Food for Thought
People · Products · Purpose
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"The less efficient path can often be the exact one we need."

— Novelist Jemimah Wei

Repurposing food waste

Local farm helps community speed up the composting process

Katie Belle Miller is the owner of Heritage Belle Farms near Peyton. A Ranch Foods Direct customer for many years, she has been involved in several local food projects, including the SoCo Virtual Farmers Market that provided a vital service during the coronavirus pandemic. The livestock she raises — longhorn cattle, goats, sheep and pigs — are processed at Ranch Foods Direct. She's also on the board of the El Paso County Conservation District. Here, she talks about a county initiative underway to reduce food waste.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR LATEST PROJECT.

My farm is working with Food to Power and the El Paso Conservation District on a composting project. We have an ASP composting unit on our property now, and we get some of the food scraps from Food to Power's composting program. They bring it out to our ranch, and we compost it in a way that speeds up the process. In about two months time, we're able to make fully useable compost that is broken down and can be returned back to Food to Power or provided to neighboring farms and ranches in our area.

HOW DOES ASP COMPOSTING WORK?

ASP stands for aerated static pile composting. There's basically a blower motor that pushes air through PVC pipes with holes in it, which allows the compost to breathe and reach a higher temperature, cooking everything and killing any bad pathogens. That allows for decomposition to happen at a super-fast rate.

DID IT REQUIRE A BIG INVESTMENT?

El Paso County Conservation got a grant to purchase the equipment for the unit, and with that came the mentorship and guidance of the company that sells these units. They basically sent us everything we needed. We had to get the pipe and that was it. We were able to put it together ourselves.

WAS THIS SOMETHING YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO DO?

I've been involved in food waste in this community for probably a decade or more. Any way we can help circumvent human-grade food going to the landfill and turn it into something useful, like soil or compost, and give it back to the community, that is something I've always been really passionate about. And getting resources to local farms to use in their fields and gardens.

HOW DOES RANCH FOODS DIRECT FIT INTO WHAT YOU'RE DOING?

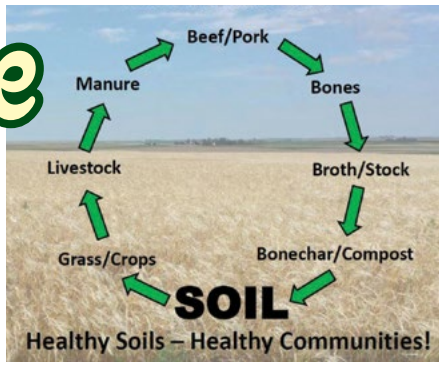
Ranch Foods Direct is definitely a huge supporter of closing the circle and filling the gaps, as far as getting resources and materials to where they need to go, and helping farmers and ranchers so they don't have to go as far to have their products sold or processed. One of our neighbors, Ahavah Farms, located about two miles from us, does their weekly CSA pick-up at Ranch Foods. That's one of the farms we offer compost to. In our area, we have several new and beginning homesteaders trying to get their foot in the door. It's all about doing what we can to keep them going.

ANY OTHER EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES THE DISTRICT IS WORKING ON RIGHT NOW?

The conservation district got a second grant to work with the CSU Extension Service and a couple of private tree farms to do a six-week program on heirloom apple trees. It includes a preservation course on how to dry and can apples. It's our hope we can start bringing back more of the sustainable ancient foods we used to have.

Completing the circle

Enriching the local community



Owner Mike Callicrate talks about what Ranch Foods Direct is doing to re-invest in the health of the land and the local community.

DOES CALLICRATE CATTLE COMPANY HAVE A COMPOSTING PROGRAM? WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Everything that goes on our land is composted. The reason we compost is we mix in the slaughter waste with the manure, which adds valuable nutrients to the compost. Those nutrients are meant to go back into the soil.

FOOD TO POWER IS AN URBAN FARM WITH A COMPOSTING PROGRAM. TALK ABOUT THE SIMILARITIES.

They do what we do, except on a smaller scale. They do an excellent job of growing food and building soil. It's very impressive. Shane, who leads their composting program, is top-notch, having previously worked for and trained at Ahavah Farm.

