Summary

For over a decade Renewing the Countryside and our partners have curated a food-related, interactive educational exhibit as part of the Minnesota State Fair’s Eco Experience - an award-winning expo that reaches 250,000 - 300,000 visitors annually. The exhibit includes high-quality, interactive and educational displays about foods and agriculture; cooking demos; food sampling from local farmers and foodmakers; and activities promoting healthy eating habits. Each year we choose a new theme, the 2017 theme was “What’s Organic?” The 2017 fair took place from August 24th to September 5th.

Purpose:

The exhibit’s goal was to expand people’s understanding, and therefore support, for organic food and agriculture. Those who do not buy organics often cite cost as the barrier. Others believe that “natural” or non-GMO is the same, or as good as, organic. The exhibit clarified how organic products differ from other products, showed the true costs of eating conventionally produced food, and explained why choosing organic has benefits with impacts that reach beyond the pocketbook. Each year we also educate fairgoers about healthy eating, purchasing local food, and promoting local food businesses, farmers and foodmakers.

Components of the exhibit:

- A series of educational kiosks with displays combining photos, facts, and interactive panels to engage fairgoers.
- Three daily cooking demonstrations. Local chefs and foodmakers demonstrated cooking with local, organic foods.
- Daily sampling. Each day we sampled foods from three or more local organic farmers and foodmakers.
- Kids activities. In partnership with HealthPartners’ Yum Power program, children and families enjoyed fun activities that encourage healthy eating, cooking and local, organic food.
- Free giveaways. These included MN Grown directories, YumPower children’s magazines, tattoos, keychains, and Peace Coffee coupons and merchandise.

Presented by:

renewing the countryside
just. sustainable. vibrant.

Healthy Local Food Major Partners:

Cooking Demonstration Stage was provided by: Domain Architecture & Design, Dakota Surfaces and Warners’ Stellian Appliance Company, with additional support from Eversharp Knives.
Healthy Local Food Exhibit
2017 by the numbers:

A record **1.97 million fairgoers** attended Minnesota state fair in 2017.

**272,064 visitors** toured our exhibit hall, the Eco Experience, averaging nearly **23,000 per day**.

Activities were staffed for **144 hours** over **12 days**.

**151 volunteers** shift were filled for the Healthy Local Food Exhibit which amounts to **530 volunteer hours**.

**36 cooking demonstrations** took place on stage.

Nearly **50 local farms and food businesses** participated in the exhibit.

More than **100,000 local food samples** were provided to fairgoers.
Exhibit Display:

What’s Organic?

Though organic food has been making inroads onto the shelves of mainstream consumers, there remains a good deal of confusion about what organic means, how it differs from “natural”, and how it differs from conventional agriculture. Our display educated fairgoers about organic and explained why is vitally important to our food system.

We addressed the following topics regarding organic food production:

- **Yield**: can organic methods feed the world?
- **Environment**: is organic better for the earth?
- **Cost**: why is organic more expensive?
- **Livestock**: what is organic animal production?
- **Health**: is organic food better for you to eat?
- **Value**: is buying organic worthwhile for you and your family?

Who’s Organic?

With photography and written profiles, we told the story of seven organic farmers, sharing their perspectives on how each of these topics affect their fields, families and livelihoods.

“Does it cost more to grow organically? Yes... but, while I don’t care much for the paperwork, and some of my supplies cost a bit more, it is worth it to know we are limiting the exposure to toxic chemicals around our kids, neighbors, and the planet.”

-Hannah Miller, Easy Yoke Farm
Lisa Baker operates 15 acres of certified organic farmland located in Avon, MN. Bakers Acres sells produce direct to individuals through a CSA program, as well as to co-ops and restaurants in the Twin Cities and Central Minnesota. She also raises livestock including pastured poultry, eggs, and grass-finished beef.

She began in 2010 with the conversion from a conventionally farmed rye field into certified organic growing methods and began offering CSA shares in 2012. Lisa and her parents support the farm work, along with a handful of hired seasonal workers.

The farm hosts participation days, events, and on-the-farm culinary productions as part of its mission to connect people with the land. The farm is also active in educational activities, policy and community-building initiatives to help promote restorative agriculture and sustainable food systems.

“I love, love, love! having my neighbors come to the farm to talk about why organic is important and how they can be part of a local food system that makes us all stronger,” says Lisa. “I’m proud to say, ‘We’re certified organic!’ so my customers know my farm is using non-GMO seeds, no prohibited synthetic pesticides/herbicides/fungicides, and that I am systematically and consistently building soil health with cover crops, common sense water management systems, increasing biodiversity, and meeting food safety standards.”
Cooking Demonstrations

The Sustainability Stage sits in the heart of the exhibit and is shared with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, who curates daily presentations meant to encourage sustainable living. We hosted three 45 minute cooking demonstrations on the stage daily at 11am, 1pm, and 3pm. We invited 12 Minnesotan chefs and foodmakers to share information about their food, restaurant, or business, and teach techniques for using local and organic ingredients. Demonstrations ranged in topics from tips for vegetarian cooking, to Minnesota Hmong cuisine, to preserving and pickling farm-fresh produce.
2017 Demonstrations

