

# The Security of Sustenance: The Resilience of Local Food Systems in a Time of Crisis



April 16, 2020

Argus Farm Stop, Ann Arbor, MI

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## *An Introduction:*

How can we create a more inclusive and accessible food system, when changing food policy is next to impossible within the United States? While systematic change is needed, citizens should take steps to regain some of their agency in relationship to their food. A local food hub, Argus Farm Stop, has been doing just that. Argus Farm Stop has been a part of Ann Arbor's community since 2014. Co-owners Kathleen Sample and Bill Brinkerhoff began Argus as a way to maintain the local food system in Washtenaw County. Sample and Brinkerhoff were concerned with local farms disappearing, and the knowledge of growing food with it. They were also concerned with the difficulty that it took to start and maintain a farm, with a five-year survival rate of new farms being less than 50%, and felt that the distribution of the food played into this. Farmers on average only receive 15 cents on each retail dollar, with distributors and middlemen taking the other 85 cents. Argus has an alternative system: farmers get to set their own prices, and make 75 cents to each dollar. The travel of the food was also important to them, as most food in the United States travels over 1,500 miles to get from farm to table, and takes a long time to do so, reducing the quality.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, food access has become a larger issue and localized food systems are more important than ever. The store is a new model for the future of food; it provides a year-round selling opportunity for local farmers and year-round buying for consumers. Agriculture is one of the highest emitters of fossil fuels in the United States, along with being responsible for high amounts of global deforestation, soil degradation, and water pollution. In the future, under a climate-descent scenario we will require re-worked food systems that require less energy and are able to prosper in the changing climate. By localizing parts of our food system, we can change our relationship to food and its value to us, while helping to decrease the need for unsustainable food systems that have disproportionately negative effects on neighboring countries and the Global South.

The goal is to help people be aware of the values of localized food systems early on, so they have more agency in relationship to their food, and are able to transition easier into a future with more difficult food access from climate change and other crises.

Through *The Security of Sustenance: the Resilience of Local Food Systems in a Time of Crisis*, I want to make sure that Argus' work does not go unnoticed during this time of crisis, and can be used as a model for more sustainable, local food systems. All images are taken at the Packard Street location, a retail space that has been converted into a full-scale packaging center to fill the pick-up and drop-off orders.









*General employee Gonzalo Muñoz picks out apples while fulfilling a curbside pick-up order*





*Dietician Mary Balog weighs and sorts mushrooms for distribution on what is usually used as the checkout counter during regular retail*





*Shift manager Cary Peterson and Balog sort boxes and move produce in the back station of the store*





*Peterson and Balog look over an order and try to locate food items throughout the store*





*Balog chooses a variety of apples for a pick-up order*





*Balog, co-owner Kathy Sample, and Peterson constantly move stock around the store*

## Interview with Mary Balog, Dietician and employee, Argus Farm Stop

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Sam Plouff:

*What is your role here at Argus, and how did you end up working here?*

Mary Balog:

“I’ve been working here for five years, and my background is in nutrition and culinary arts. I’ve wanted to work here to support a place that I feel promotes health directly, and I feel that every community should have a place like Argus. I wanted to be somewhere where I’m directly influencing people’s behaviors and finding ways to improve the access of this fresh food too, because everyone should have this food as an option.”

Plouff:

*Do you think that localized, fresh food is more important, especially now?*

Balog:

“Yeah, for sure, I mean we can see the disproportionate mortality rate and infection rate for people who have been marginalized. In that context, I’ve been thinking a lot about how the social determinants of health play a big part in our health outcomes. So, in that sense, making sure that our communities have fresh food options and that people can afford it and get transportation to these places. That is so crucial to having a healthy society and community and it’s unfortunate that you see people who are being affected by this with underlying conditions that are just results of systematic racism and oppression. Hopefully whatever comes out of this (pandemic) there’s some type of reform in that sense.

As a dietician, that’s what’s hard, because I can only do so much in the individual realm, and individual behaviors do impact out health, significantly, but whatever you do can only be with what’s within your vicinity and what you have access to.”

Plouff:

*So you think that working at Argus helps you reach more of the community vs. individuals then?*

Balog:

“Yeah for sure, before that even, before the consumer comes into the picture, if the farmers aren’t around, no one is going to be able to grow the vegetable I’m telling people to eat. And that’s why I’m here at Argus, because we’re here to support the farmers. I want this model to be successful so that it can spread to other communities and support those farms, and prove to people that small farming can be a viable business if models like this exist. So, in my mind, starting with the food here is how we can potentially get to a really healthy food system. Because we can have the farmers growing the food from the start that people need to be eating.”

