

APRIL 2015

# STATE OF THE FOOD SYSTEM REPORT



OFFICE OF  
SUSTAINABILITY

CITY OF AUSTIN



## Messages from Community Leaders



### Our Health Depends on a Healthy Food System

—Dr. Phillip Huang, Medical Director/Health Authority  
Austin/Travis County Health & Human Services Department

Chronic diseases are the major cause of illness, disability, and death in Travis County and contribute greatly to local economic costs. In fact, chronic disease conditions account for three out of four deaths in Austin, many of which are preventable. Diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, stroke, and diabetes can be reduced through healthy individual behavior and a supportive environment. The Austin/Travis County Health & Human Services Department (HHSD)

is committed to making the healthy choice the easy choice. Part of this commitment includes improving the local food system to ensure that there is healthy, fresh and affordable food for all.



### The Importance of Food to Our Community

—Ronda Rutledge, Past Chair  
Sustainable Food Policy Board

Our community depends on a strong food system for its health and well-being. The Sustainable Food Policy Board is a volunteer board created in 2008 to provide Austin City Council and the Commissioners of Travis County with recommendations for strengthening the local food system. Some of the Board's recent focus areas include ensuring a streamlined compliance process for producers impacted by the urban farm ordinance; facilitating increased access to farm stands and markets

through electronic payment technology and training; supporting efforts to increase awareness of and enrollment in nutrition assistance programs like SNAP; enabling SNAP benefits to go further at farmers markets so that recipients purchase more fruits and vegetables; initiating a process to recommend preservation of land for food production that also leverages federal support; and working on innovative policy strategies to address critical access to food resources, as well as affordability. This State of the Food System Report will help to inform our efforts going forward.



### A Local Food System is a Sustainable Food System

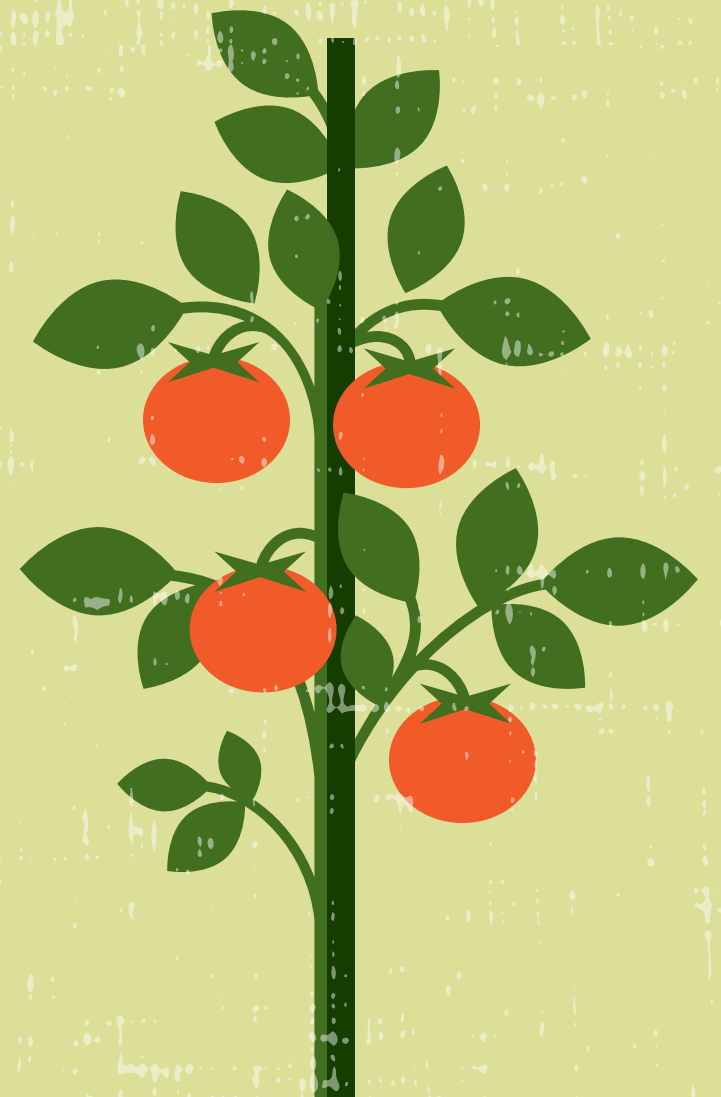
—Lucia Athens, Chief Sustainability Officer  
Office of Sustainability

Food plays a major role in every aspect of sustainability, from its impact on the environment, to its role in individual health, to the vibrancy of our communities. Recognizing its importance, last year City Council created a Sustainable Food Policy Manager position to provide leadership in the local sustainable food movement. This position allows the Office of Sustainability to frame conversations within various City departments and community stakeholders about the future of Austin's

food system. This State of the Food System Report is the beginning of a broader effort to chart a clear course toward achieving the numerous food system goals identified in Imagine Austin as well as the desires voiced by community members throughout the region. Austin and Central Texas are well positioned to address the expanded interest in eating local healthy foods while protecting valuable natural resources. The Office of Sustainability is committed to leading the conversation about balancing these demands and opportunities to produce thoughtful and intentional strategies forward.

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For Austin to be a thriving, equitable, and ecologically resilient community, it must have a healthy and just local food system. Growing, selling, eating, and recovering food locally creates jobs, strengthens the economy, improves public health, and reduces transportation impacts. A sustainable food system benefits everyone.



## Introduction

This report provides an overview of Austin's dynamic food system, including major components such as production, consumption, and waste. It is intended to provide a common framework for celebrating progress as well as identifying challenges and opportunities to inform strategies for moving forward.

