vermont’s LOCAL BANQUET
summer 2007

July 4th Beef
Buffalo Mozzarella
Garlic from Farm to Table
The Chicken Event
by George Schenk

It began simply enough: I wanted to buy my neighbor’s chicken to serve at my Waitsfield restaurant.

"Can’t," responded my neighbor, Hadley Gaylord.

"Why?" I asked.

"Last fall," Hadley began, "my daughter was up at the Montpelier farmers’ market where she was selling our vegetables and farm-processed chicken, and she got 'busted' by an official from the Agency of Agriculture who told her she could sell the chicken at our farm stand but not at the farmers’ market or to restaurants."

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Hadley’s chickens are not inspected by a government official when they are slaughtered on his farm. At the time – early 2006 – Vermont allowed only inspected chicken to be sold at restaurants and or off-farm.

"Could you take your chickens to an inspected slaughter house?" I asked.

"There isn’t one for sixty miles. It’s a lot of time back and forth – if you can get in – and it’s money out of my pocket. So I process them on the farm myself and sell what I can from the farm stand, but that doesn’t really amount to much. The rules and regulations that govern animal protein processing were written by and for large producers and make it almost impossible for the small guy to compete."

"But your chicken is excellent," I said. "It’s clean, fresh, delicious, naturally raised, and local. Your chicken is not what is wrong with American food. It’s an important part of what is right."

From this conversation was born “The Chicken Event: A Public Act of Civil Disobedience in Support of Local Agriculture.” It was an event I hosted in June 2006 at our bakery restaurant, American Flatbread, to raise awareness of the regulatory obstacles small farmers face and to engage our community in a public conversation about why we have a food system that makes it easy and cheap to access industrially-produced chicken from a thousand miles away, but virtually impossible to buy chicken from our neighbor across the road.

We set a date and placed an ad in the local newspaper announcing the event. We planned on serving Hadley’s chicken in an act of civil disobedience. I wrote a position paper entitled “Localvore: Local Food Logic” to explain to our customers and community why we were challenging the law, and we invited representatives from the state’s Department of Health and Agency of Agriculture, as well as the governor. Our intention was to be completely open and transparent.

The response was strong and complex. Some neighbors expressed their encouragement and support, others wrote us letters of condemnation. And like the community at large, the staff at American Flatbread were divided. Some thought it was the right thing to do, while others worried about their jobs.

Two days before the event I heard from the Secretary of Health. She said we would be served an injunction prohibiting us from selling our neighbor’s chicken under threat of contempt of court. And then she said something interesting: "Instead of beating you up in court I would much rather engage you in a conversation about how we might make things better."

I agreed.

Two days later we held the chicken event. But instead of serving chicken that night, we served
up ideas – new ways of thinking about how to go forward with the important work of feeding one another. Over 400 people attended. The cars overwhelmed the parking area and spilled out along the main road. We used the back porch as a stage. To their credit, three representatives from the Agency of Agriculture came and they answered polite but pointed questions from the crowd. It was maybe the largest gathering in the history of Vermont over the subject of small-farm chicken.

True to her word, the Secretary of Health later arranged a meeting between herself, representatives of the Agency of Agriculture and some of us concerned citizens who became known as “The Chicken Group.” In early 2007, we were invited to speak at hearings held by the House Agriculture Committee. The committee eventually wrote provisions into the 2007 Agriculture Omnibus Bill allowing farmers who process fewer than 1,000 birds per year to sell uninspected farm-processed chicken at farmers’ markets and to restaurants. (Restaurants would be required to tell customers that the birds are uninspected and to provide information on where they originated.) The bill passed the House and Senate this spring and was signed by the governor in May.

From a commitment to civil disobedience to a commitment to civil law, we managed to change the rules governing access to small farm food. This is not the end of the story, but the beginning of another chapter in how we grow food for one another.

George Schenk is a trained biologist and professional cook. He is the founder and CEO of American Flatbread Company in Waitsfield.