

What is the problem your app is addressing?

Food for Thought is a mobile app that addresses the problem of dining spontaneously while also dining sustainably. In today's market, conscientious consumers seek out establishments that provide them with local and seasonal items. However, finding a restaurant that serves sustainable food of this nature is a process of trial and error and requires a lot of effort on the part of the consumer.

There is currently no on-the-go, comprehensive way for consumers to find restaurants that serve these types of foods. We propose the creation of an app that would map out nearby restaurants based on their patronage to local farmers. With this app, consumers will easily discover places to dine that meet sustainability standards. Many existing apps explain the idea of local and sustainable eating, leaving an opportunity for a practical application. Smart phones, thankfully, have provided us with a platform for spontaneous conscientiousness, something that every active local eater will enjoy.

Who is the audience and why is this relevant to them?

Food for Thought has a diverse audience because it allows for three channels of input as well as three specific target benefactors. This app benefits local farmers, restaurant owners who choose to buy from local farms and customers seeking a truly local dining experience.

Benefactor #1: The Farmers

Food producers are the main ingredient of this food-centric app. Our initial interview with

Sandy Lombardi, an employee of Kuhn Orchards in Virginia, illuminated the current obstructions in the way of a farmer-to-restaurant relationship. She explained the situation with one restaurant in particular that uses Kuhn produce occasionally in their seasonal menu selection. Lombardi believes that using local food increases customer confidence in the freshness of the restaurant's food items. She said they will be more likely to return because it's "fresh...straight from the farm to the chef to the plate." She reported that her farm would be interested in supplying to more restaurants if there was more consistency in the orders and more accountability in general from the restaurants.

Food for Thought addresses these problems from many angles. First, the success of the app would create a demand that would enact a consistency in orders from the restaurants that buy from local farms. The accountability problem would be solved too, because customers would learn to expect certain farm-fresh foods at the restaurant promoting such cuisine on the app and would leave negative reviews if that item was not available. This would essentially change the way restaurants communicated with farms and create a system of equality.

Further benefits spawn from the functionality aspects of this app, which require that farmers provide correct information and restaurants represent this information accurately. This type of responsibility creates an ecosystem of trust and honesty between restaurant owners and their suppliers, the farmers. Food for Thought also creates another set of potential clientele. Farmers will benefit from the increased, consistent demand of restaurants that desire to be included in this local food family. If the economics of eating start to shift in favor of local farmers, the habits of Americans are sure to follow.

Benefactor #2: The Consumers

Restaurant-goers interested in sustainable practices will benefit from this app simply because their goal of eating more responsibly will be achieved by a technology they can keep in their pocket. Michael Windle, a young DC professional, explained that he “would definitely increase [his] patronage” to restaurants that buy locally, but that he “just [doesn’t] know where they are.” Customers like Mr. Windle would benefit because they would be able to explore new sustainable restaurant options, feel confident in their dining choices and be able to share the experience of easy, local dining with friends through informing others of the app.

Customers of restaurants featured in Food for Thought would also benefit from the ratings system. The ratings system adds one more check and balance for the app that, again, increases accountability. Customers will enjoy the satisfaction of knowing that their shared experiences with local foods in restaurants will, effectively, help the farm where the food was grown. In a similar vein, app users will be able to find out which “local” restaurants do not live up to their name.

Benefactor #3: The Restaurants

There are many restaurants that make a concentrated effort to support local farms and food producers by purchasing from them consistently, year-round. Unfortunately, there are also restaurants that tout “local ingredients,” when they really only serve local tomatoes on one salad, and only on Tuesdays. Alex Nazarov, product engineer at Washington Post Company, gave us the initial idea of creating a crowd sourced database that leaves no room for misleading information. The creation of Food for Thought does just that, and benefits the restaurants that actually provide sufficient local ingredients by setting them apart from the wash of “green” locations that do not keep promises.

Restaurant owners will also benefit because they will become a part of an elite “local food family” that will increase their customer base. Consumers who use Food for Thought will seek out these restaurants in particular and enjoy spending their money knowing it is going back to the farm. In a broader sense, the restaurants will benefit from an assumed increase in the quality of the food that is served, as well. Local, in-season food is desirable on many levels, and will increase profit for the restaurant.

How is your app different than other apps that potentially address this problem?

Food for Thought addresses the problem of spontaneity. There are many resources that allow local eaters to determine where *that* type of cuisine is available, or which farms provide what ingredients, but there are currently no options that simplify the process down to the most important step: going to the restaurant.

Food for Thought tackles the issue surrounding the (sometimes not-so-) honest portrayal of what actually comes from a local, sustainable source on a restaurant’s menu. Buzzwords like “farm fresh” and “free-range” draw attention from the target market for this app, but there is rarely any evidence to support the rhetoric. Food for Thought engages the restaurants, farmers and consumers in a system of checks and balances that benefits everyone involved. Our app keeps the process simple and relies on the farmer’s word to create its valuable content. The combination of farmer input, restaurant aggregation and customer ratings create a symbiotic system for the app to expand the local eating scene and promote accountability in the industry as a whole.

Literature on the subject alludes to the nature of sustainable consumption and its potential rejuvenation through social media and technology (Zemack, 2011; Mainwaring, 2011). Many

articles focused on already established apps that have created a social culture around the idea of eating at restaurants. One article about the app Foodspotting underlined the three aspects that a social food-related app should contain: the ability to share, show and collaborate (Siegler, 2011). The sentiment seems to be shared that sustainable and responsible eating is an important social movement that should be regarded as more than just a fad, and many are trying to find the best way to create momentum in the sphere of app creation (Teck Heng, 2011). Foodspotting, and many other apps with a “foodie” focus, are missing an important step that leaves users hanging: they have information, but how do they incorporate it into their lives?

