

Is Organic Food the Secret to Reviving Small Town America?

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If one thing can solve the epidemic of the dying American small town, it may just be organic food.

Dying Small Towns: An American Epidemic

Small towns have been shrinking for decades, and even more so since 2000, according to Forbes. Former industry hubs are shrinking; and median incomes in small towns are dropping with manufacturing work being replaced by service jobs.

One native of Athol, a small town in Massachusetts, wrote about this trend in 2012, noting that in the early 20th century, particularly post-World War II, "It was thought of as a grand idea to move out of the dirty insanity of the Big City and live in a small town, where one could make a name for oneself, get a job at the local factory or store, and be a part of a small but tight community."

The younger generation, the writer notes, has become far more urbane than its ancestors, and while the writer himself has relocated to San Francisco, he expresses sadness and nostalgia at the sight of his diminishing hometown, wishing that “some company that could enjoy the fruits of its labors, could hire the town’s citizens” would move in and instill new life in the area.

This sentiment is likely one felt throughout the U.S., where according to the Wall Street Journal, nearly 60 percent of rural counties shrank in population in 2014, as compared to 40 percent in the late '90s.

Is Organic Food the Answer?

Between two small towns on Route 17 in upstate New York, towns that The Photo News noted in May were “in need of some TLC,” entrepreneur Michael Bruno decided to open a Hudson Valley farm stand selling organic food.

The Blue Barn organic stand sold out within the first few hours of opening this past summer, and its success has not stopped there.

Since moving to the area four years ago, Bruno has made a point of buying up 14 properties, with the goal of revitalizing the commercial economy of the area. Bruno plans to complete his farm stand by creating a veritable organic food destination: a 70- to 90-room hotel, a roadside rotisserie, and a bar will all help in creating a reason to travel to this small area of upstate New York. The New York Post called it a plan to “transform the blighted towns of Tuxedo and Sloatsburg into the ‘gateway’ to the Hudson.”

“This park, this much natural beauty, the Hudson Valley with all the food and the city that close by,” Bruno said. “You’d have to be a bad storyteller for people to not want to at least come once and check it out.”

While at this point, Bruno is chiefly interested in attracting tourists, particularly those who make a habit of biking in nearby Harriman State Park, this typically urbane attention to organic food may be the key to bringing food-minded millennials back to small towns, whether it be via Bruno’s planned externship program, where chefs can come right out of cooking school to work at his new restaurants, or just because, in his words, Sloatsburg will have become “cool.”

"I was at dinner not too long ago," he said, "and I was talking with some friends, and I said 'Sloatsburg's going to be cool.' They said, 'Sloatsburg and cool have never been in the same sentence ever.' I said, 'You'll see, it's gonna be cool. This is where all the young people – it's gonna be our Brooklyn – it's where all the young kids are going to want to hang out cause it's fun.'"