Farm-to-school part of ballot initiative

An initiative on the ballot in November would extend the Healthy School Meals for All Program while mandating $1 million be spent on local food purchasing and technical assistance. Ranch Foods Direct owner Mike Callicrate joined a group of supporters at a kick-off campaign event in southeast Colorado Springs this fall to talk about the importance of serving fresh healthy food in schools. Supporters say providing meals for all, regardless of financial need, reduces the stigmatization sometimes associated with free or reduced meals. Healthy School Meals for All is a package of two separate ballot initiatives, LL and MM. Proposition LL designates already-collected funds can go toward continuing the program in districts that choose to opt in, with a portion of the funding directed toward local food purchases. Prop MM authorizes collection of additional funds to support the popular program. The revenue would come from Coloradans who make over $300,000 annually.

Ranch Foods Direct co-sponsored Food to Power's Harvest Fest in September. The urban farm provides food and fellowship for the surrounding community.

Revitalizing community

with food at the center

What if we could innovate communities to ignite human potential and well-being in the digital age? That's the core question behind the writings of Ranch Foods Direct customer and long-time business consultant Mark Dancer. His newsletter on Substack, Innovating Communities, explores new developments at the "intersection of food, community, and business innovation."

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN SHOPPING AT RANCH FOODS DIRECT?

I've been coming here as long as I've been in Colorado Springs. I moved here in 2015. Shortly after that, I don't remember who, but somebody locally told me the store was great. I was born in Kansas and so there was always that connection too.

WHAT KEEPS BRINGING YOU BACK?

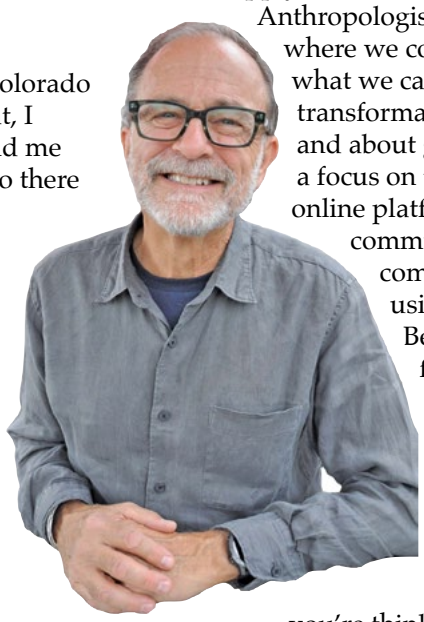
I love the fresh healthy local nature of the food. I like being able to talk to a skilled craftsman, the butchers who know what they're doing and are proud of it and have opinions on how you should cook things. I love the fact that there is more than just meat from the farm, that there are other producers and growers represented too. It's a one-stop shop for things that are real and healthy.

YOU MENTIONED BEING FROM KANSAS. DO YOU HAVE A RURAL BACKGROUND?

My dad was born on a small plot of land outside of a tiny town called Caney, just north of Tulsa. He was actually born on the farm, although it wasn't much of a farm. They did have their own dairy cow. My family on both my dad and mom's side were mostly in the oil and gas industry. They were welders and foremen and procurement people, but mostly workers on the gas pipelines. My dad ended up in the Navy, including serving during the Vietnam War. He moved back to the area after he retired and had a second career there. While I was growing up, we lived all over the states and the world. But what we did on our vacations is we went home to Caney, Kansas, so I spent my summers and holidays there.

WHAT IGNITED YOUR INTEREST IN USING FOOD AS A CATALYST FOR COMMUNITY?

I'm a Naval Academy graduate and served in the Navy for six years. I lived in Oregon for awhile and then went to business school. But my career for 25 years was working for manufacturers and distributors on their channel strategies, business strategies and innovation. That's when I started thinking about the customers of the supply chain and about communities as a customer.



Anthropologists say that communities are where we come together as humans to do what we can't do alone. But all the digital transformation has been about the individual and about global scale. It doesn't really have a focus on the community. Social media and online platforms in some ways work against communities. So I think we can innovate communities using technologies, but using human-centered innovation. Because communities are kind of the forgotten institution.