Apps like Foodspotting and Locavore all focus on the same end result, but have a different method of achieving it. Foodspotting is much more focused on the aesthetics of the food itself and the ability to share photos with friends. This social networking-centric app serves a specific purpose and is highly successful. Locavore’s purpose is to illuminate what types of food is in season based on one’s location. The app has mixed reviews because many people are left clueless as to how they should apply this information in their daily lives. Food for Thought fixes that problem by adding an action element: the restaurant.

What interesting research questions might emerge as a result of this app?

The Food for Thought app will undoubtedly lead to many questions surrounding the local food movement. There will be questions aimed at comparing the farming practices of small, local farms to those of industrial farms. Whether small, local farms are actually more sustainable than larger, industrial farms will be an important question that will probably arise as people become more invested in the topic and more motivated to learn about it. Other questions will no doubt be focused on the actual demand of local farming. For our app to be successful, the local residents

and the local restaurants must be interested in purchasing local produce, and so questions surrounding the actual demand of local produce will arise. Lastly, an important area for questions will be local farms' effect on local communities.

How might two different disciplines address these questions?

There are a number of disciplines through which our app can be meaningfully analyzed. One important lens through which to view our app would be the environment. The local food movement is tied to the hip of the environmental movement. Many people see supporting local farmers as a way to lower their carbon footprint and support sustainable agricultural practices. There are a few main topics that have been cited as reasons to support local farming for the purpose of bettering the environment, mostly hinged on the fact that local farms are, by definition, smaller than industrial farms.

There is evidence to show that the agricultural practices of small farms are more sustainable and environmentally friendly than the agricultural practices of industrial farms. Local farms tend to be smaller and need to clear less land for farming so they may not contribute to large-scale soil erosion like industrial farms do (Guo & Gifford, 2002). Additionally, the outputs of carbon dioxide, methane gas and nitrous oxide emissions by cattle and livestock can increase or decrease depending on the environments in which they live and the food they eat (Leng, 1993; Radl, V., et al., 2007). Because smaller farms usually deal with less livestock and fewer cattle, they tend to treat them more humanely and feed them more digestible foods than industrial farms do, which deal with livestock and cattle on such a large scale that they do not tend to implement humane handling practices or proper nutrition. As for the local element, buying local produce reduces the “food miles” that are necessary to get produce from the farm to your plate. Reducing the number of miles your food must travel can reduce the amount of fuel that is used and thus

pollution that is emitted into the environment (Pirog & Benjamin, 2003; Blanke & Burdick, 2005; Sim, S., 2007).

Research could also be conducted through the lens of an economic discipline. While reducing food miles cuts down pollution, it also ensures that consumers are putting money directly back into their local economy instead of first funneling it through the larger national or international economies. Studies have shown that buying local tends to bolster small, local economies because the money spent to support local business goes back to people that live in the local area, who in turn spend the money at local businesses (Schwartz, 2009). Additionally, through direct sale of their produce to local consumers, small, local farms are able to retain more of the value of their produce than if they had to spend money on shipping costs (Trobe, 2001). Restaurants are in more demand of local produce than they used to be. This trend has not only increased purchasing at already established local farms, but large-scale growers are looking to open up regional markets in order to sell their produce to more restaurants (Day-Farnsworth, 2009). Lastly, the “food miles” issue is also an economic one, as food miles are reduced, so are transportation costs for the farmers.

What might be missing as a result of this approach?

Implications and Future Research.

Going local has become very cool. Trendy terms are emerging to describe the movement, such as, “locavore” - a person who eats locally grown produce (Farenga & Ness, 2010) - and “locapour” - a person who drinks locally made wine or beer. Urban farming and urban wineries have become the new trend in densely populated cities all over the country. However, much of

the support surrounding these “green” trends is superficial, and it is questionable how many people are actually invested in “greening” their lives and lowering their carbon footprint.

This app will inevitably face this issue and an important question that will arise is: How will our app affect how consumers are engaging with the green movement? Superficial locavores will talk the talk, but probably will not take the time to use our app. Research questions that will emerge from our app will surround this issue, such as: How invested is the general public in supporting local produce? What is the actual dedication to local eating in DC? Will making local eating more accessible be the tipping point for turning superficial locavores into active ones? How involved do locavores want to be? Is the knowledge that foods are locally produced enough, or do consumers require information about the food’s origin as well? Do they want information about the specific farming practices of the farms? How important will it be to our app users if the farms are certified organic or not? Do they want to be able to communicate with the farms? How invested will app users be in the ratings process? Will only a small portion of our users rate the restaurants or will the majority of our users participate in the ratings system? These questions underlie the local food movement overall. It is hard to know if this movement has become so popular because of its novelty and progressive nature, or because people actually want to use it as a way to make positive changes in health, farming practices, the environment, animal rights and local economies.

Conclusion

Food for Thought attempts to achieve a symbiosis between farmer, restaurant and consumer. The app’s multi-dimensional functionality relies on the cooperation and honest communication of the three involved parties, and therefore provides a transparent and direct

circle of communication. Into the future, our app will promote a lifestyle that will assist in a necessary shift toward responsible consumerism that will lower the national carbon footprint and increase health awareness.

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