

# edible HOUSTON

LIVE LOCAL ★ LIVE WELL

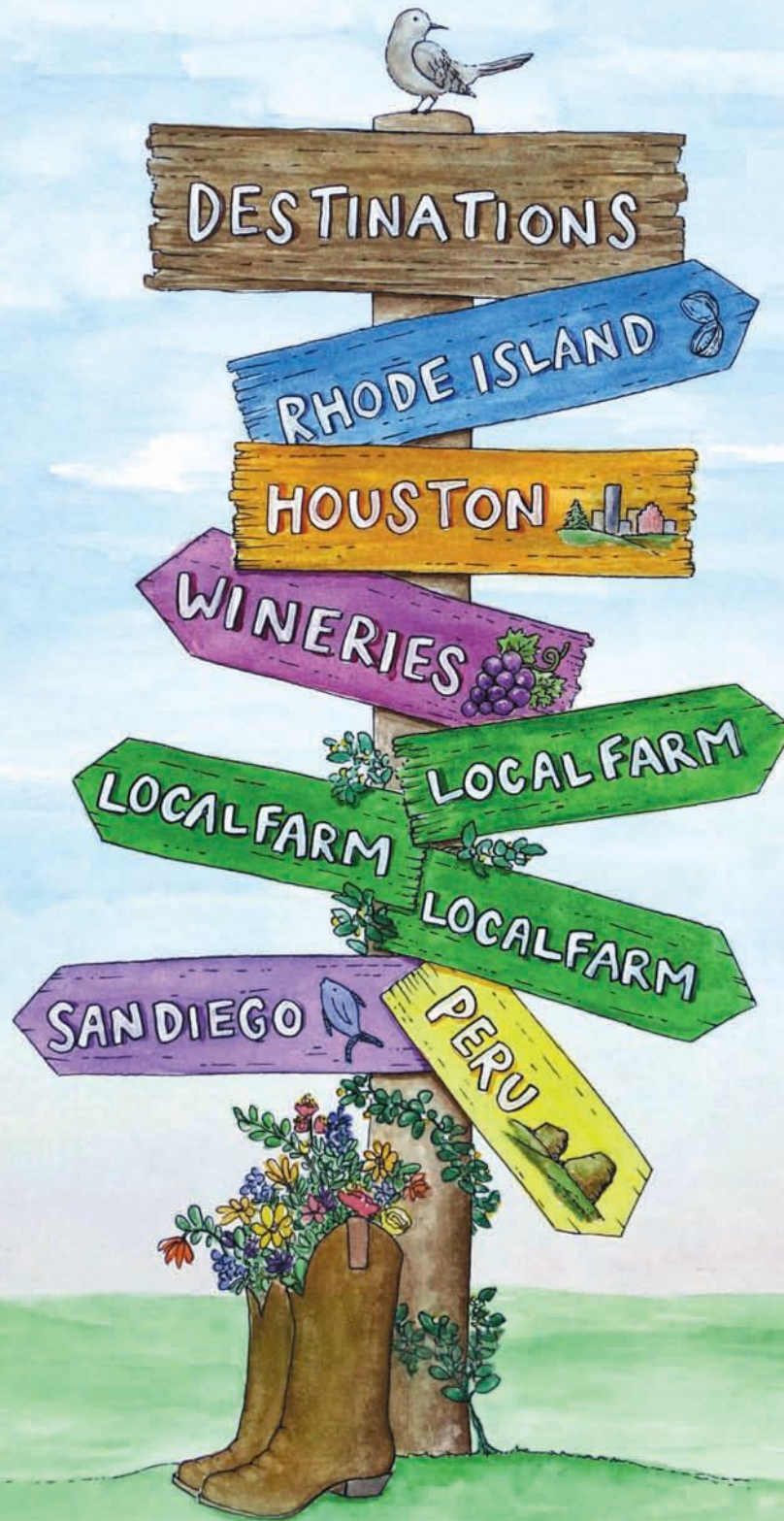




photo by Philip Emerson

# Homing In on Local Food

*Grit Grocery, Common Market make the locavore life easier*

WORDS BY CAT MODLIN-JACKSON

Filling bags with locally grown goods on a leisurely Wednesday at the City Hall Farmers Market may be one of the most refreshing ways to spend an afternoon in Houston, but it's a no-go for folks working 9 to 5. That is, until the creators of Grit Grocery proved undeterred by the obstacles in the path of farm to plate, and with their truck-turned-market they're making a new way for Houstonians to get food grown close to home.

The mobile grocery store is a picture-perfect model of trend and innovation, plucked straight from the farm-to-table playbook. On a Thursday night, the gunmetal-gray van is parked in front of high-rise apartments downtown. Beneath a striped awning, the side of the truck is open, revealing baskets of produce; glass freezers stocked with meat and dairy; shelves of bread, coffee and condiments.