SAY MORE ABOUT THAT.

If you think about the role of communities in connecting us with what makes us human, right at the top of the list is food. If you're thinking about innovating communities, you have to start by thinking about local agriculture, and eating as a ceremony. You start by thinking about being connected to place. Everybody eats, right? So if we're going to innovate communities, food is the natural lever for starting to think about engaging communities to help us live as humans in the digital age. Food can never be virtual.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR NEWSLETTER.

I've written somewhere around 200 articles on Substack. I started it about three years ago. It's been a journey for me. This is where I've ended up and this is my focus: how can we innovate communities, starting with a what-if question? I'm a systems thinker, and one technique we use is the what-if statement. (*Continued next page*)

"My what-if statement is this: 'What if a community decided to eat its way to better health, well-being and prosperity?'"

My what-if statement is this: what if a community decided to eat it's way to better health, well-being and prosperity? Every citizen in every business can get involved in that. Even a business that has nothing to do with agriculture or food can help its employees eat better and come together through food.

DO YOU KNOW ANY COMMUNITIES THAT HAVE DONE THAT SUCCESSFULLY?

I've done some research, and there's not a lot. There are some European communities that have local gardens or a strong health movement. But the idea of sitting back and thinking of a community as an institution, not as just a place for activism or social impact or politics, I think that's still pretty fresh.

TALK ABOUT RANCH FOODS DIRECT IN TERMS OF CREATING A COMMUNITY AROUND FOOD. WHAT ARE YOUR IMPRESSIONS?

The commitment to healthy agriculture and healthy ranching is where it all starts. The way the cattle are fed, the way crops are treated, it starts there. I think the presentation in the store is part of it. It's very casual; the experience is very authentic. It's not designed by somebody who might design the interior of a scaled-up fast-food restaurant, which can be effective, but a bit cynical. Manipulative even. So the environment is not necessarily what a consumer packaged goods expert would do. It seems to me that it's just very authentic, and it has evolved. It reflects the people who own it and the people who work there.

DON'T YOU THINK PEOPLE ARE CRAVING THAT KIND OF AUTHENTICITY THESE DAYS?

I think as more and more of our lives becomes digital, or virtual, and enabled by artificial intelligence — there are huge benefits in that — but there are things you can't get through a screen, or from a chatbot, even though those things are going to be very influential. It flattens the experience. It's a less human experience. It's a mediated experience. There's nothing mediated about walking into the Ranch Foods Direct store. It's you and the produce, you and the meat, you and the people behind the counter. You can meet the owner and even get to know him personally. That's the power of human connection. It's about being connected to our food and water, to our energy and our work, and to the places we call home. Just feeling connected to something greater than ourselves.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

***THE NEXUS: Augmented Thinking for A Complex World and The New Convergence of Art, Technology and Science,* by Julio Mario and Bruce Mau**

***PROXIMITY: How Coming Breakthroughs In Just-in-time Transform Business, Society and Daily Life,* by Robert Wolcott and Kahn Krippendorff**

***THE FUTURE OF EVERYTHING with Russ Altman,* a podcast by the Stanford University School of Engineering**

***INNOVATING COMMUNITIES with Mark Dancer* (MarkDancer.Substack.com)**

"Communities add something to solving problems that digital technologies can't do." — Mark Dancer

Big tech, and the implications for small business

Are computer algorithms being used to overcharge customers and squeeze workers and suppliers?

DRIVING NORTH INTO DENVER ON INTERSTATE 25, motorists pass through an attractively manicured hive of sleek corporate buildings known as the Tech Center. Dating to the 1970s, it's not hard to imagine how even back then city planners saw the promise of economic vitality from luring tech start-ups to the suburbs. What began with communication technologies like cable TV and broadband expanded into a constellation of other tech-enabled services in areas like financial management, home building, manufacturing and more.