Pictured left to right

**Lachelle Cunningham, Breaking Bread Foods**
Kale and Blueberry Salad

**Marshall Paulsen, Birchwood Cafe**
Cucumber Gazpacho

**Karl Gerstenberger, The Waldmann Brewery and Wurstery**
Wickelklosse - traditional German potato dumplings

**Yia Vang, Union Kitchen**
Hmong Sausage with Pok Pok Radish Salad and Tiger Bite Sauce

**Kim Olson, Grandma Gourmet**
Pickled Beets, Eggs and Greens

**Joe Hatch-Surisook, Sen Yai Sen Lek**
Thai Street Pork Toast

**Ruhel Islam, Gandhi Mahal**
Sag Baji, an Indian dish of spinach, garlic and onion

**Nicholas Nelson, Wedge Food Co-op**
Grilled Zucchini Salad with Millet and Herb-Yogurt Dressing

**Susan Brown, Mademosielle Miel**
Local Honey Marshmallows

**Ross Logas and Linnea Logas, the Moral Omnivore**
Butternut Squash Taco Bowl

**Joe Williams, Day Block Brewing**
Fermenting Basics

**Tammy Wong, Rainbow Chinese Restaurant and Bar**
Wild Rice Fried Rice
Sampling Station

To promote local and organic food, food samples were offered each day at our sampling station. Local food produces and businesses donated their products and time to share their local product for 4-hour shifts in the morning and afternoon, and volunteers handed out samples of local foods donated from the Twin Cities based local food distributor, Co-op Partner Partners Warehouse.

2017 Sampling Station Companies:
Big River Farms • Blue Fruit Farm • Bootlegger Brewing Kombucha Castle Rock Dairy • Crapola Granola • Creature Comfort Hot Sauce Deannes Kombucha • Doubting Thomas Farm • Eichten’s Cheese Featherstone Fruits and Vegetables • Gardenaire • Gray Duck Chai The Good Acre • Gustola Granola • Isadore nut company • Mademoiselle Miel • Organic Farmers of Canon River • Organic Valley • Pasture’s Pride • Peace Coffee • Ridgeland Harvest • St. Croix Valley CSA • Taking Stock Foods • The Farm of Minnesota • The Good Acre • Urban Graze Urban Roots • Whole Grain Milling Company • Wild Fruits Farm
Peace Coffee

Peace Coffee offered samples of their organic, shade grown, and fair trade coffee daily from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. The exhibit profiled one of their partners, a coffee farmer known for his pioneering organic methods.

Oscar is one of the most well-known producers in Honduras because of his ingenuity and dedication to thinking outside the box when it comes to producing organic coffee. He is committed to certified organic farming as a method to improve his coffee and safeguard the environment. He completed his transition to organic in 2001 and uses an innovative composting system, including coconut husks as organic fertilizer.

"To dedicate yourself to organic production is an act of faith and perseverance in the hopes of achieving positive results for ourselves and our family. Organic production is a way of taking responsibility for the construction of a better world for our children. It gives them the opportunity to grow up healthy, and gives them the opportunity to have a better education and recognize the need to take care of our environment, so these same natural resources may still be available to others in the future." -Oscar Omar Alonso
Kid’s Activity Area

Children and families enjoyed an array of different games and activities. Healthy eating activities were designed and provided by HealthPartners’ YumPower Project and Renewing the Countryside.

Activities included:
-Identifying and then racing local vegetables down the Veggies Grand Prix race track
-“try for five” guess what’s in the box vegetable guessing game
-A HealthPartners spin the wheel game with questions and activities promoting healthy eating and movement
-Climate change bingo game organized by the MPCA. We asked players questions about which fruits and vegetables are grown locally
-A “head-in-the-hole selfie station where you can pose with Chomp, a YumPower carrot mascot.

All participating children received their choice of a variety of prizes including temporary tattoos, key chains, magazines, and fruit and vegetable tracking sheets.
Volunteers

The Healthy Local Food Exhibit would not have been possible without the more than 100 individuals who volunteered to fill 151 shifts. Volunteers perform a variety of tasks including assisting with cooking demonstrations, sampling local foods, and overseeing the children’s activities. Volunteers attended a pre-fair orientation, and receive free admission to the fair and an organic cotton t-shirt. In 2017, nearly two-thirds of our volunteers were returnees who had volunteered in previous years.
**Conclusions**

2017 was a successful year for the Healthy Local Food Exhibit with a number of new changes contributed to this success. The exhibit layout was larger than previous years, allowing for an expanded childrens area with new activities and eye catching displays from HealthPartners. The Sampling Station was located more prominently than in previous years, resulting in greater traffic with samplers serving more than 1,000 samples per shift.

The exhibit achieved its goal of supporting local, organic food companies. The majority of local food businesses and farms, responding to post event surveys, indicated that their participation lead to new sales leads and customer connections. Each indicated that they would like to participate again in future years.

Constructive feedback for next year included requests for more information for volunteers who are unable to attend the training and support for chefs and business loading in through the fairgrounds. Others asked for more resources about where to find local food and farms.

**Testimonials**

“A Lunds/Byerly’s employee was excited and said she would be talking to the grocery buyer. Also one of my smaller accounts made a big order because a Fairgoer goes to buy my kombucha there now.”
-Deanne’s Kombucha, food sampler

“This experience was positive and refreshing, and may be a bellwether indicating that culturally Minnesotans are becoming more curious about new food concepts!”
-Taking Stock Foods, food sampler

“This is a super well-organized, neat opportunity to be a part of during the Fair. THANK YOU!!!”
-Volunteer

“My daughter and I had a blast! We loved to interact with hundreds of people!”
-Volunteer

“The kids had a blast with the veggie car racing. I have to say I really enjoyed chatting with the kids about food. I am pursuing my certification as a nutritional therapy practitioner and the time to make an impact on food choices is early on. I had a lot of good conversations with people of all ages. I can’t wait to do this again”
-Volunteer
renewing the countryside
just. sustainable. vibrant.

metro
2637 27th Ave S, Suite 17 Minneapolis, MN 55406

rural
PO Box One Zumbro Falls, Minnesota 55991

www.renewingthecountryside.org