Plouff:

*Have you been able to put any of your personal skills surrounding diet into your work here at Argus?*

Balog:

“Yes, fortunately the owners Bill and Cathy, and floor managers Laura, Ryan and Travis are all very supportive of whatever employee’s specific interests and endeavors are. In 2018 they gave me the chance to make my own position here, so I’m called the food alchemist of the ministry of food, *laughs*, so anything that relates to food education is given to me, and that’s great. When we’re not social distancing, we will



hopefully return to providing the food demos in Argus, and after hour classes that are led by farmers and other community members and myself. It's fun to explore education opportunities in a store setting which is a thing in grocery markets, but here the social aspect and the community is such an important aspect of health that I get to promote, as well as the food. That's something you don't get in supermarkets. Creating connections between someone growing the food, meeting a new customer who is talking about the recipes, and creating social connections is really important to build on as well."

Plouff:

*Do you think that the classes will change at all after this calms down?*

Balog:

"I'm not sure, we'll have to see, our other store is pretty busy in the current circumstances. I'm sure if things slow down and there is a need to be virtual or have remote classes, we can explore that. Right now it is just an overhaul of our operation, it's just all hands on deck, and classes are more on the backburner."



*One of Balog's signs offering help with home food preparation*





*General employee Thomas Burke looks in an refrigerator, normally used for retail, for produce to fill a drop-off order*





*After not finding the produce indoors, Burke gets produce out of one of the new, outdoor walk-in refrigerators*





*The indoor, open-air refrigerator normally used for retail, now holds produce for boxed orders*





*Peterson waits as Muñoz exits one of the outdoor freezers*





*Peterson sorts through the tightly packed, outdoor freezer*





*Notes and reminders are pinned up all over the store to help with sorting*





*Produce manager Brian Barch tags crates of apples*

## Interview with Brian Barch, Produce-Manager, Argus Farm Stop

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Sam Plouff:

*What is your role here at Argus?*

Brian Barch:

“I wear a lot of different hats, I’m the produce-manager here at the Packard store, and I do the schedule for our 40-50 staff members, as well as a lot of other things. Right now, I am still doing the schedule for both of the stores and managing the back end of our online operation. I’m trying to make sure that we are ordering sufficient quantities of local produce from our farmers and producers to make sure that we are getting local food out there into the hands of folks stuck at home.”

Plouff:

*Has that process shifted during the pandemic?*

Barch:

“A month ago, we had a very small online store and we would send out a few orders here and there for a few smaller institutions. Now, we are sending out between 100-200 orders a day for pickup and delivery for individual homes and families, so we are quite a bit busier than we were before all of this happened. The pandemic was not anticipated, and we and our partners are doing our best to keep up and every day we’re getting a little better at it”

Plouff:

*How would you say that the farmers have been impacted during this time?*

Barch:

“It’s been a challenge for them, as like for many of us, they (the farmers) have homes and families, and accounts, and what not. So in addition to all the challenges of weather, etc. for planting and so on, the farmers market was cancelled, so that took away one point of access for customers, and for our farmers it is generally a pretty important part of their business. With all the restaurants shut down as well, the farmers who supply for restaurants have had that revenue stream largely dry up. They’re still able to supply a few folks here and there who are doing curbside pickup, but it’s a very different situation for them. The demand has changed significantly from a lot of people who usually buy from grocery stores. And a whole lot of other places have just shut down.

If the farmers have been growing stuff this winter they have a hoop house or field full of stuff, and not necessarily anywhere to take it. The good thing is we’ve been able to provide an outlet for them. One of our farmers said: ‘thank you for what you’re doing with what you’re able to move through your store, we’ve been able to keep up with our harvest’. So then that means that what (produce) they have in their hoop house or field, they are harvesting regularly, and if they didn’t have an outlet like us, they would just have to leave it to rot.”

Plouff:

*Other than helping supply people work and income, and not letting food go to rot in fields, how would you say that this has impacted the local community? Has there been any strong community aspects or movements you’ve noticed?*



Barch:

“We basically overnight turned out Packard store into an online operation. It felt like overnight we shut down retail operation (at Packard ) and developed an online store, and I don't know , put out 50-60 orders our first day as a soft-trial run. Now, as I mentioned before, we're doing 100-200 orders a day. We've noticed the pattern of ordering has changed even over this sort time. Before, we would see smaller orders for supplemental items or specialty things: arugula, fancy cheese, etc. Now, you see an order come in and it's like: onions, eggs, potatoes, milk. I think one huge difference that has really impacted the community here, is that we have really short supply chains relative to others stores. What that means is that our farmers and producers come in 1-2 times a week, if not more, and are regularly supplying us with what's available from a short distance away. So ( the food) is good, it's fresh, it's nutritious, and it's really amazing, amazing, food.