The idea that tech can accelerate growth has only intensified in recent years. Smart phones and other electronic devices have put enormous capabilities and convenience at the fingertips of virtually every American. What city wouldn't dream of incubating the next Airbnb, an internet platform that takes something obvious — the desire of many people to rent out their homes or extra space — and connects them seamlessly with travelers aiming to avoid the indignities of warehouse-like corporate hotels?

Still, breakthrough apps like these can have a dark side, according to labor and consumer advocates. Their ease of use and ubiquitous nature funnels users to just one or two companies, and their analytical processing abilities further compound marketing advantages that put new start-ups at a significant disadvantage. One way this happens is through sophisticated pricing that allows for real-time adjustment, a phenomenon experts refer to as "surveillance pricing."

HERE'S HOW IT WORKS. Ride-share companies like Uber and Lyft can use computer surveillance to charge more at certain times of the day like rush hour or during large events. At the same time, fare discounts can be used to undercut rival start-ups. In this way, the Uber-Lyft duopoly (or monopoly of two) can maximize revenue that goes to executive and shareholder compensation, at the expense of what might be in the best interests of riders and drivers. A similar model is deployed by knock-offs like Uber Eats and third-party apps like DoorDash and Drizzly, which recruit gig workers for food and beverage delivery, then use their power in the market to strategically manage payments and fees.

Denver business leader Minsun Ji is determined to provide a driver-owned alternative to big-tech's ride-share model. This fall she appeared at an event with other small business advocates, including Ranch Foods Direct owner Mike Callicrate, to discuss what was billed as "the fight for a fair economy." The event was sponsored by Towards Justice and the Small Business Majority.

As executive director of the Rocky Mountain Employee Ownership Center, Minsun Ji helped to incubate Drivers Cooperative Colorado, the first of its kind in the nation. Because there is no highly paid corporate CEO or outside shareholders, drivers get to keep 80 percent of the fare, more than twice as much as they do with national ride-sharing apps, she said during a panel. The drivers also receive better benefits.

But since the cooperative ride-share launched, it has faced a big hurdle. When Coop Rideshare entered the market, the existing services immediately began offering rides at steeply discounted rates. Without equivalent real-time pricing technology, the cooperative ride-share was unable to respond with price changes of its own, making profitability more difficult to achieve and potentially affecting its ability to remain viable over the long run.

"Small businesses need to co-locate and do an end-run around the landlords and rent collectors." — Mike Callicrate

"We can code. So we thought, 'why not build our own app?'" — Perdeep Badhesha

"As owners, our drivers get 80% of the fare on every trip, twice what they do with Uber or Lyft. They are excited about that." — Minsun Ji

To entice more riders — even five percent of the market would be significant, she said — the worker-owned cooperative is currently networking with other socially conscious businesses and event planners willing to promote it and build awareness. The co-op also hopes to educate more drivers on the role of shared ownership in keeping pay and benefits competitive.

THE CUTTHROAT NATURE OF THE RIDE-SHARE MARKET is a glimpse into a rapidly changing economy built around the power of big tech. Tech entrepreneurs often use their computing prowess to extract more profit from workers and consumers, according to Seth Frotman, former general counsel to the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and now a senior fellow at Towards Justice, a Colorado-based worker and consumer rights organization. "Online platforms and apps enable this," he said.

Apps alone are not an insurmountable barrier for small businesses, especially as artificial intelligence makes computer coding more accessible to more people, pointed out Perdeep Badhesha, a government liaison for Colorado South Asians for Progress. During the Covid pandemic, he took over operation of his parents' liquor store in Colorado Springs and built his own beverage delivery app as an alternative to Drizzly.

"Our cafe tries to cut out as many of the middlemen as possible." — Kristin Lacy

"Big corporations and the powerful few who run them dominate our economy, our politics, and our country at the direct expense of the people who actually make America great." — Seth Frotman

He also campaigned for Prop 126 in Colorado, which prevents restaurants and liquor stores from using third-party companies like DoorDash to deliver alcoholic drinks. Instead, drivers must be full-time employees of the stores.

Technology isn't inherently bad. But when it results in consolidated corporate power, it can further the interests of a few at the expense of everyone else, according to Toward Justice Policy Director Nina DiSalvo.

