

Trading food stamps for produce is a win-win

The Boston Globe

By Christine Phelan Kueter, Globe Correspondent | July 15, 2010

LAWRENCE — Gloria Bautista doesn't do canned. But three seasons out of four, even with the help of food stamps, buying fresh is way out of reach.

When growing season began in June, for Bautista and a handful of area families who cash in their food stamps for local farm shares, it meant more than good food. It was a little like going home.

"The way they cook in the Dominican Republic is mostly from fresh vegetables and fruit, so coming to the US was definitely a change, with everything processed and canned," said Bautista, 31. "The [farm share] helps to get that little piece of the DR back in my regular everyday cooking."

Bautista is one of the 751,393 Bay State residents now reliant on food stamps, and she's grateful to be able to purchase what David Dumaresq offers at his Dracut farmstand, Farmer Dave's. And Dumaresq, who estimates that 40 percent of his revenue comes from sales to low-income households, is happy to oblige.

But the meteoric rise in families relying on food stamps — a nearly 43 percent increase since February 2006 — is no cash crop for most farmers.

Even with a profusion of incentives to buy local, including discounts and doubled benefits, food stamps recipients redeemed less than 3 cents apiece on average during the 2009 May to December growing season, yielding Bay State farmers a total of just \$20,648 to divvy. But if just 1 percent of food stamps benefits had been redeemed at one of the state's 205 farmers' markets, farmers would have netted \$1 million in a single month.

"It's a huge untapped resource," said Jennifer Hashley, director of the Tufts-affiliated New Entry Sustainable Farming Project of Lowell, "and it has huge potential to solve the issue of nutritional poverty and put federal dollars already being circulated into the hands of the local farmer."

In some spots, food stamp redemption at farmers markets is a mere trickle. Farmers at Lynn's weekly market netted \$3,526 in food stamp receipts last year, down from \$3,918 in 2008, but up from \$2,781 in 2007, and \$1,861 in 2006. The Lawrence farmers market, which takes place three days a week this season, including a Saturday, sold 40 percent more produce to food stamp holders in 2009 than in 2008, but the numbers — from \$1,068 to \$1,784 — are meager nonetheless.

"It's growing, but incrementally," said Janel Wright, manager of community food programs for Groundwork Lawrence, which oversees the market.

Elsewhere, it's dry as a bone. In Lowell, less than \$28 in food stamps benefits was redeemed in all of 2009 at the weekly market, according to Lisa Damon of the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources. At Mattapan's Brookwood Community Farm, the total was \$255. At the Chicopee Farmers Market, no food stamp dollars were redeemed during the entire growing season, and ditto for the Boston-based Community Servings Farmers' Market and the Berkshire Harmony Farmers' Market, Damon said.

But cultivating the connection between food stamps holder and farmer may benefit both. If food stamp recipients eat fresher, healthier fare, they're less likely to have diabetes and coronary artery disease, which disproportionately affect the poor. A 2009 study published in American Journal of Clinical Nutrition found that subjects who got a 12.5 percent discount on healthy fare bought and ate more of it, even after the discounts ended. And a 2009 US Department of Agriculture report found that a 20 percent discount on fruits and vegetables prompted food stamp recipients to eat one-third cup more of those foods per day.

Even if traditional supermarkets provide growers with stiff competition, they're not the only gap between farmers and the food stamp-reliant.

Many farmers markets are poorly timed for working people and battle the perception that the food is pricier, though it's more often not. And, of course, there's cooking fresh stuff, which can seem like more work than opening a box, bag, or

can.

“These people might be worried about housing, child care, possibly finding a job,” said Bethany Bellingham, CSA manager at Farmer Dave’s, “and unless you’re feeling really motivated, it might not feel like the best time to pick up a new skill.”

Then there’s the redemption itself. Only about a quarter of the state’s farmers markets will be set up to process food stamps through electronic EBT cards this growing season, many of them in low-income areas.

And while the state distributed \$50,000 for a battery of centralized EBT terminals at a handful of markets, few farmers can themselves front the \$500 to \$1,000 cost for a machine while also footing bills for processing and transaction fees. So many don’t take the risk to market to low-income customers.

“The farmer needs to make sure the price point is worth the market,” said Margaret Williams, director of the Food Project in Lynn, which oversees that city’s market. “It’s expensive to take the risk unless they know they can get the sales they need.”

But dealing with government programs is hardly a cakewalk. Dumaresq hires a full-time staffer each summer to organize, stamp, sign, and bundle government food coupons, which must be sent via certified mail for redemption.

He doesn’t have his own EBT terminal, relying instead on market managers for a centralized system. And there are plenty of missed connections.

“Someone will give me a coupon that’s valid for one can of green beans, and I say, ‘Well, I can sell you the fresh ones,’ but then they can’t redeem it for fresh,” Dumaresq said.

But for those food stamp holders interested in farmers’ fare, the growing season is a bright spot in hard economic times.

Dolores Diaz of Lawrence, grandmother to a gaggle of youngsters including a 9-year-old vegetarian, makes traditional Dominican dishes like maiz sancocado and sancocho with the CSA (community-supported agriculture) share she uses food stamps to buy.

“If I buy it at the supermarket, it’s more expensive,” said Diaz through a translator. “With so many grandkids, it’s an easy way to get fresh. I’m excited to share.”

So is Dumaresq.

“I don’t want my food to be elitist,” he said, angling his ’87 pickup between rows of Cubanelle peppers and pipian squash. “I want it to be good food for all.” ■