### What is a sustainable food system?

A food system is an integrated and interconnected network that includes production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste management—essentially everything that happens with food, from where and how it is grown, to how it is ultimately disposed of.

A sustainable food system is one that takes into account all aspects of sustainability, which is defined as finding a balance among three sets of goals: 1) prosperity and jobs, 2) conservation and the environment, and 3) community health, equity, and cultural vitality. It means taking positive, proactive steps to protect Austin's quality of life now and for future generations.

Austin's food system has a tremendous impact on the local economy, the health of citizens, and the environment. Some of the news is good, such as:

- › Austin has more 'for profit' urban farms than any city of its size in the nation.
- › Childhood education about growing food is strong, with 73% of all AISD schools having a teaching garden.
- › The local food economy is very strong, representing \$4.1 billion dollars in annual sales and tax revenues.

However, numerous critical factors are threatening both local food production capacity and food security, or having enough to eat, in Central Texas:

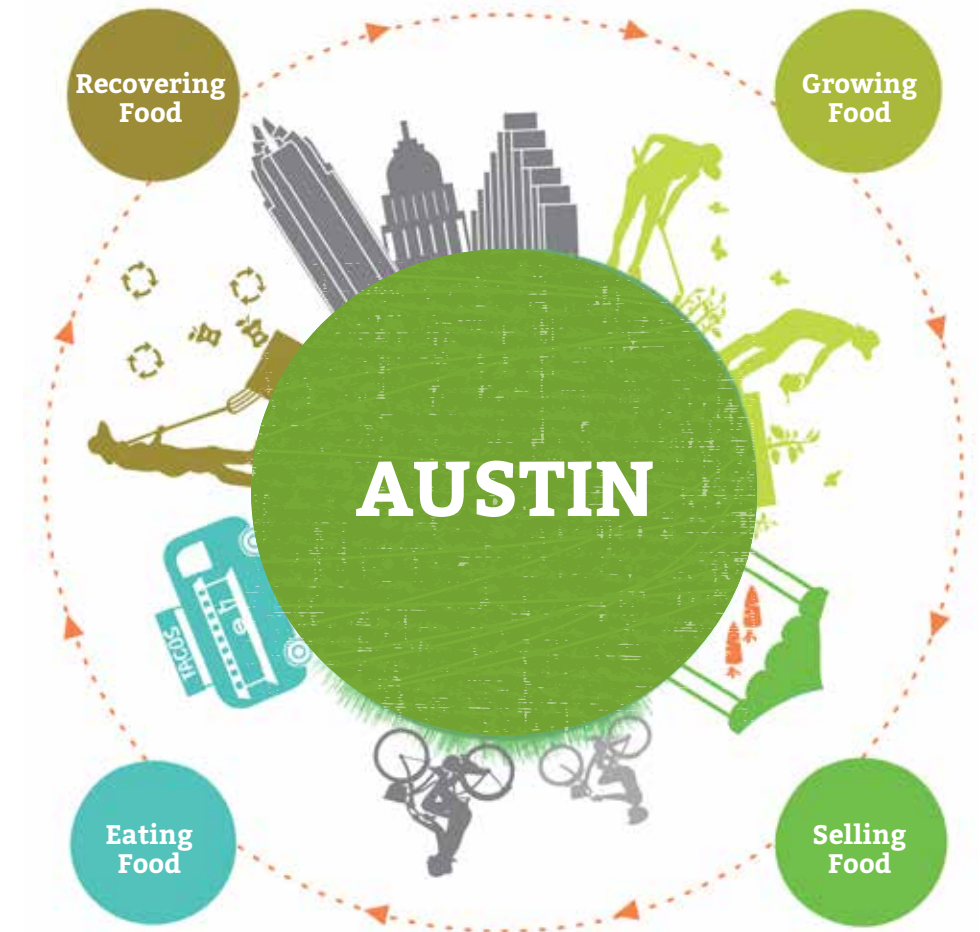
- › The population of Texas is growing at twice the national rate. Although local food production has expanded in response to this growth, it has bypassed some consumers who have little access to or cannot afford fresh nutrient-dense foods, such as whole grains, fruits and vegetables.
- › Extreme weather and climate events are ravaging the state and presenting challenges for food production. In 2011, Texas set a new record for the number of days over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, experienced a devastating drought, and lost 3.7 million acres to wildfires.
- › Texas faces the looming departure of a generation of farmers. Many of the state's established food producers are nearing retirement, while young farmers face increasing barriers to entering or continuing their work.

Despite these challenges, we can ensure that opportunities for increasing local food production and consumption are seized to ensure a just and secure community.

The data that is shared throughout this report is indicative of the health of Austin's food system. These indicators were identified through input from food system stakeholders throughout the city – City staff involved with food-related programs and policies, community leaders, and non-profit organizations. In addition, indicators from the Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan and Community Health Improvement Plan were identified that pertain to the food system and are contained in the Appendices (visit [www.austintexas.gov/food](http://www.austintexas.gov/food)).



# What Does a Sustainable Food System Look Like?



“Food is a human necessity, like air and water it should be available.” —Pearl Buck



A sustainable food system for Austin would be a **local** one where much of the food consumed is produced locally. This preserves urban farmland, supports the local economy, and results in greater self-reliance and resilience in the event of a disaster. A sustainable food system provides everyone in the community with access to fresh, nutritious food, which helps in reducing dietary-related disease and hunger. It also involves recovering food so that nothing is wasted—through food donations, feeding animals, and composting organics to provide nutrients to soil used for farming.

Each component of the food system, from growing and selling, to eating and recovering, is connected. To maintain a healthy and sustainable food system, strategies for one area should be evaluated and adjusted based on their potential effects throughout the system.