The implications for food and agriculture are wide ranging. DiSalvo found it appalling that farmers can't set the price they need to cover their production costs, but are instead essentially told what they can charge. Kristin Lacy, co-owner of the Convivio Café, a woman-owned shop that buys coffee beans direct from growers, said she and her business partner made it a priority to include them in their business model. "We told them, you're the artist, and we want you to be involved in this."

But that means a higher cost structure compared to big chain competitors. "It's more challenging than just going online and clicking on a link to place an order," she explained. At the same time, spiraling operating costs require more gross revenue just to cover overhead like rent, which tripled at trendy food halls like The Source last year. "For it to work, you need a collaborative relationship with property owners and developers."

CONCENTRATED OWNERSHIP STRUCTURES also have an impact on healthcare services and costs, according to Neal Walia, the director of policy and government affairs at the Academy of Family Physicians. As more offices and clinics are purchased by private equity companies and hospital networks, the autonomy of doctors declines, paperwork goes up, and patient fees for routine office visits typically rise by 15 to 20 percent.

"Only 40 percent of these clinics are privately owned now. It used to be 60 percent," he said. "Hospitals alone own more than half of them." Hospital networks use local clinics to steer more of the lucrative specialty services to their own hospitals and often add hefty "facility fees" to the bill, he said.

Privately owned practices often feel pressured to sell out to large firms that can offer the highest bids. It's up to state and federal governments to evaluate healthcare mergers and acquisitions carefully and consider their long-term impact, he added.

While the influence of money in politics is pervasive, government enforcement and oversight agencies are underfunded and fragmented, according to Isabel Cruz, policy director with the Colorado Consumer Health Initiative.

The fragmentation makes it difficult for small businesses to understand their rights, obligations or alternatives when providing health coverage to employees, she added. "Information is being siloed," she said.

In virtually every business sector, large organizations have special advantages compared to those that are small, independent and community-based. Examples include greater access to capital and more money to spend on political representation, according to David Seligman who serves as Towards Justice' executive vice president. Seligman is currently running to be the state's next attorney general.

Advocates and legal scholars discussed several measures they said were needed to level the playing field, including expanding consumer protection laws to include small business owners; limiting the use of consumer arbitration clauses that favor corporate interests; researching and presenting compelling case studies; and promoting stricter laws similar to Prop 126.

Each state has a set of basic rules meant to prevent unfair, deceptive, manipulative or predatory business practices, Frotman said.

"Fair dealing statutes are meant to be bold and broad. And durable," he added. "But over time they've been whittled down by corporate influence."

MUCH OF THE DISCUSSION echoed what Ranch Foods Direct owner Mike Callicrate has been saying for years.

As the first speaker on the opening panel, he emphasized the necessity of enforcing the Robinson-Patman Act, which prohibits price discrimination against small businesses. Robinson-Patman was enacted in 1936 to prevent large firms from discriminating against small, independent businesses with unequal pricing.

"When Lina Kahn was commissioner of the Federal Trade Commission under President Biden, she was bringing a case against Pepsi for selling to Walmart's competitors at more than Walmart's retail price," he said, citing one example. "After she was fired, the Trump Administration dropped the case."

Unfair pricing, if allowed to continue, causes consolidation to spiral unchecked, eventually leading to noncompetitive business environments that can harm consumers.

"As chain stores grow more powerful, and continue to get bigger and bigger, the non-enforcement of these laws removes a key barrier that allows them to charge whatever they want from whomever they want. Main Streets get emptied out because of it," he added. "When the last independent grocery store closed in Goodland, Kansas, Walmart raised the prices in their meat case by 18 percent the next day."

To address the problem of skyrocketing rents, he has proposed creating a series of maker-owned marketplaces around the country where producers and makers could co-locate while owning a portion of the real estate. A shared condominium-type development would make it easy and convenient for shoppers to buy local from a range of independent businesses all in one place. The co-location model could also be used as a framework to provide collective access to necessary support services, such as financing and employee health coverage.

