

## In Skagit County, 'farm to table' really means something

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Charlie Lahud-Zahner removes loaves of bread from an oven Thursday at Water Tank Bakery west of Burlington.

Oliver Hamlin / Skagit Valley Herald

Skagit County embraces the term "farm to table," whether it's in the context of buying directly from a farmer, working with the local food hub or eating a meal made from local ingredients at a restaurant.

"It all works together," said Blake Vanfield, executive director of Genuine Skagit Valley, which is focused on increasing awareness and consumption of Skagit Valley agricultural products. "It's all a piece to a very complex economic machine."

## THE FARMS

According to the Washington State University Skagit Extension, Skagit County farmers produce more than 90 crops.

While some crops are marketed worldwide, others stay close to home.

Red Shed Farm west of Mount Vernon is one of the many farms keeping their products local with the help of the Puget Sound Food Hub. It is also in the process of opening a farm stand.

Owners David and Janet Bauermeister bought an 11-acre plot of land in 2013 and turned it into a small farm with more than 40 crops.

David Bauermeister grew up on a large wheat farm in Eastern Washington and was excited at the prospect of having a farm of his own.

"I couldn't get the farming out of my blood," he said.

Red Shed Farm focuses on a variety crops so it will have a lot to offer customers at its farm stand, but some crops are grown in larger quantities for the Puget Sound Food Hub.

David Bauermeister, who was a key partner of the food hub during his time as executive director of the Northwest Agriculture Business Center, said the food hub is all about providing small farmers more market access.

This summer peppers, eggplants, tomatoes, cucumbers and summer squash from Red Shed Farm will be at the food hub.

Janet Bauermeister said several large farms helped get the food hub off the ground, which helped everyone.

"That's what we loved about it," she said.

David Bauermeister said that while it is important for the community to support local agriculture, it is also important for the farmers to support each other.

Red Shed Farm plants everything from seed and they get the seed from Osborne Seed in Mount Vernon.

"If the farmers don't (buy local) then there won't be a local seed company," David Bauermeister said.

Red Shed Farm used to do farmers markets, but now its farm stand will be how it diversifies its income stream as well as gets food directly into the hands of county residents.

"It's all about keeping that connection to the local community," David Bauermeister said.

## **THE FOOD HUB**

The Puget Sound Food hub helps get items from nearly 100 farms and processors to businesses and organizations throughout the Northwest.

Many of the producers — and buyers — are in Skagit County.

Executive Director Andrew Yokom said the food hub has done about \$25 million in business over the past four years, and \$20 million of that has gone directly back to the farmers and processors.

Yokom said most of the remaining \$5 million has stayed local through paying bills and wages, and investing into infrastructure, such as two new trucks that are expected to arrive this summer.

The food hub started as a group of farmers wanting to broaden access to local markets, and it is still farmer owned.

It serves everyone from larger farmers with hundreds of acres to first-generation farmers on less than a dozen acres.

"We try to find a niche for every producer," Yokom said.

Along with matching farms with those looking for products, the food hub also transports the products to the customers, saving the farmers the time, fuel and labor of doing it themselves.

"We're the ones with trucks on the road," he said. "This only works because we have dozens of farms wanting us to do that work for them."

The food hub has a variety of customers. It sells wholesale to chains such as Haggen and to local restaurants such as Skagit Landing.

Yokom said the food hub should only be one financial avenue for farmers.

He said farmers markets, community supported agriculture programs, farm stands and selling direct to businesses are options for farms of all sizes.

## THE BUSINESSES

Vanfield said many local restaurants and businesses feature Skagit Valley products, whether they be meats, dairy products, produce or even flowers.

Vanfield said restaurants associated with Genuine Skagit Valley buy about \$100,000 in products from local farmers.

Skagit Landing, located at the Port of Skagit, is one of the many Skagit Valley restaurants cooking with local ingredients.

Chef Josie Urbick said she gets her local products a variety of ways. In some instances she buys directly from farms, and many times she uses the Puget Sound Food Hub.

"How can you not utilize the local farmers the best that you can?" Urbick said. "It just makes you feel good."

Urbick said that having grown up in the Skagit Valley picking strawberries, blueberries and planting bulbs she understands the importance of local agriculture.

"It gets instilled in you as a child, and I think we don't realize how lucky we are to live in the Skagit Valley," she said.

Part of her mission at Skagit Landing is to highlight how local produce can be used, and she changes her menu seasonally based on what is available.

Items permanently on her shopping list include Lopez Island Creamery ice cream, Water Tank Bakery bread and flour from Fairhaven Mill.

"If you don't do your part to use local, it's going to go away," Urbick said.

Water Tank Bakery uses flour milled at Cairnspring Mills, which is a neighbor of the bakery. And Cairnspring Mills uses wheat from the Skagit Valley, including from growers such as Hughes Farm.

Rachel Sobczak, owner and head baker at Water Tank Bakery, said the grain in her bread all comes from within 13 miles of the bakery.

"I made the decision to use 100% local flour because we don't do that enough here," she said about utilizing local ingredients.

She said while it may cost more, it's worth it.

"I think it's worth it to support our local food system," Sobczak said.

Where she saves money, is on transportation costs.

"I pay zero transportation costs because the bakery is right next to the mill," she said. "They just forklift it over."

Overall, Sobczak said she has felt supported in being hyper-local, even by those who could be seen as competitors.

"I feel really lucky," she said. "I feel so much gratitude toward the community."