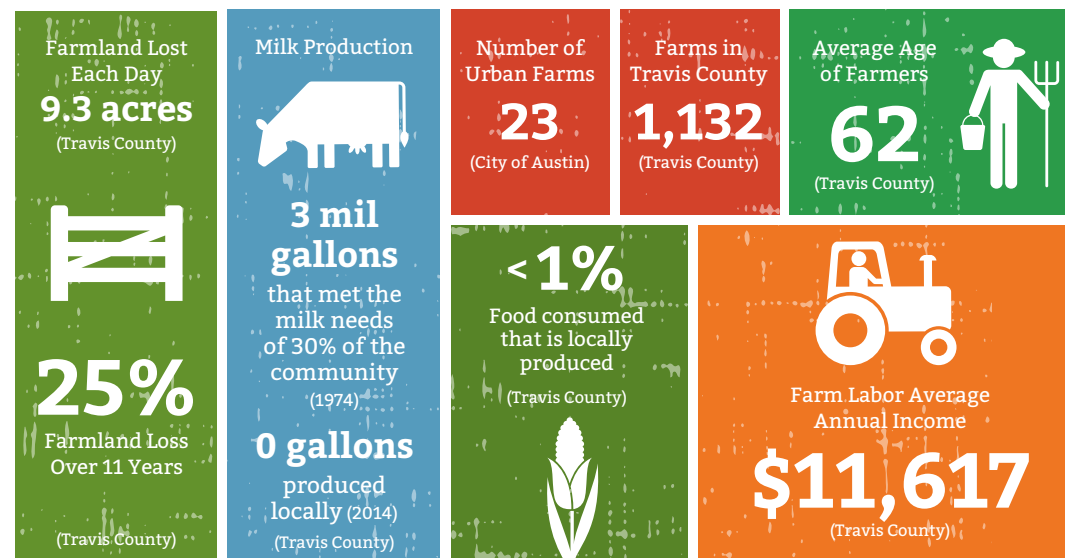
# Growing Food: Farming

Food production has been a critical part of the economy and social fabric of Central Texas, but is diminishing rapidly as farmland is lost, farmers age, and income for farm labor remains below the poverty level. Today less than 1% of the food that is consumed in Travis County is produced locally, which has implications for public health, as well as the local economy. In 1974, 30% of the community's milk was produced locally; today there is no local milk production in Travis County. However, Austin has more private urban farms than any city its size in the country. Building on this momentum, urban agriculture could increase local food production, create jobs, and provide direct neighborhood connections to the food system.

## City of Austin Actions

In 2000, the City of Austin Planning & Development Review Department began an effort to increase local food production by allowing urban farms in certain zoning districts. In 2011, urban farming was expanded to all zoning districts in an effort to increase jobs, improve access to healthy food, and decrease dietary-related diseases. Based on community feedback regarding code impacts, the City worked with stakeholders to make refinements that provide better clarity around requirements for urban farms and provide benefits to the community. In 2014, a Certificate of Compliance with the Urban Farm Ordinance was developed and adopted. To date, five farms have successfully achieved compliance.

Land development also plays a major role in Austin's food system. CodeNEXT is the City's effort to revise the Land Development Code, which will impact land preservation for farming, food production, processing and distribution, access and consumption, and waste management. A Sustainable Food Policy Board working group is developing recommendations for CodeNEXT revisions with the goal of creating a healthy, safe, and sustainable food system for all of Austin.



## Potential Food Production Areas



Austin's rapid growth threatens to push development onto vacant land that could be preserved for farming. Encouraging compact and connected development, as envisioned in the Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan, may encourage increased local food production and consumption.



## Community Case Study

# Agua Dulce Farm

Agua Dulce is an urban farm located in Southeast Austin that is committed to sustainable food production. The farm combines aquaponics (raising aquatic animals such as snails and fish) with hydroponics (raising plants in water rather than soil) to produce fresh fish and organically grown vegetables for harvest year-round.

Agua Dulce supplies many Austin-area restaurants and wholesale markets with their locally-produced food and was the first local farm to receive a certificate of compliance with Austin's Urban Farm Ordinance. Aquaponic farming offers tremendous potential in increasing local food production that uses substantially less water than traditional farming.

*"The efforts of City staff and many volunteers thoughtfully carved a path toward an incentive to grow tasty and healthy food in the city. The Urban Farm Ordinance provides a sense of security and a "stamp of approval" that many local farmers certainly appreciate."*

