

SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS

“UNLESS WE CHANGE HOW WE GROW OUR FOOD AND MANAGE OUR NATURAL CAPITAL, FOOD SECURITY — ESPECIALLY FOR THE WORLD’S POOREST — WILL BE AT RISK.”

— GLOBAL CALL FOR ACTION FROM THE WORLD FOOD BANK

What began humbly as a series of meetings between SNRE faculty and colleagues across campus has transformed quickly into U-M’s Sustainable Food Systems Initiative (SFSI). Since its inception in 2007, SFSI has identified and confronted key food system challenges, from the presence of food deserts in Detroit to the crisis of malnutrition in India.



MLA GRADUATE STUDENT NICK MANCHINSKI HOLDS FRESHLY GROWN STRAWBERRIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN CAMPUS FARM



FAST FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Organized by SFSI in honor of National Food Day (October 24), *Fast Food for Thought* presented ten “tiny talks on big topics” in food and agriculture, each limited to five minutes.

More than 200 people turned out for the event. Lilly Fink Shapiro, event coordinator, quipped, “This shows that people are interested and, pun intended, hungry for more.”

Program:

- Sarah Besky, PhD (SNRE and LSA Anthropology): *Why Fair Trade's Not Fair*
- Jennifer Blesh, PhD (SNRE): “*Brasillience*”: *Realizing Resilient Food Systems in Mato Grosso, Brazil*
- Raymond De Young, PhD (SNRE): *Behaving... Within Limits*
- Paul Drevnick, PhD (SNRE): *Dr. Demented or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying (About Mercury) and Eat Fish*
- Lesli Hoey, PhD (Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning): *A Plan for Preventing Malnutrition in 5 Minutes*
- Andrew Jones, PhD (School of Public Health): *Farm to Fork: A Critical Look at the Aspirations of Local Food*
- Laurie Lachance, PhD (School of Public Health): *Silly Rabbit, Carrots Are for Kids*
- Ivette Perfecto, PhD (SNRE): *Let's Play Azteca Chess: Learning About Agroecological Complexity While Having Fun*
- Maren Spolum, MPH, MPP (SNRE): *Examining Food Access and Food Security Across Michigan*
- John Vandermeer, PhD (SNRE and LSA Ecology and Evolutionary Biology): *A Plan for the Revolution in Agriculture in 5 minutes*



SFSI LEADERS AT THE UM STUDENT FARM (LEFT TO RIGHT: LILLY FINK SHAPIRO, JOHN VANDERMEER, ANDREW JONES, LESLI HOEY, JENNIFER BLESCH, IVETTE PERFECTO)

U-M's Sustainable Food Systems Initiative (SFSI) has become a springboard for new faculty, programs, and affiliated student groups. From the outset, the Initiative has taken a broadly interdisciplinary approach, mirroring SNRE's emphasis on cross-discipline problem-solving. Thus far, SFSI partners include SNRE, the School of Public Health, the Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, LSA, the College of Engineering, the Graham Sustainability Institute, the Law School, the Medical School, the Ross School of Business, and the Stamps School of Art and Design. And while SNRE has a prominent role in the Initiative, no single unit dominates – to do so would undermine the campus-wide traction that makes SFSI strong.

“Food lends itself to interdisciplinary study, as it simultaneously affects health, the environment, policy, land use, and issues of equity,” explains Lilly Fink Shapiro (MPH '15), SFSI's coordinator. Fink Shapiro notes that while other universities are at various stages of creating similar programs, U-M is at the forefront of recognizing the study of food systems as an academic discipline in which economic, social, ecological, health, and policy dimensions are investigated as an integrated whole. She compares the emerging field of study to the introduction of Women's Studies and African-American Studies programs at U-M several decades ago, adding, “It's exciting to help define this new field.”

Accompanying its broad array of academic disciplines, SFSI addresses a wide range of sustainable food issues. On one end, participants influence food policies that aim to increase equitable access to nutritious food at the local and global levels. On the other, they help mitigate food production issues by establishing community gardens and improving soil health standards and biodiversity on farms.

The student led University of Michigan Sustainable Food Program (UMSFP) complements the work of SFSI. Since its creation in 2012, UMSFP has engaged in a variety of sustainable food-related issues, including advocating for healthy eating on campus and recovering and distributing leftover food. In addition, UMSFP oversees the Campus Farm, a three-year-old, one-acre plot that serves as a central hub for experimental and academic education and has helped increase access to fresh food on campus. Emily Canosa, UMSFP manager, says of her experience with the program: “The number of students interested in sustainable food systems is increasing at an exponential rate.

When they're connected to one another and have an outlet for their specific interests, there's no limit to the positive impact they can have."