I've heard a lot of people who have said: 'I've tried to use this other delivery program or pickup and they keep being backlogged or putting the order off' and we have been able to keep up with our orders. One of the good things about this is that Ann Arbor has a really strong, well-educated, insightful community in the local food world, with amazing levels of sophistication. However, I think that this whole situation has gotten local food into the hands of people who might not have had an introduction to it, and people are discovering just how fantastic it actually is. So, one of the biggest impacts I hope to see is that those folks introduced to local food continue to come back to support the local food community. That's basically our mission, to grow the local food economy.”



*Muñoz, Peterson, and Balog help each other find produce*





*Manager Laura Barch takes constant phone calls from customers and farmers throughout the day*









*Sample sorts packaged meat while Burke, co-owner Bill Brinkerhoff, and Peterson look for different meats that cannot be found in the upstairs freezers*





*Sample pulls rainbow chard from boxes in the beer cooler that have been transformed into more produce storage*



## Interview with Kathy Sample, Co-Owner, Argus Farm Stop

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Sam Plouff:

*Argus Farm Stop has been supplying the Ann Arbor community with local food for quite a while now, do you think it is being noticed more now that fresh food is more inaccessible?*

Kathy Sample:

“It’s proving it now, but I feel bad for places that don’t have this (Argus Farm Stop) . There’s an organization up in the Traverse City area called Groundwork, and they have put out a lot of local food out as well. There’s been a larger variety of things available, and more exposure, we like to say that we have the biggest collection of locally raised meats in the state. People are finding us as a food source, especially when other places aren’t even taking orders anymore.”

Plouff:

*Do you think that that momentum is going to continue?*

Sample:

“I think some people will continue (with their purchasing). I think if you make it (money) a pie, and the economy as a pie piece, the piece might get a little smaller, and people might eat at home more, therefore, the (at-home) food buying will be increased.”

Plouff:

*Is Argus planning on maintaining a big online presence after all of this?*

Sample:

“I don’t see how we could go back now, people are now realizing: ‘I can just go online, I can view the food, somebody will deliver it to me’-particularly the people who are not mobile as much as they used to be.”

Plouff:

*Do you think it’s going to be at the same scale?*

Sample:

“It’s going to be really different, because it is difficult to do online and retail in the same facility. So it could be that we have to have a facility just to do the online orders, which is a whole other issue. We have been driving around looking at buildings and we weren’t doing that a month ago. We’re still a neighborhood store, and I have no desire to become an amazon packing center for food. It’s (the pandemic) is just not what we thought was going to happen. We went from being your local barista and local food person to packing up people’s boxes.

Plouff:

*Has your relationship with your employees changed at all?*

Sample:

“Well, we thought they (the employees) were super smart before and now we think they’re geniuses, because they’ve been able to pivot and figure out things that we had not idea how to do. Like with inventory of this scale, our staff has been like: ‘hey we should do this, or put that there, or worry about that instead’. So, lots of people have been showing new sides of their creativity when they’re thrown a curveball.”

Plouff:

*I've always felt that Argus had a strong sense of community, but it seems that it's even stronger now. There seems to be a new sense of comradery?*

Sample:

“You become like family because you’re in the trenches doing this stuff. I felt like we were kind of a family and had a common mission before this. But, when the business pivoted like this (due to the pandemic) when you’re working for three weeks without as many breaks , you’re a lot more tender with them and not as sharp as you might be, because you know and care about them. But they put themselves out there and they have not held anything back from this whole thing. You can see they are trying to get customers their food, and you wouldn’t think they would care that much, but they know that farmer, who brought the food (to the store), and when a farmer comes in they know where it (the food) is coming from.”





*Sample and Brinkerhoff sort packaged meats by weight to place on their online ordering site*

## An Update with Kathy Sample, Co-Owner, Argus Farm Stop - April 24th, 2020

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Sam Plouff:

*How has the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) been a part of Argus in the past?*

Kathy Sample:

“We have worked hard from the beginning to make sure food access was built into our model. In fact, we are the largest Double-Up-Food-Bucks participant as we have the only year round local stock of produce.”

Plouff:

*In what ways has this relationship changed during the quarantine?*

Sample:

“In Michigan, SNAP is not currently allowed to be done over the phone, so SNAP customers can only do pick-up and pay at the pick-up point, no delivery. It means that contactless order fulfillment is not possible, and for those who are not mobile, this is an additional hurdle that non-SNAP users don't encounter. We are trying to get this changed. Several states have allowed SNAP acceptance online. If it changes, the DUFEB will be also something we can offer: so, we're waiting.”

Plouff:

*What change are you pushing for within the SNAP program?*

Sample:

“We're encouraging lawmakers and those involved in local government to push for the change to make SNAP use online legal.”



*Thank you to Argus Farm Stop and all the employees for letting me  
be a part of your day*

*Special thanks to...*



*for funding this project*