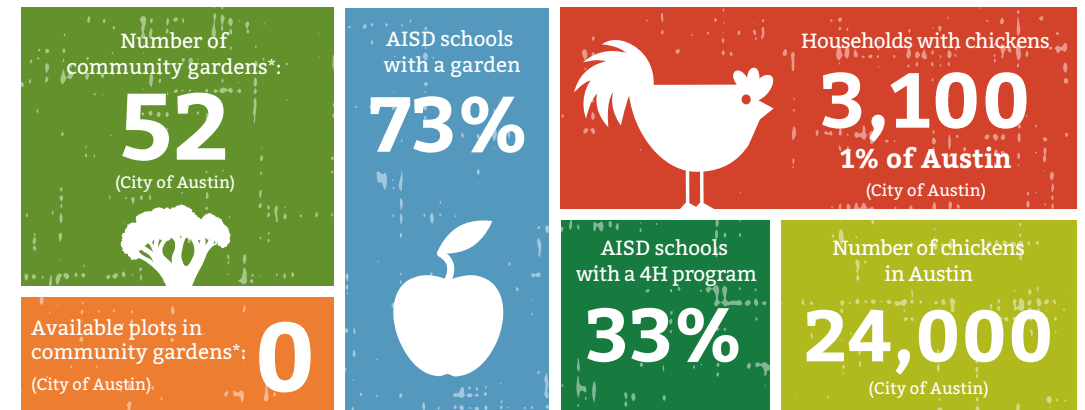
—Jack Waite, Agua Dulce Farm



Aquaponic farming at Agua Dulce Farm

## Growing Food: Community and School Gardens

The City of Austin has helped the community to increase local food production by enabling non-profit farms to utilize City-owned property and establishing community gardens on City-owned land. Community gardens provide the opportunity to grow nutritious and affordable food, contribute to healthy lifestyles by encouraging physical activity, connect urban families with nature and sources of food, and create opportunities for community bonding through commitment to a common interest. The gardens also provide valuable habitat for native wildlife, including songbirds, butterflies, and other pollinators. While there are strong signs that many Austinites are growing some of their food, the supply of community gardens is still unable to meet the demand. Children are increasingly being engaged in the food system through gardening programs at schools. Finally, backyard chicken keeping offers more than fresh eggs; it is a strong strategy for increasing household composting to meet Austin's Zero Waste goal.



### City of Austin Actions

As part of the City's Parks and Recreation Department, the Sustainable Urban Agriculture and Community Garden Program was created in 2009 to provide support and streamline the process for establishing community gardens and sustainable urban agriculture on City land. The program assists citizens with gardening education, membership structure, permitting, site plan development, and irrigation plans for both public and private community gardens. They also maintain a database of eligible garden properties on City land. To date, 13 new community gardens and five senior gardens have been endorsed for operation on City land.

*"The earliest and still one of the best examples of community gardening on park land is Festival Beach Community Garden in East Austin. Opened in 2010, it now has more than 80 active gardeners on two acres of property and is also a Certified Wildlife Habitat."*

—Meredith Gray, Sustainable Urban Agriculture and Community Gardens Program

Other City initiatives that support growing food locally:

- Through the Public Works Department, the Neighborhood Partnering Program offers cost-sharing opportunities for neighborhood groups for community enhancement projects. Part of this initiative has turned City-owned land into sustainable and healthy community garden spaces.
- The Bright Green Future Grants program, which is managed through the Office of Sustainability, offers funding for Austin-area students, teachers, and parents to implement hands-on learning projects that have included five composting system projects, nine rain gardens, and twelve organic gardens.
- Austin Water Utility encourages local food production through watering restriction exemptions for vegetable gardens and connection fee waivers for installing water line service to community gardens.

- › Grow Green, a gardening education program of the Watershed Protection Department, promotes sustainable landscaping and gardening practices. It addresses water quality and conservation, recycling, and an Integrated Pest Management philosophy that encourages the least toxic way to address pest issues.
- › The Watershed Protection Department, in partnership with Keep Austin Beautiful, offers classroom presentations on waste, recycling, gardening, and water quality followed by a class/school service project through Clean Creek Campus. During the 2014-2015 school year, seven garden projects were completed through this program.
- › Agri-Life Extension Service in Travis County provides a wide range of technical assistance and support for the community. Agri-Life not only assists farmers with integrated pest management, soil testing, and business support, the program also supports backyard gardeners with a variety of technical research-based information. In addition, Agri-Life supports the Master Gardner program, which includes work in the Zilker Botanical Garden and most community gardens.

## Public and Private Community Gardens



To date, community gardens have been primarily located in Central Austin neighborhoods. By expanding to underserved and suburban communities, more Austinites will have greater access to fresh produce, as well as green space that provides wildlife habitat.

## Community Case Study Multicultural Refugee Coalition New Leaf Agriculture Program

Each year, approximately 1,500 refugees from war-torn and conflict areas of the world such as Burma/Myanmar, Bhutan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cuba, and Iraq are resettled to Austin. The Multicultural Refugee Coalition is a non-profit that works to empower refugees and encourage self-sufficiency by providing opportunities for educational, professional, and personal growth. The organization offers the New Leaf Agriculture Program to help refugees gain a sense of health and well-being through a reconnection to agriculture, which provides healthy produce, exercise, and social interaction, as well as strengthens inter-generational ties. Refugees grow at two community garden locations—Festival Beach Community Garden and the Lanier Garden at Lanier High School. Currently 34 families are served through the program, which includes guidance and support in securing gardens and resources, educational workshops, and access to local farms through work-share opportunities and a farm incubator project in development with the New Farm Institute at Green Gate Farms.



Participants in the New Leaf Agriculture Program at Festival Beach Community Garden



## Community Case Study Urban Roots

Building a sustainable, local and equitable food system starts with ensuring that the children in Austin understand the issues and are empowered to lead. Urban Roots is a local, non-profit urban farm that provides Youth Farm Interns with valuable 21st century skills, such as cooperation and communication, which allow them to become potent change-agents as well as the next generation of food system leaders.

*“While the 30,000 pounds of produce we grow and donate annually to local soup kitchens and food pantries is critical to feeding our community, even more importantly are the seeds we sow within the youth, providing opportunities for diverse teenagers to learn the value of meaningful hard work as they grow.”*

—Max Elliot, Urban Roots Executive Director



Produce raised on the Urban Roots farm is sold at local farmers markets.



## Selling Food from Farms

Food and beverage sales are a significant part of Austin’s economy, equaling the impact of the creative sector. However, despite the efforts of many advocates and dedicated ‘farm-to-table’ chefs to pass this bounty along to local farmers, Austin still lags far behind other regions in over-all support for local agriculture. While the number of farmers markets has increased significantly over the last decade in central Texas, the state still has the fewest per capita in the country. In addition, a USDA agricultural survey shows significantly less consumer spending on local farm products than other areas of the country. These are clear indicators that additional efforts could be made to assist local farmers with selling directly to the consumer.

