

Visions of Kitchens Danced in Her Head

What's more exciting than a bucket o'fish? Well, a bucket o' fish that's for sale at your local outdoor seafood market, right alongside the veggies you need to go with it, and the dressing for that salad, and maybe a bit of dessert from the vendor across the way. Fresh lemonade? A bit of goat cheese? You got it. Oh, and you don't have to drive to Cannon Beach if you live in Astoria . . . this is *your* local farm-and-fish-to-table market.

Ahhh, the sweet sound of a dream beginning to take shape. The goodness doesn't stop there but includes a community accessible commercial kitchen, food venture facility, retail store, café, business development center, and more. What *is* this vision of food system sugarplums? The North Coast Food Center, and yes, while it's still a vision, a twinkle in the eye of North Coast Food Web's Kristin Frost Albrecht, the Food Center is a concept worth watching—and getting involved with.

The beginning of the Clatsop County food assessment took place in September of 2009, at a FEAST event in Cannon Beach. FEAST= Food Education Agriculture Solutions Together; here interested parties began the discussion of what the community food security needs were in Clatsop County (see related article, p.15). The North Coast Food Web was born of this gathering, and from there Albrecht began spooling out her idea to a receptive board of food community players.

A facility such as the North Coast Food Center would contribute enormously to the economic growth and well being of the region. Small food and value-added product producers are very limited in the State of Oregon as to where and how they can operate. A licensed domestic or commercial kitchen presents the would-be cottage industrialist with a plethora of fees, regulations, and requirements that are often beyond the scope of and production goals of the maker. The red tape can present a barrier to success; having access via membership to a commercial kitchen that would offer not only offer production but also processing and packaging facilities makes a small business dream 100% more viable.

“Many of our small or emerging farmers have to have regular jobs in addition to farming. By offering a facility to create value-added products, their sales season is extended beyond our sometimes very short growing season,” Albrecht, also the Small Farms agent at OSU Extension Center, states. An accessible commercial kitchen would allow the production of jams, jellies, salsas, canned fish, baked goods, and so on, a natural outgrowth of the bounty of the harvest.

A business development center is also part of the plan, to provide food and agricultural consulting to future and existing businesses. A retail store would be a natural outcome of value added products and seafood products, and a café

would also provide an opportunity to consumers to enjoy local produce and seafood, as well as creating potential partnerships with culinary arts programs at CCC and Tongue Point.

“I need to emphasize that we’re very much in the concept stage at this point. It’s probably a little grand, but I like to jump right into the heart of things. The first thing we need to do is get a grant for a feasibility study,” Albrecht says. The Food Center would evolve under the 501c-3 status of the North Coast Food Web, which is currently in process. A feasibility study would supply the necessary basis and in-depth planning that could then be used to apply for grant monies. “There are community food project grants out there. It’s a worthy project, but we need to have the studies in place.”

Like a mature vegetable garden that is appreciated for all that it offers, a concept as brimming with abundance as the North Coast Food Center has to start with a single seed. Albrecht admits that her original enthusiastic hope of seeing the Food Center in place within three years is probably unrealistic. But parts of the project can begin to sprout. The first impetus will be to create the much asked for fresh food and seafood market in Astoria, separate from the Astoria Sunday Market. Albrecht, who was the initial force behind the popular and profitable Cannon Beach Farmer’s Market, says that there has been overwhelming input from the community of both consumers and food providers (farmers, fisher-folk) for a fresh food market. Her idea is for a weeknight time slot, possibly a Thursday, which would not only benefit locals but be inviting for tourists coming for a long weekend as well.

“The Cannon Beach Market provides an astounding influx of cash into that community. While the demographics are different, the Astoria region could find a real cash benefit from a market too.”

And a fresh food market would offer a venue for the fresh, local fruits of the sea that so often are not accessible to the local community (much of local catch is shipped away from the region). Albrecht desires that the market accept SNAP (food stamps) like the Cannon Beach and Tillamook markets. Then local and often organic foods will be more available to those who typically do not have access. Especially if a matching program is put in place, like the \$5 for \$5 initiative available at the CB market, then benefit dollars are significantly extended.

“I really think it’s realistic to have the market up and running by June,” Albrecht enthuses. And she asserts that the Food Center concept and the fresh food market need community support and involvement. Anyone can offer time, skills, money and ideas. Contact Albrecht at her OSU Extension Service number, 503-325-8573 or the North Coast Food Web board at info@northcoastfoodweb.org.

“The broader our base is, the healthier the system will be,” Albrecht says. And a healthy food system for all is the fundamental drive behind the food security movement. Oregon is already a national leader in hunger initiatives; Astoria could be the model for the nation of a community based and created food security center.