



THE QUEEN OF SHOPPING LOCAL: Lt. Governor Elizabeth Roberts is working on making local shopping as convenient as possible.

KEEPING IT IN THE COMMUNITY

Exploring the real benefits of buying local

By Emily Dietsch | Photography by Jonathan Beller

On a drizzly Wednesday evening, I find myself captive in Whole Foods, having characteristically forgotten my umbrella. At the community bulletin board, skulking by the exit, I kill time while locating potential guitar lessons and shaman allergists. A sign on oversized, neon pink paper with bold black lettering shouts down at me: DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOUR (SOCIO-ECOPOLITICAL) SUGAR COMES FROM?

Do I? I begin to sputter, "I don't buy sugar!" before realizing the question isn't a literal one. No, it's a (rather miserable, somewhat confused) double entendre, a social-responsibility-through-commerce pun. How very current. There was a time when social activism and progressive politics shunned market operations out of begrudging respect to the battle lines of old, conceiving of money and morality as natu-

ral foes. We have not totally outgrown this binary in the Obama Age – and yet it does seem outdated, like a fist-shaking relic of the revolution past its prime. Within the pragmatist-optimist model of contemporary politics, commerce has been newly redrawn as a potential tool for social activism and community-building – rather than just a bitter pill to be stomached.

Buying "local" has become the latest in a string of activist consumer slogans to gain fashion, feeding off the unforeseen commercial cachet of buying "green," "organic" and "sustainable." The idea is that buying local is not just a financial decision, but also an ideological one; you're not just purchasing sugar, as the pink sign reminds you, but supporting a particular socio-ecopolitical stance as well. This may seem a bit militant compared to the standard

notion of local businesses as the mild mom-and-pop, but in essence it's really just supporting businesses who make a profit *and* a difference. By and large these types of businesses tend to be locally rooted ones, as deeply committed to their communities as they are to profit margins.

The issue is not as simple as the cloudless, "buy local" catchphrase advertises. To begin, even a proudly idiosyncratic, regional state such as Rhode Island is entrenched within the global economy, in which the overlapping points of connection are nearly infinite. Chase Hogoboom of Farm Fresh RI, a non-profit that's successfully married business and social interests, is careful to address the ambiguity inherent to the "local" label. "There's a wide spectrum of interpretation that is all pretty much accepted," he notes. "In the glob-

LOCAL SHOPPING BY THE NUMBERS

\$100, \$68, \$43, \$0. If \$100 is spent locally, \$68 remains within the community. Only \$43 remains if spent with a national chain. And \$0 remains when spent online.

2x: The multiplier for economic growth generated by a fractional shift in spending to support local businesses. A 10% shift, for example, potentially generates 20% in economic growth.

90%: The number of businesses in Rhode Island that qualify as “small” or independent.

Lt. Governor Roberts is working with Johnson and Wales University to develop metrics specific to Rhode Island’s local business economy. The figures here come from the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation and the National Bureau of Labor Statistics.



THIS TIME, IT'S POLITICAL: Asher Schofield of Frog & Toad splits his time between retail and activism

al economy, buying local can mean ‘buying American’ or ‘buying Rhody.’” This makes teasing out the origins of a homegrown product and the true impact of its purchase difficult if not pointless. All of which begs two questions: Can we really consider anything truly “local,” and if so, does it matter? Does “local” necessarily designate good quality, good karma and good economic sense?

Happily, the latest arguments behind the newest buy local movement leave plenty of room for balanced perspective. What distinguishes this development from its more reactionary precedents is an apparent emphasis on interconnection and mutual benefit, rather than parochialism and exclusion. In Rhode Island the casual practice of buying locally has coalesced into a concerted effort, gaining real visibility and muscle through the Buy Local RI campaign spearheaded by Lieutenant Governor Elizabeth Roberts. The campaign began amidst last holiday season’s deepening recessionary woes, as commercial promotion to help small and local businesses compete for dwindling consumer dollars. The response was enthusiastic and vocal enough to spur continued development beyond holiday retail: a logo design competition followed, networking and membership ramped

up, and development on a robust website began.