One area that could improve sales for local farmers would be capturing the unmet demand for local sustainable food from institutional buyers such as hospitals and schools. Local farms face barriers in scaling up to meet larger institutional needs; for example, most institutions require significant amounts of insurance coverage and consistent year-round supplies. Overcoming obstacles such as these would increase the over-all economic impact of local farming.



From The Economic Impact of Austin’s Food Sector, a study conducted by TXP, Inc. and commissioned by City of Austin’s Economic Development Department.

### City of Austin Actions

The City of Austin is committed to working closely with local farmers markets to ensure that they can meet the growing customer demand for local food, as well as ensure the safety of the food that is sold. In 2009, the Environmental Health Services Division of the Austin/Travis County Health & Human Services Department began working with farmers market representatives to improve permitting requirements for preparing and selling food at farmers markets. A variety of existing permitting options were explored, but none completely addressed the unique nature of farmers markets and the way food is prepared and sold there. In 2013, three new Annual Farmers Market permits were created to replace all of the previous permit types. This has simplified the process and reduced the confusion surrounding requirements for local farmers markets.

The City also supports local farmers by providing a direct connection to local healthy produce for employees through the Farm-to-Work program offered by the Human Resources Department. The program works in affiliation with the Sustainable Food Center to purchase fresh, seasonal food from local producers. In 2013, 1,429 baskets of fresh produce were sold to 484 participants in the program. Nutrition and cooking education classes are also available through Farm-to-Work.





## Central Texas Farmers Markets



Texas has the fewest farmers markets per capita in the country. Strategically increasing the number of markets and farmstands in neighborhoods with reduced access to fresh food would help address food insecurity, but logistical considerations such as hours and days of operation, location, and consumer demand need to be considered and addressed to make participation viable and profitable for farmers.



## Community Case Study Salt & Time Butcher Shop

Fifty years ago, local butchers provided customers with safe cuts of meat at numerous locations throughout Austin. However, consolidation in the meat-packing industry, as well as costs involved with meeting state health and federal USDA and FDA regulations, resulted in fewer and fewer local options for meat processing. In addition, as fewer slaughtering facilities were available to link ranchers with processors, it was difficult to maintain an efficient supply chain. Local butchers went the way of home delivered milk.



Ben Runkle and Bryan Butler of Salt & Time

Salt & Time owners Ben Runkle and Bryan Butler started their business butchering animals and selling their products at local farmers markets. After significant efforts to understand the regulatory framework, they were successful in creating a brick and mortar facility in East Austin that also serves as a full service butcher shop, salumeria, and restaurant featuring fresh cut meats from sustainable Texas ranches. Success stories like Salt and Time's may inspire more businesses to follow suit and bolster the capacity of local farming and ranching.

Austin's food manufacturing industry has been growing with numerous start-up businesses scaling up to the national level. Bona Dea, Sassy Lassi, Sabor! Hot Sauce, mmmpanadas, and austiNuts are just some of the businesses that contribute to the over \$700 million in food manufacturing to the local economy.

# Selling Food at Restaurants

In recent years, the Austin food scene has garnered national and international attention. This growing recognition is an important part of Austin’s overall appeal for tourists; in fact, 40 percent of the total economic impact from the food sector is created through tourism. Many local restaurants feature seasonal menus sourced from regional farms. The number of food trucks in Austin has also increased dramatically, providing an amazing array of eating options to locals, as well as tourists, and making Austin one of the leading cities in the country for food trailers. These trailers offer entrepreneurs a low-cost and innovative means of entry into business ownership. However, the food sector of the Austin economy extends far beyond the latest hot restaurant or interesting trailer. The food sector in Austin touches every element of the community and food has an economic impact equal to many other core aspects of the local economy.

## City of Austin Actions

The Environmental Health Services Division of the Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department is tasked with the regulation of food safety to reduce the occurrence of foodborne illness. Their work is based on enforcement of city codes, county rules and regulations, and the State’s “Texas Food Establishment Rules,” which are based upon the United States Federal Food & Drug Act. Education and enforcement is conducted through inspection of all fixed, mobile or temporary food service establishments by Environmental Health Officers. Restaurant inspection scores are posted online at [www.austintexas.gov/health/restaurant](http://www.austintexas.gov/health/restaurant).

The City of Austin’s Small Business Program serves as a clearinghouse of information to directly help business owners or refer them to the other resources. The mission of the Small Business Program is to foster job creation and support the growth of new and existing businesses, such as restaurants and food trailers, by providing capacity building information, tools, and resources. Most services are available at nominal or no charge. Services are available at [www.austinsmallbiz.org](http://www.austinsmallbiz.org).

About 80 percent of Austin’s businesses employ less than 20 people. Recognizing that these small businesses are vital to the local economy, the Economic Development Department launched [LocallyAustin.org](http://LocallyAustin.org), a tool for residents and visitors to discover locally-owned, small businesses that give Austin its treasured and unique character. As more and more people take to the web in search of businesses and services to meet their needs, the Small Business Program hopes to give locally-owned, small businesses a greater presence online, increasing their chances of attracting customers.