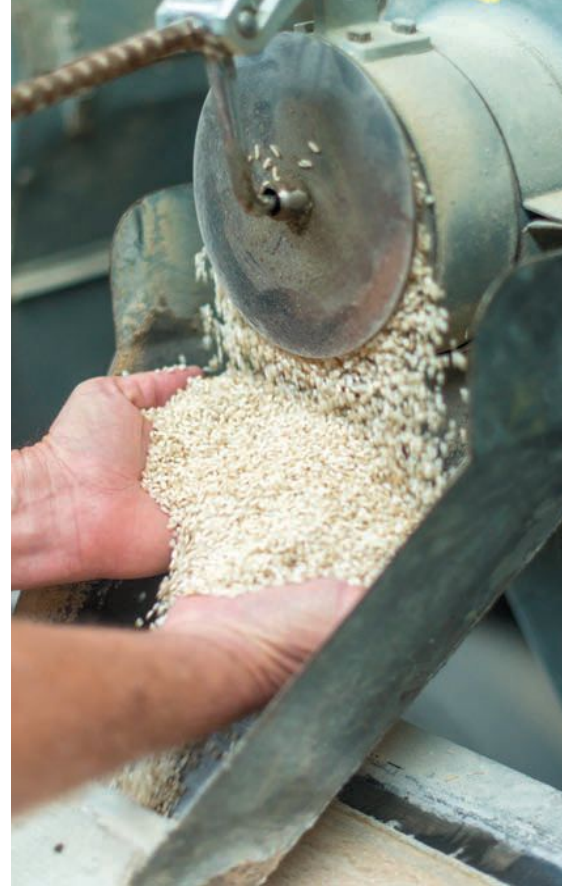
An after-work crowd ready to grab a bite and hit the bar sifts through the selection and co-founder Michael Powell stands to the side, ready to answer questions. A couple asks about a sign offering a meal bundle of the week. Powell answers that for less than the cost of takeout, they'll get pork chops from Three Sisters farm in Tomball, sweet potatoes grown on Gundermann Acres in Wharton County, and a head of garlic. Throw it all together, says Powell, and

in less than an hour they'll have a home-cooked meal made entirely with food grown by farmers less than 100 miles from downtown Houston.

Powell isn't new to cutting-edge grocery. He studied food culture in grad school and designed prototype stores in California before he crossed paths with Grit Grocery founder Dustin Windham. Now they're breaking the box store mold of food retail.

"Nobody was doing anything like this," says Powell. "What we're doing is offering you a different way to look at food because there's no junk-food aisles. That's what the core engine of the grocery stores has always been." If the Grit truck had a jingle, the lyrics would surely include the three notes that make locavores sing: fresh, local, organic.

From shopper to farmer, everyone will benefit from the store's approach to keeping selection limited and buying in volume from nearby producers, says Windham. After a successful pilot in 2017, Windham and crew took a fundraising hiatus to grow a fleet that can support Grit's goals. "We need several of these [trucks] for it to work financially, both on the customer side so they can have a price point that's moderate ... and then on the farmer's side as well.



We need to be buying at a price that can help them make a living,” explains Windham.

As Grit Grocery carves a new market for farmers in Houston, another kind of market has hit the town to make sure Texas eats what Texas makes. The Common Market, known in the policy world as a “food hub” has just opened for business in Houston. Working with large buyers rather than individual shoppers, the nonprofit started by distributing food from farms to schools and other large institutions in Philadelphia. Over 10 years the operation has procured millions of dollars of business for hundreds of farmers within the mid-Atlantic, bringing students closer to their food and keeping food dollars closer to home. Two years ago, the Common Market started branching out, first in Atlanta and now in Houston, where director Margaret Smith has been working to get the Texas operation under way.

Whereas mainline distributors can serve as a wall between farm and plate, the Common Market acts as a bridge, says Smith. “The current food system is incredibly unfair, it’s incredibly undemocratic and it’s incredibly opaque,” says Smith. “Access to good food is not currently equal in this country and so Common Market’s model looks to change that.”

Part of Common Market’s work entails revamping lunch menus in schools across the city, including those with students whose parents have neither the money nor the time to make meals with farmers market ingredients that fetch twice the price of grocery-store food. When the school year begins in the fall, some students might see traditional menu items like peas on Monday and carrots on Friday replaced with a space for “seasonal vegetables.”

When it comes to large distributors, Common Market is unique in their commitment to ensuring that farmers don’t get cheated when selling in bulk, says Texas Center for Local Food President

Sue Beckwith, who’s spent several years researching ways to build a more ethical food supply chain through links like food hubs.