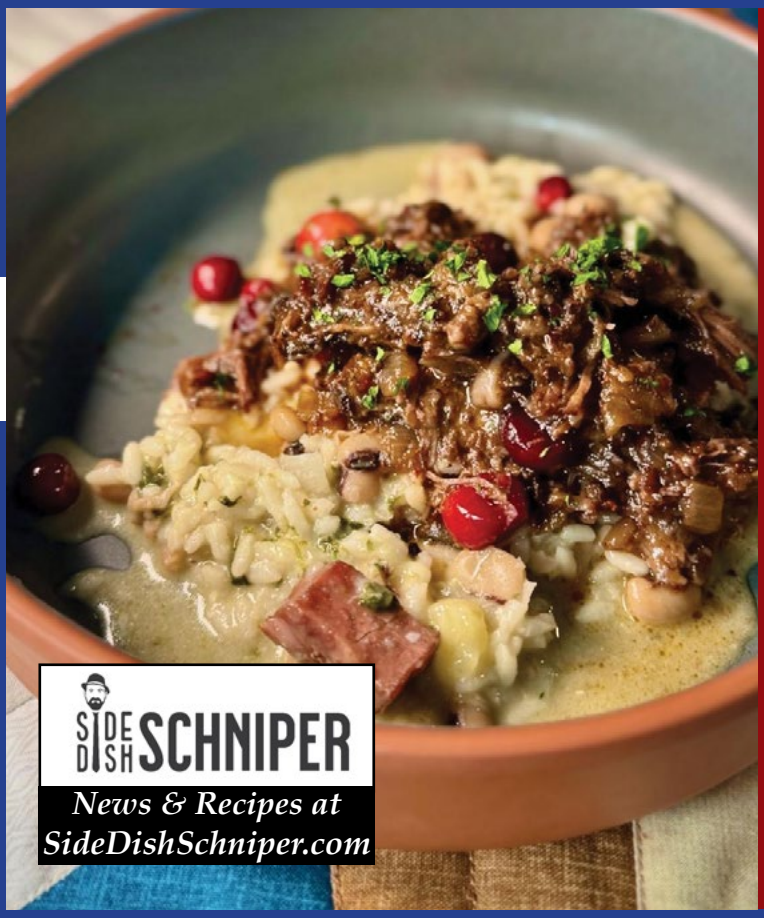
"It's the essential next step in building healthy, resilient, community-scaled food systems," he said.

The concept has drawn the interest of community leaders in La Junta and Lamar, who are looking for options following the announcement their Safeway stores were closing. That leaves Walmart and the dollar stores as the primary source of groceries.

While the prospect of pursuing a co-location development in Southeast Colorado is exciting, Mike cautions it requires the right business climate, adequate business protections and anti-trust enforcement to give it a fair chance at success.

"The community has to be fully behind it, and we need the right business protections in place," he said. "But wouldn't it be nice if Colorado could become an example for the nation of how to build, support, and protect local and regional food systems?"

"We need to develop a cost-of-production-plus pricing model that prevents imports from undercutting domestic farmers and ranchers and their workers, while devaluing foreign labor." — Ranch Foods Direct Owner Mike Callicrate



CRANBERRY CHIPOTLE BEEF CHEEKS

Recipe courtesy Chef Matt Maher

2 lbs. Callicrate beef cheeks
1 medium red onion, small dice
2 cloves garlic, minced
1 lb. cranberries
1 can (7.5 oz.) chipotle in adobo
Callicrate Beef bone broth

Set crock pot to high and lightly oil the bottom using Callicrate Beef tallow. When hot, salt and pepper beef cheeks and sear in base of crock pot. After 3-5 minutes flip beef and add diced onion and garlic. While onion and garlic sauté, combine half the cranberries and chipotle peppers in food processor or blender and process til smooth. Coat beef cheeks in chipotle/ cranberry mixture and return to crock pot. Add remaining cranberries and enough bone broth to cover the beef cheeks. Let beef cheeks cook until tender enough to shred with tongs or a fork (4-6 hours.) Serve over risotto or use meat for tacos.

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