Number of food trailers approximately

1,000

(City of Austin)



### Noteworthy Accolades about the Austin Food Scene

- Best Cities for Food (Austin is #6)—Thrillist
- 2015 James Beard Foundation Finalists for Best Chef: Southwest
- 2015 Most Outstanding Restaurants—*GQ Magazine*
- Top Chef Season 9 Winner
- 2014 James Beard Foundation Finalists for Best Chef: Southwest
- 2014 Best New Chefs—*Food & Wine*
- 2014 Best New Restaurants in America—*Bon Appétit*
- 2014 Best Restaurants in America—*The Daily Meal*
- 2014 Top Restaurants—*Fobdie*
- 2014 Chef of the Year—*Esquire*
- Best Barbecue in the U.S.—*Gayot*
- 2013 Best New Restaurants in America—*Bon Appétit*
- 2013 James Beard Foundation Finalists—Rising Chef of the Year and Pastry Chef



# Community Case Study The Odd Duck



Bryce Gilmore

From 2009 to 2010, brothers Bryce and Dylan Gilmore ran a farm-to-table food truck. The Odd Duck served farm-fresh food raised and grown by local producers, and was welcomed by Austinites eager to sample local fare. After gaining fame for their rustic and seasonal food, Bryce started conceptualizing a brick-and-mortar Odd Duck restaurant. In 2014, the Odd Duck opened its doors on South Lamar. With natural light and plenty of windows, patrons can watch the sun set behind the newly renovated Alamo Drafthouse, or sit outside on the patio for views of downtown. Most of the food served at the Odd Duck is made from scratch, including the cultured butter and bread made from grain provided by local breweries. The restaurant has followed the same farm-to-table approach as the food truck; building on the lessons learned and successes of the truck, the restaurant now offers the Gilmores the ability to serve far more customers. Bryce says, “We want to give people another option of a place they can go eat, and know that their food was grown responsibly or raised humanely.”

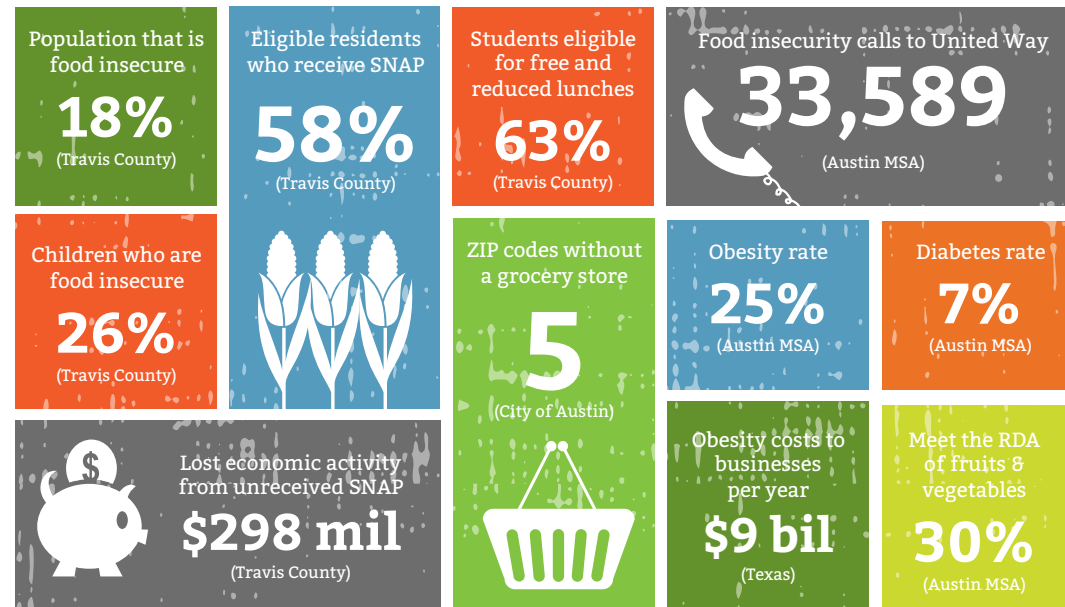
*“As you look at the business landscape across Austin, you see plenty of opportunities for tech companies, financial companies and traditional startups, but an awareness of food is sorely lacking. Sure, if you have a new drink, energy bar or restaurant, then you have plenty of options for funding, mentoring, acceleration or incubation. However, those same options are not present for the people actually effecting food security or availability—farmers, ranchers, distribution, value-add companies, etc.”*

—Jarred Maxwell, Austin Foodshed Investors/Slow Money Austin



# Eating Food

Eating a nourishing diet is not only important for overall health and well-being, it also has a significant impact on performance at school and work. There are many in Austin who do not know where their next meal will come from. This food insecurity disproportionately impacts children, the elderly and minority communities. Despite Austin's reputation as an active, healthy community, few people eat the recommended daily allowance of fruits and vegetables. There is a need for more education concerning healthy eating, as well as targeted outreach to residents who are eligible for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), with the goal of raising enrollment in this important program.



## City of Austin Actions

The Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department is working with partners throughout the county to improve the health of our community. As part of the Community Health Assessment and Community Health Improvement Plan, food access was identified as one of the four priority areas to focus efforts. Specifically, the Plan will seek ways to decrease the percentage of low income residents who are not living within one mile of a grocery store, increase the prevalence of people who eat more than five servings of fruits and vegetables each day, and promote availability of healthy food and beverages in retail settings.

The Austin/Travis County Health & Human Services Department offers nutrition education and counseling, breastfeeding support, healthy foods, and help accessing health care to low-income residents through the Women Infants and Children (WIC) program. Food benefits are issued for each client and both fathers and mothers can receive and spend the benefits for their children. These benefits can be used to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables at all Sustainable Food Center farmers markets. Currently, the WIC program has 30,877 participants.

To improve healthy eating habits for City of Austin staff, numerous Departments have implemented Healthy Vending Policies as a way to ensure that employees find that the 'healthy choice is the easy choice.' Austin/Travis County Health & Human Services Department, Parks and Recreation Department, and the Convention Center have changed the terms of their vending contracts to increase options for healthy snacks and drinks in vending machines. Austin Energy has also implemented a program to provide healthier lunch options at its headquarters.

## Areas of Austin with Limited Access to Fresh Food



People who live in areas with few grocery stores and reduced access to fresh produce are more likely to go hungry and are more prone to dietary-related disease.