“One thing wholesalers do is they promise they’re going to buy their crop at a certain price, and either they don’t buy at all or they come back and say they can’t pay the price [they said they were] going to pay. Now the farmer’s already grown it so that leaves the farmer hanging either without a buyer or without a buyer at the right price. Common Market doesn’t do that and won’t do that,” says Beckwith.

In order for communities to be well the farmers must be well, and that means developing a system that supports their work, says Smith of the Common Market’s mission to promote fair and open agribusiness. “Transparency is one of our core values and is something that we really see is a huge problem with the more conventional food system,” she says. That means offering farmers information about market trends so they can set their own prices, making sure they’re paid on time and helping them develop lasting relationships with buyers.

Food policy experts across the country have praised Common Market for these policies. “They are very interested in equity, and that’s equity to both farm and buyer,” adds Beckwith.

From dinner plates of potatoes and pastured pork to cafeteria trays filled with greens, the rise of local-centric food businesses shows a shift in the way people are thinking about what’s important when it comes to consumption. In addition to considerations of health and nutrition, animal treatment, sustainable land use, fair wages and la-

Left to right: Shopping straight from the office (photo Philip Emerson); Steve Gillespie showing his organic long-grain white rice at Doguet’s Rice Mill in Beaumont, TX; preparing local products at one of the hospitals Common Market works with; Farmer Mike Flores of Sustainable Harvesters in Hockley, TX (photos Katie Frezza); Grit Grocery’s co-owner Dustin Windham (photo Philip Emerson)



bor practices are all part of the equation of stocking the fridge.

But for the one in five Houstonians who live in poverty, premium food grown on local farms isn't a realistic option. "It's a quandary of 'How do we make healthy food more affordable for people who are living on lower incomes?' Which we have to do. How do we pay farmers and farmworkers a living wage and provide food at an accessible price at the same time?" asks Beckwith.

The current system puts fresh food out of reach for so many, particularly those living in predominantly black and Hispanic neighborhoods where incomes skew disproportionately low. A just food system is an inclusive food system, says Dara Cooper, winner of the 2018 James Beard Leadership Award and co-founder of the National Black Food and Justice Alliance.

It is not enough to rebuild a problematic food system if the people oppressed by the system are left out of the process of redevelopment. "Racial equality means supporting the systems around food access that are developed and led by communities of color. It does not mean thinking of communities of color solely as recipients of service," writes Cooper in her report "Reframing Food Hubs."

Whether Common Market or Grit Grocery will make an effort to source from Houston's farmers of color remains to be seen. But their very existence suggests a community yearning for communion between farmers and eaters. Time will tell if the path from farm to plate is accessible for all, but the ground is ripe for change in Houston—a city well on its way. 🍌

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**Cat Modlin-Jackson** loves writing about the intersections of food and politics, hanging out with her plants or baking goodies with whatever ingredients are readily available.

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## No wasting on the grit

Not every night is a sellout for Grit Grocery, but instead of throwing away leftovers the team upcycles as much as possible. Stale bread is baked into croutons; berries are churned into juice; carcasses are stewed into bone broth. "Everything moves through to something further," says founder Dustin Windham.

To take Grit's good-sense approach to sustainability a step further, Windham partnered with finance and IT specialist Jamal Ansari to develop technology to cut waste from the process of moving food from harvest time to dinnertime. Soon shoppers and farmers will be able to use a Facebook bot Ansari designed to keep their wants and needs in sync.

A former oil and gas industry problem-solver, Ansari got the idea for Grit's predictive analytics technology after designing algorithms that smoothed quirks in the process of getting oil from refinery to gas station. Ansari understands Mother Earth can be unpredictable: Both oil and vegetables can emerge in excess. So he found a way to funnel farmers' surplus into shoppers' baskets with just a few taps.

"I knew farmers all have cell phones, so we built a platform where farmers could literally text our bot and say, 'Hey, you're supposed to buy 20 pounds of broccoli. I have 25. Can you take 25?' And it's in our best interest to take 25 because we don't want our farmers to have a loss," says Ansari.

Drawing on consumer data collected at the truck, Grit will send coupons to certain customers, say those with a penchant for broccoli, when a farmer's harvest is more bountiful than expected. Instead of having to compost food they spent time and money growing, those farmers are able to sell their surplus to folks ready to roast.

Predictive analytics isn't new in the retail world. Chains like Kroger have been using technology to capitalize on consumer behavior for over a decade. But Grit's consideration of farmers' needs suggests a level of concern that goes beyond dollar signs.

"When you're building businesses, if you can't satisfy all parts of the equation, it's not sustainable," says Ansari.

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