Roberts’s office hopes that Buy Local RI can leverage web presence to facilitate mutually beneficial consumerism, similar to what Farm Fresh RI has done through its pioneering website. Soon Rhode Islanders will have access to a searchable database for goods and services with local ties, removing significant hurdles of inconvenience that otherwise might limit local purchasing to the realm of the familiar. Someone in the market for, say, organic cotton t-shirts could feasibly shop for their purchase locally with the same ease as shopping generically online. The database will extend its application beyond individual purchases to facilitate business-to-business networking. If a company’s dollars are earmarked for a certain item, and a good-quality local option exists at the ready, then it makes sense to spend those dollars in a way that resonates satisfyingly beyond the immediate purchase.

Restaurateur Leah Reynolds strikes a similarly pragmatic chord when discussing her emphasis on local sourcing for Everyman Bistro, a venue she recently opened in the West Side’s revamped American Locomotive Works building. Her pragmatism seems a natural result of decades spent in a

notoriously fickle industry, having run the much-missed Custom House Tavern prior to returning with her current venture. “If I can find what I need locally, then why not?” she says casually. “There’s so much available within Rhode Island that I can usually find it here first.” Reynolds’s practical approach extends not just to the sourcing of ingredients that comprise a menu of regional classics like johnnycakes, but also to the live music and art that fills her space. Her formula for merging good business and good will is one of self-sustaining equilibrium: quality local products and art support Everyman’s success by contributing distinctive, Rhode Island-proud character to the restaurant, often at lower cost than generic, non-local alternatives; in turn, the success of Everyman enables Reynolds’s continued support of her suppliers and the community at large.

What Reynolds articulates is congruent with the concept of “triple bottom line,” an economic philosophy much-touted among supporters of local-business programs, which promotes the idea that local businesses can simultaneously be profitable and foster social consciousness. Those wary of neoliberalist economics may note with satisfaction that “triple bottom line” doesn’t naively suggest that profit is the only measure



EAT LOCAL: Everyman's Leah Reynolds sources her food from RI growers.

of success, but simply that profit and purpose need not antagonize one another, and at best may even play nicely together. Asher Schofield, owner of Frog and Toad gifts on Hope Street, echoes these sentiments – albeit with an added dose of infectious optimism. (I defy even the most grievous skeptic to ring off a conversation without having absorbed his sunny, philanthropic ethos.) As a relatively new small business owner, Schofield is particularly sentient about how his shop's finances impact his capacity to engage community work. As his business has solidified, he's been able to steadily amplify his community work. Were Frog and Toad faltering rather than thriving as it is, he notes, his time and money for activism no doubt would be limited.

Schofield's genuine sense of social responsibility hasn't prevented Frog and Toad from continually increasing profits, or from contributing to projects that strengthen the neighborhood both socially *and* economically. As an active member of his merchants' association, he has helped spur mindful beautification measures, such as an architectural bus shelter that will be custom-designed to reflect the neighborhood's character. The project's benefits are reciprocal among residents and business owners, the positive social outcomes dovetailing with finan-

cial ones: residents receive a piece of functional sculpture for the neighborhood; bus patrons get a more comfortable commute; and any consequential boost to commercial foot traffic helps the nearby stores' bottom lines.

This is all emblematic of a practical do-gooder spirit that's accompanied the ascendance of a grown-up, bipartisan national politics and a newfound communion of business and social progress. Schofield, for one, credits Obama's presidency with encouraging his incorporation of activism into his daily work. He now views activism as simply "a good neighbor thing," he says, an integral part of his role as business owner rather than something better left to nights and weekends. While hosting an in-store call center to contact swing voters during the 2008 presidential campaign, Schofield regularly met customers who did not support his candidate but nevertheless supported his activism.

After years of whitewashed corporate culture, stripped of all potential profit deterrents, it seems reasonable that consumers are just happy to encounter an actual pulse behind the register. Whether this pulse beats blue or red is often beside the point... unless you're at hyper-partisan Blue State Coffee on Thayer, of course, and then it's go blue or go home. **PM**

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