*“Food insecurity and lack of access to healthy foods increases health risks for obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. In our community, this is a real issue, for many, particularly those living in poverty.”*

—Shannon Jones, CHIP Steering Committee Chair and Director of the Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department

## Community Case Study Capital Area Food Bank

Capital Area Food Bank is the largest hunger-relief charity in Central Texas, bringing 26 million meals to families and community non-profits each year. The organization works to share knowledge about low-cost, healthy eating options for families, donate quality food to community partners, and makes it easy for families to participate in assistance programs. Every month, hundreds of thousands of families across the state turn to the Texas Health and Human Services Commissions to receive help in the form of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to help feed their families; in fact, the low income population in Austin is increasing at twice the rate of the overall population. However, approximately 43% of income-eligible Travis County residents do not participate in SNAP because of the application process and misunderstandings about benefits. Capital Area Food Bank offers education about SNAP, as well as assistance with applications in an effort to increase participation and shorten the line at many community food pantries.



*Capital Area Food Bank is a leader in the fight against hunger in our community.*

## Community Case Study Sustainable Food Center Double Dollar Program

From seed to table, the Sustainable Food Center creates opportunities for individuals to make healthy food choices and participate in a vibrant local food system. Through organic food gardening, relationships with area farmers, interactive cooking classes and nutrition education, children and adults in Central Texas have increased access to locally grown food and are empowered to improve their long-term health.

The Double Dollar Incentive Program allows families and individuals who receive SNAP assistance, WIC program fruit and vegetable benefits, and/or Farmers Market Nutrition Program vouchers to double the dollar amount they can spend on fruits and vegetables at the market. Eligible shoppers are matched dollar for dollar up to \$20 each week, per program. Sustainable Food Center is currently providing the program at all of its markets, with plans to expand to additional markets this summer.



*SNAP can be used to purchase eligible items from Sustainable Food Center Farmers Markets.*

# Recovering Food

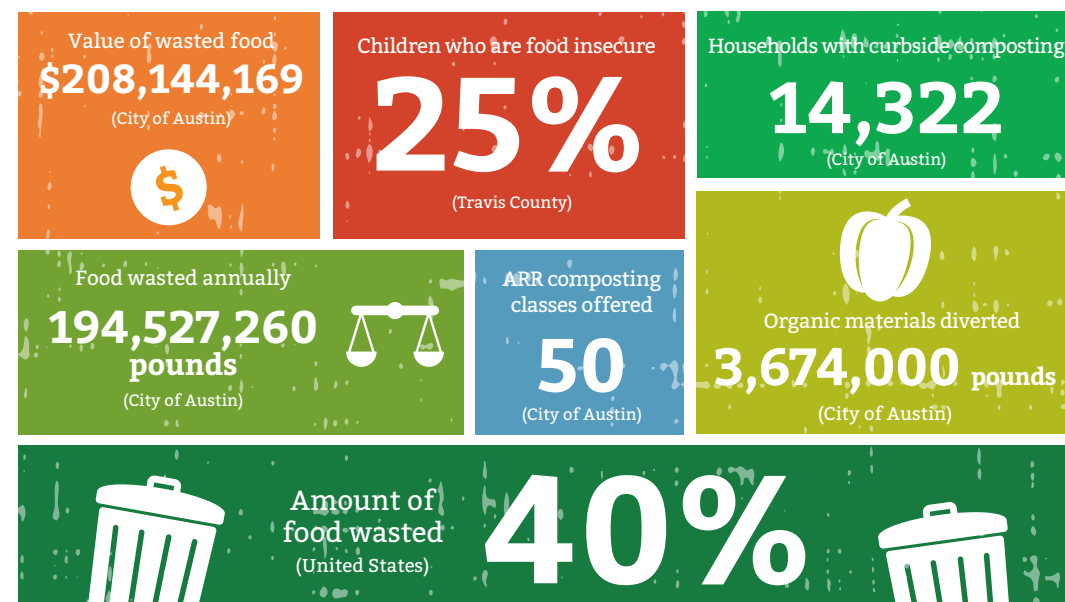
Keeping food out of the landfill not only saves money, conserves natural resources, and reduces climate change impacts caused by the methane produced by food waste, it is also a critical step in reducing food insecurity. The City of Austin is pursuing the goal of zero waste through various composting initiatives and pilot programs. Any efforts to reduce wasted food should follow the Food Waste Hierarchy: first, food for humans; then animals; then compost; and finally, for the landfill. This approach ensures that food is redirected to those in need—while also ensuring a safe food chain.

## City of Austin Actions

To demonstrate how restaurants can help meet Austin’s Zero Waste goal, Austin Resource Recovery (ARR) launched a Restaurant Composting and Recycling Pilot Program in September of 2012. Fourteen local restaurants participated in the pilot; more than half of these participating businesses experienced a considerable reduction in their trash collection service. In April of 2013, Council approved an ordinance requiring all Austin restaurants to begin composting by 2017, as well as start recycling paper, plastics, and aluminum by 2014.

Austin Resource Recovery also launched the Curbside Organics Collection Pilot for residents in 2012. Currently, approximately 14,000 households are offered weekly curbside collection of food scraps, food-soiled paper, and yard trimmings. Organic materials collected at the curb are turned into nutrient-rich compost.

Austin Resource Recovery also promotes composting through rebates and training. Since the program’s inception, more than 500 rebates have been issued and more than 1,000 residents have taken the composting training, which is offered free of charge at various locations or online, in both English and Spanish.



