

Orange County Community Food Assessment *Executive Summary*

The Community Food Assessment is a compilation of data offering a holistic view of the state of Orange County's food system, with the goal of understanding how the Orange County Food Council may support a socially, economically, and environmentally just food system that provides safe, culturally appropriate, and nutritious food.

Our food system is a complex and interwoven network that includes the following components: production, processing, distribution, consumption, and food waste management. The assessment used this framework alongside the Whole Measures Framework, adapted from the Center of Whole Communities, to guide data collection and analysis. Data was compiled in Fall 2015, primarily from public resources as well as qualitative interviews with key stakeholders.

Key Findings

Growing Food: Production

Orange County enjoys a long farming history, but the nature of agricultural production has changed over time. The number of farms increased while the size of farms and total farming acreage declined. Types of produce and profitability are changing as local food systems gain support. Farmers themselves are older, and are relatively a homogenous demographic. The rural buffer in Orange County is a tremendous asset for farmers and farming, and supports high air, water, and soil quality, although more data to monitor the quality would be beneficial.

Preparing Food: Processing and Distribution

This report focuses on Orange County yet a regional perspective is needed to fully understand processing and distribution. A handful of local operations provide produce and meat processing or distribution/aggregation services. Orange County currently supports food business development through incubators and grant programs. However, this area of the food system has growth potential, particularly for poultry processing and additional distribution infrastructure.

Consumption: Eating Food & Selling Food

Orange County is consistently ranked among the healthiest in North Carolina. Diet-related health outcomes such as obesity and diabetes improved recently and food insecurity in Orange County is relatively low, though a substantial proportion of food insecure individuals are ineligible for SNAP (formerly known as food stamps). The percentage of households receiving SNAP increased dramatically over the last 15 years, mirroring national trends, though the proportion remains low relative to the rest of North Carolina. Both schools districts in Orange County saw an increase in the proportion of students receiving free and reduced lunch, but the need is greater in rural Orange County schools. Additionally, summer lunch programs have expanded yet still have trouble reaching all children in need.

Neighborhoods in Chapel Hill/ Carrboro are classified as food deserts via the standard USDA definition that takes into account distance (within 1-mile) to a full-service grocery store, and many more households are located in low income, low access areas within the county. Programming improved for services providing fresh foods for low-income households, particularly targeting recipients of Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP).

Both demand and availability of local food increased in Orange County. Direct-to-consumer markets, such as farmers markets and community supported agriculture arrangements (CSAs), have and continue to grow. Traditional retailers are interested in selling more local food to meet this demand, though infrastructure is still lacking. Despite the avenue of selling food, promotion and access to healthy food for consumers is still a concern.

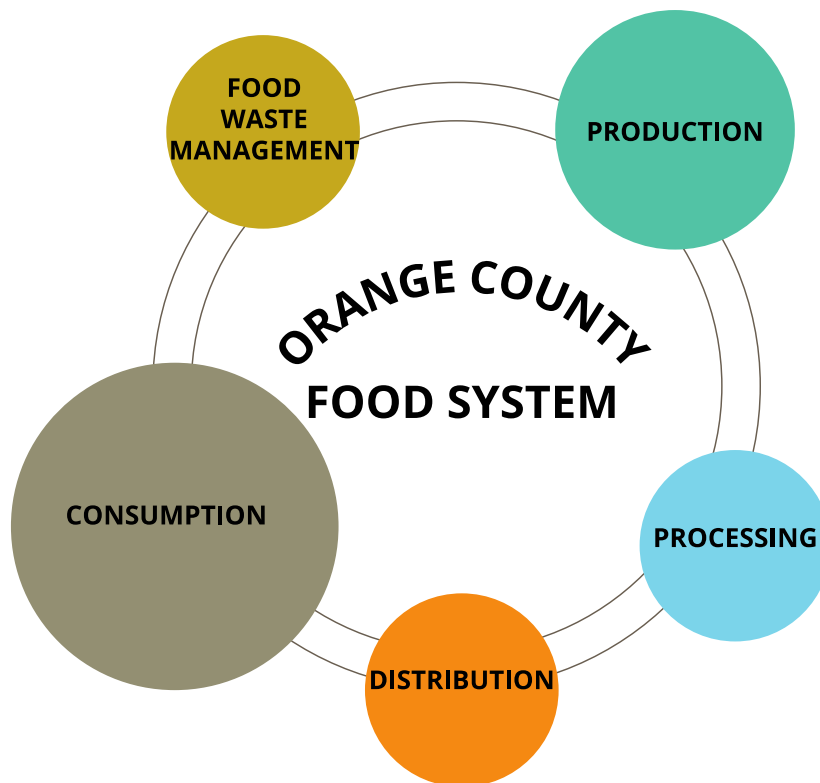
Composting Food: Food Waste Management

Orange County does not have a county supported composting service, but residents have access to privately run composting services. Other waste reduction programming includes a district wide composting program at schools, composting at select groceries, and event specific initiatives.

Additional Findings:

Our food system exists within a larger institutional framework made up of organizations and policies that shape all aspects of the food system's inner workings. Orange County programs and policies working to create a more viable and equitable food system include: community-based organizations working with local farmers and retailers to connect food insecure households with fresh foods; policies promoting economic growth in agriculture and food entrepreneurship; and school initiatives such as gardens and farm to school programs. The Orange County Food Council would join this infrastructure as a collaborative network between these key stakeholders already engaged in the health of the food system and the community.

Food System Schematic:



Prepared for the Orange County Food Council by Sophie Kelmenson and Sarah Prager