

Who:	U.P. Food Exchange
What:	Resource portal for farmers, businesses and individuals
Where:	Michigan's Upper Peninsula

GOOD FOOD MEETINGS GROW INTO UNITED U.P. NETWORK

Michelle Walk and Natasha Lantz didn't know what to expect.

It was November 2011 in Sault Ste. Marie. Light snow swirled around the campus of Lake Superior State University, just south of the bridge to Canada and the Soo Locks. The parking lot outside the Cisler Center began to fill with cars and pickups. Most had traveled more than an hour across the mostly rural and remote Eastern U.P., and some from as far away as Marquette in the Central U.P. and Houghton on the West side of the more than 300-mile wide peninsula.

Michelle, a U.P.-based Michigan State University Extension educator, was the host of the event: the inaugural Eastern U.P. Local Foods Summit. Michelle had organized this first-time gathering of area farmers, restaurateurs, school officials and others interested in building a local food system that sustains healthy people and farms with support from the Chippewa-Luce-Mackinac Conservation District, the Les Cheneaux Community Foundation, and a local planning committee.



Michelle Walk of MSU Extension shares information about local food systems with stakeholders in the Western U.P. Photo courtesy of MSUE.

Natasha planned to be there, along with the general manager of the Marquette Food Cooperative, traveling three hours from the central U.P. At that time Natasha was the natural food co-op's community liaison, building relationships with local farmers and area leaders to grow the farming community and local supply of good food.

Natasha and Michelle wondered what would happen that day in Sault Ste. Marie as farmers, local government leaders, retailers, and social service and health care professionals filtered into the room. It was time to put information and ideas about local food's potential on the table and see where these community members wanted to take it.

Fast-forward to November 2013. Just two years later, the vision that took shape from early meetings and discussions such as the Eastern U.P. summit is in full swing. Residents, businesses, agencies and others are working together to organize a U.P.-wide market for local foods and a grassroots movement for policy change.

In late 2012, Michelle, Natasha, and partners launched the U.P. Food Exchange with the support of a regional food systems grant from the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. The U.P. Food Exchange, a marketing and networking initiative with an online portal for local food buyers and sellers, connects hubs of local food market development and policy discussion in the Eastern,

Central, and Western regions of the peninsula. By November 2013, the partners hosted three consecutive local food summits across the U. P. in the three regions.

As conveners of the initial and ongoing discussions, Michelle, Natasha, and their local and state partners recognize the power of acknowledging and channeling the interests and creativity of their communities.

Challenges remain regarding infrastructure and capacity in moving projects forward, Michelle says. "But it has been very rewarding to see things move forward and to be seeing results so quickly," she adds. "The number of people that have become actively engaged in this work across the U.P. is incredible."

What

The U.P. Food Exchange connects local food activity within each of the Upper Peninsula's three distinct regions (eastern, central, and western), and coordinates local food efforts between the regions.

- *The primary goal of the Eastern Upper Peninsula (EUP) Food Hub is to develop and implement strategies that will help support the viability and sustainability of EUP agriculture and food production.*
- *The Central U.P. Food Hub is the result of efforts by the Marquette Food Co-op to bring together the sectors of the local food system, from eaters and farmers to institutions and distributors.*
- *In the food hub's formative stage, the Western Upper Peninsula Health Department is taking a lead role, organizing meetings and facilitating communications in the west end.*

Why

Across the U.P., two thirds of adults and 40 percent of teens are either overweight or obese. Poverty rates are higher and median incomes lower than statewide and nationally, and residents of outlying areas have little nearby access to healthy foods. Agriculture, commonplace in the U.P. just a few decades ago, has waned considerably. Many children cannot identify common vegetables or tell you how they are grown. Long, snowy winters are problematic, requiring creativity and technology to extend growing seasons.

How

Each region sets its own goals and agenda, but their common concerns and work encompasses outreach, programming, and investment in consumer and community awareness and education, increasing production capacity and farm business infrastructure such as storage and distribution, and building availability and accessibility of good food for all.

Learn more about the U.P. Food Exchange at upfoodexchange.com, by email at info@upfoodexchange.com, or contact organizers at 906-225-0671 x 711.