# Community Case Study Compost Pedallers

The Compost Pedallers are a bike-powered compost recycling company that delivers organic waste from central Austin homes and businesses to a network of urban gardens. The company makes it simple for Austinites to meet the city’s zero waste goals and help grow more local food. Dustin Fedako of Compost Pedallers adds, “The City’s Zero Waste Mandate has raised the bar for responsible urban development in Austin and created a new framework for decision making that will allow our business, and our city, to flourish for years to come.”



Compost Pedallers serves 500 members and has composted over 250,000 pounds of organic waste.

# Community Case Study Keep Austin Fed

Keep Austin Fed is a volunteer-based non-profit that gathers wholesome and nutritious surplus food from commercial kitchens and distributes it to area charities that serve hungry people in need. Founded in 2004, Keep Austin Fed currently “rescues” thousands of meals each month, which are then used to feed hundreds of Austinites living with food insecurity. In addition, the organization helps reduce the amount of food that ends up in landfills, helping to reduce methane gas, and ultimately helping to reduce the risk of global warming from increased methane gas production.

*It is amazing that Keep Austin Fed is currently moving 21 tons of food per month with only 60 very dedicated volunteers.”*

—Susan Nahkunst, Keep Austin Fed



## Where Do We Go From Here?

Our food comes from an interconnected global network that provides the safest, most affordable, diverse food in the world. While there have been significant improvements to the global food system over the last century, there have also been some unintended negative impacts to the environment, individual health, and community well-being. These are impacts that can be overcome. The Office of Sustainability is working closely with City Departments as well as external partners to support transformation in the following areas:

### Growing Food

#### Increase the production of local food

- › The Sustainable Food Policy Board has developed working groups to look at how CodeNEXT can preserve land for food production and protect natural resources, while complementing density and affordable housing options. The Board is also exploring how Texas Land Link can match existing landowners with future farmers to ensure that prime farm land is preserved, while lowering barriers to entry for the next generation of producers.
- › The Office of Sustainability is creating an inventory of all City of Austin property including parks, flood plain property, and vacant lots to see which properties could be a good fit for urban farming.
- › The City of Austin's Brownfield Revitalization Program is providing free soil testing for community gardens, school gardens, and backyard gardens to ensure that no food is grown in soil contaminated with heavy metals.
- › The Office of Sustainability and the Parks and Recreation Department are supporting efforts to evaluate the output of local community gardens to better understand their current and potential impact.

#### Improve the infrastructure for processing local food

- › The City of Austin Economic Development Department provides support to small local business that could address a need that has been identified for more local slaughtering and processing facilities. Retaining existing business and helping start new ones could help revitalize the local animal husbandry market and increase the amount of food that is locally processed.

### Selling Food

#### Increase the sale of locally produced food

- › The Office of Sustainability is working closely with graduate students from the University of Texas School of Public Health to identify national best practice strategies for local and healthy food procurement. Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services, in collaboration with the Mayor's Health and Fitness Council, is working with local businesses to incorporate healthier food offerings in the workplace, including healthy food procurement, meeting policies, and farm-to-site programs. Increasing local and healthy food purchases by major food purchasers supports local farmers and improves the health of employees.
- › The Community Health Improvement Plan developed by the Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department has identified strategies to improve food offerings in the retail environment. Efforts include partnering with Go Austin Vamos Austin to develop a Healthy Corner Store Initiative to stock and promote healthier choices.

- › Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services, in collaboration with St. David's HealthCare, is providing technical assistance to restaurants to offer entrees that meet healthy guidelines. This work includes an initiative to promote healthy children's menus at local eateries.

### Eating Food

#### Increase access to fresh, healthy & affordable food for everyone

- › A collaboration of local non-profits and the Office of Sustainability is piloting a School Farm Stand at Sanchez Elementary School. This project has created a way for a local farm to sell produce at deep discounts to the parents and staff at the school. This could provide a template for expansion to other schools and ensure more communities have access to healthy affordable food.
- › The Sustainable Food Policy Board asked the City of Austin to increase support for local food security organizations to increase their outreach to residents that are eligible to receive food stamps but have not utilized the program. Travis County also contributed to an outreach campaign. Some of these funds are being used to expand the Double Dollar program that allows users of the Lone Star Card to increase their purchasing power at local farmers markets.
- › The Parks and Recreation Department is expanding a database of all the existing fruit trees available for harvesting to general public through a program called Falling Fruit.

### Recovering Food

#### Increase the amount of food diverted from landfills

- › In the summer of 2015, the City of Austin will be hosting a 3-day conference on reducing waste, with an entire day dedicated to food recovery. Businesses and community partners will have the opportunity to learn about best-practices from around the county on how to stop food from entering the waste stream, as well as strategies for utilizing food if it does enter the waste stream.

Going forward, the Office of Sustainability and key partners will continue tracking the food system indicators identified in this report to better understand trends and report progress over time. We will identify activities that align with the goals stated in the Imagine Austin Comprehensive Plan. To take action "on the ground," we will be piloting a community engagement process to help identify food system 'assets' within a neighborhood and how these can be leveraged to increase access to fresh healthy food. This process involves working with residents to provide them with a deeper understanding of the food system and how it impacts their life, as well as listening to their concerns about food and health related issues. We look forward to sharing more about lessons learned.

Finally, the Office of Sustainability created an on-line Food Information Portal that now links resources for starting food-related projects, such as community gardens, urban farms, food trucks, food donation and composting ([www.austintexas.gov/food](http://www.austintexas.gov/food)). Regulations and permits required to implement each of these operations are provided on the portal in hopes that the barriers for getting started will be reduced. This is a work in progress but allows those interested in helping to further develop a robust food system a clear understanding of regulations and helpful resources.

### Eat well and prosper!

—Edwin Marty, Sustainable Food Policy Manager



# Acknowledgements

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## SUSTAINABLE FOOD POLICY BOARD