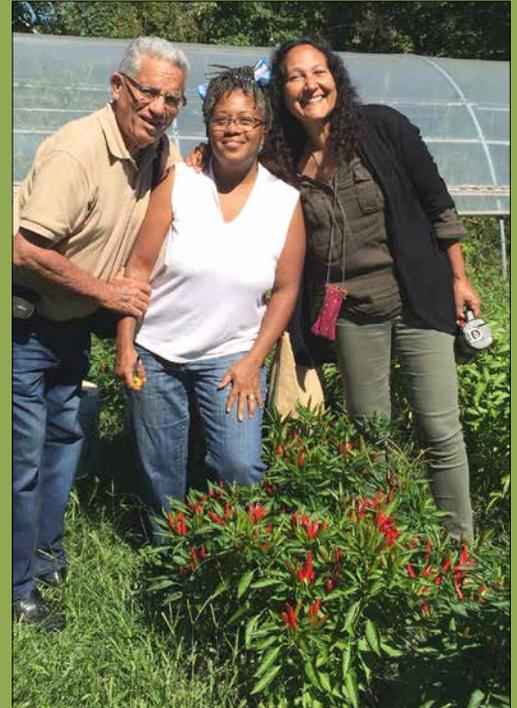
The sustainable food movement at U-M owes its foothold to key faculty leaders responsible for creating and developing SFSI. Professor John Vandermeer, one of the Initiative's original organizers, explains, "The whole idea of developing such as program originated in discussions within a separate international body called the New World Agriculture and Ecology Group. Before long, discussions had grown to include faculty from U-M, as well as Michigan State University and Wayne State University." Vandermeer has been a member of the U-M community since 1971 and includes SNRE among his many university affiliations.

Another senior SNRE faculty member, Professor Ivette Perfecto, has also been integral to the Initiative. Her current work serves as just one example of the spectrum of issues tackled by SFSI. For several years, Perfecto has explored the relationship between biodiversity and agriculture in coffee-producing areas in Latin America. However, her interest in sustainable food issues has led to her recent collaboration with Vandermeer and Professor Lesli Hoey, a colleague from the Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning. Their work examines how urban farms and surrounding city landscapes affect the biodiversity of insects that provide pollination and pest control. By understanding how pollinators and beneficial predators are impacted by features of the urban landscape, Perfecto and her colleagues can inform decisions about where to locate urban farms and how to manage them to optimize these ecosystem services.

Another key success for SFSI came in 2011, when the initiative secured approval to hire five new professors specializing in sustainable food systems. Professor Jennifer Blesh, one of the new hires, serves on the faculty of SNRE and describes herself as a broadly trained agroecologist. Blesh affirms that the university has successfully supported "exciting new interdisciplinary research and curriculum development centered on how to make food systems more sustainable."

The evolution of SFSI has also led to the creation of new academic programs. In 2014, U-M established an undergraduate minor in sustainable food systems (SFS). To earn the minor, students must take at least five subject-related courses, for a minimum of 15 credits. "The SFS minor exposes students to the food system from production to consumption," says Perfecto. According to Vandermeer, "The program has quite a strong emphasis on what's going on in the United States – especially in Michigan – but it also provides tremendous opportunities to do international work on food systems and agriculture." The SFS minor is in high demand, with waitlists for many of its courses.

SFSI's rapid development includes hiring new faculty, creating new academic programs, and fostering the emergence of multiple student groups – all within the span of less than eight years. Its brief-but-exciting history reflects a growing public interest in creating food systems that will harmoniously produce food, conserve natural resources, and encourage nutritious diets and public health. Given the support of SNRE and U-M, along with the overwhelming interest of students, there is no doubt that the future of the Initiative and programs on campus will aid in the worldwide call for sustainable food systems. 🌱



PROFESSOR IVETTE PERFECTO, URBAN FARMER MYRTLE THOMSON CURTIS, AND CUBAN AGROECOLOGIST FERNANDO FUNES AT FREEDOM FREEDOM URBAN FARM IN DETROIT

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY CONFERENCE

The food sovereignty movement, in which peasant farmers, fishers, and farmworkers seek to solve world problems in food and agriculture, was the focus of a May 28-29 academic conference.

Food Sovereignty: Local Struggles, Global Movement took place at SNRE and featured speakers, panel discussions, and poster sessions on the different aspects of food sovereignty. It was made possible by a Michigan Meetings grant from the Rackham School of Graduate Studies.

According to Professor Ivette Perfecto, organizers aimed to elevate the intellectual discussion on food sovereignty by having in-depth analyses of how ecological and health aspects can be articulated within the food sovereignty debate.

"This movement is challenging the assumption that we need industrial agriculture to feed the world. It is proposing that small- and medium-scale farmers using agro-ecological methods can feed the world and contribute to cooling the climate," Professor Ivette Perfecto said. She added that industrial agriculture is among the contributors to global warming.