local ingredients.

Kentland Farms is Virginia Tech's own farm. It is run by students and serves as an educational tool for the students of the agricultural department. A large portion of the local meat and produce Virginia Tech serves is from Kentland Farms. Dietrick Hall offers regular and chocolate milk from this farm. Kentland's dairy equipment uses state-of-the-art technology that will help the department continue research.

Virginia Tech is able to offer local foods year around due to variety in the menu. "The chefs have flexibility, especially with limited time offers. This means they can use local foods more easily," said Carver. The chefs in Dietrick Hall served a Kentland Harvest Pizza during Sustainability Week 2015.

The pizza solely used produce harvested from Kentland Farms. It was topped with fresh kale, onion and butternut squash. This "highlighted local items coming in even though the pizza is not on the regular menu," continued Carver. The dish was popular among students.

Currently, 13 percent of the budget for food and beverages are being used on local, organic or third party certified options. Virginia Tech Dining Services has a goal of reaching 20 percent by 2020.

"[A focus on local food] is a national conversation that is happening. Universities across the country are keeping track of local purchasing percentages. It's a way to see what other schools are doing comparatively," said Carver.

The Association of Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) sets the standards for campus sustainability. Virginia Tech is complying with AASHE requirements and remaining a top-ranked and sustainable school.

Virginia Tech recently expanded its focus on sustainability simply from locally grown food and now offers sustainable food containers. Students can purchase a \$3 token that allows them use to-go containers for the semester. Reusable water bottles cost \$13.49 but give students 10 cents off every fountain beverage purchase that accompanies the bottle.

The Virginia Tech Office of Energy and Sustainability will be distributing tokens for free outside of Owens dining hall to lucky students periodically throughout the semester.

As the use of these water bottles and to-go containers becomes standard waste from plastic cups and styrofoam to-go containers will gradually decrease.

This sustainable mindset is reflected in the townspeople of Blacksburg and Virginia Tech students.

Sustainability Week is an annual event that began in 2007. It is a collaboration between the Town of Blacksburg, Sustainable Blacksburg and Virginia Tech's Office of Energy

and Sustainability. The program teaches sustainability with events at bars, restaurants and farmers markets.

It began because “the majority of Blacksburg citizens value being environmental stewards and translating that intention into action,” said Carol Davis, the Town of Blacksburg’s sustainability manager. The Town of Blacksburg created this program to allow the townspeople to act on these intentions.

While September hosts sustainability events, it is not the only time of year Blacksburg residents live sustainably.

Sustainability is a priority of the Town of Blacksburg. The organization focuses on informing Blacksburg locals of ways to live sustainably. It also has increased the number of recycling collection areas and developed the Blacksburg Transit system.

Farmers markets are another sustainable option. There are two farmers markets within five miles of the Virginia Tech campus. This gives students and the townspeople of Blacksburg plenty of opportunities to shop locally.

“I leave the farmers markets feeling confident that I am getting high quality products. Knowing exactly where the food is coming from helps boost my confidence in its freshness and flavor,” said Nadia McQuade, a senior at Virginia Tech.

The interest in purchasing local foods has increased as farmers markets have become more common in Blacksburg.

Idyllwood Farms has been selling its produce in the New River Valley for 30 years. “In the past 30 years the market base in downtown Blacksburg has expanded,” said Amanda Bergeron, an employee of Idyllwood Farms. As farmers markets become more established in the town more people rely on them for their produce.

“It’s a lot of hard work to be a farmer. People buying locally helps the small man,” Bergeron continued. Many people in the New River Valley rely on harvest sales for their annual income. Blacksburg’s increased interest in local and sustainable produce options helps these farmers stay afloat.

Not only does this focus on local purchasing help the small businessmen and businesswomen of the New River Valley, but it also helps reduce the fossil fuels that are released into the ozone. “The average bite of food has travelled 1,500 miles to get there. Things that are grown locally will have far less [environmental] impact than things flown from Hawaii,” said Davis.

Large grocery store chain’s food often travels 1,500 miles. In comparison, Virginia Tech’s local food travels less than 250 miles. The farmers market all feature harvest that has travelled 50 miles or less.

One of the farmers markets closest to the Virginia Tech campus is the Community Farmer's market. It is located on South Main Street and features produce and meat from vendors all over the New River Valley. It opened in 2013 to expand access to local foods in the Blacksburg community. Its founders wanted to create a vibrant, community-supported market that supports local farms and connects communities and local farms together, sustaining nutrition.

The Community Farmer's Market is open from 9 a.m.— 2 p.m. every Tuesday and Saturday.

Blacksburg and Virginia Tech are making huge strides towards being sustainable and eco-friendly. "I love that we're living in a time where people, both students and not, are taking responsibility for the environment and what they're putting in their bodies," said McQuade.