

Buying local is not a fad, but a new way of life

Bunny Money

by Stephanie Barna



[Hunter McRae](#): Remedy Market owners Billy Pope and Adaline Thomas aim to please Holy City Locavores

It all started with the bunny.

A month ago, I embarked on a project. I was buying and eating local for 30 days and writing about it on my [Eat blog at charlestoncitypaper.com](#). The experiment would allow me to share my experience and potentially encourage others to do the same as a precursor to Lowcountry Local First's Buy Local month, Nov. 15-Dec. 15.

It was going along just fine. For 14 days, I was eating at places like the Glass Onion on Savannah Highway, buying gifts at the Charleston Farmers Market, shopping for a trip to the mountains at Half-Moon Outfitters, and stocking the shelves with goods from the Pig. I was cooking local food from Pinckney's Produce, a Community Supported Agricultural (CSA) program we subscribe to. I was being inspired by Chef Sean Brock, whose new restaurant Husk is all about procuring ingredients from the South. On one day, 88 percent of the money I spent went to local businesses.

And then I got a rabbit, and it all went out the window.

The Saturday before Halloween, my daughter and I headed to Hucks Produce stand on Folly Road to get one of the last pumpkins on all of James Island. As we were haggling over the pumpkin, the proprietor and I started chatting about the bunnies. *City Paper* columnist Will Moredock had written about the stand being overrun with rabbits earlier in the week. So I innocently asked if they had been able to find homes for all of them. She led us out back to see them for ourselves.

Bunnies are cute. Real cute. So cute that I couldn't help myself. I snatched a little gray one up and said we'd take her.

We brought her home in a vegetable box with some hay and collard greens, but we needed a cage. So that evening, we went to PETCO. Yes, PETCO. It was 7:30 p.m. and there wasn't a local option for shopping. And even if it was the middle of the day, I'm not so sure there's a local pet shop that carries cages and the like for small critters. Most of them tend to specialize in quality foods and unique toys — not bunny food and litter boxes.



The damn (albeit adorable) Barna bunny

A hundred dollars (!) later, our (free) bunny was all set. But then we thought, wouldn't it be great if we could clean out the dog house and build an outdoor pen for her too? The next day my husband and I raked and cleared an area for her, but we needed chicken wire. Off to Lowe's we went. This bunny was really making me fall off the cliff. And once over the edge, it's hard to

readjust.

The rest of this week was littered with failures, not all of which I could pin on the bunny.

On Tuesday, I forgot to pick up my CSA box.

On Thursday, not only did I shop at Publix, but I bought pre-cut veggies, prepared cole slaw, and fried chicken for dinner. I was a slave to convenience.

Being a conscious shopper and eater can be difficult. Over the last month, I'd occasionally stomp my feet and petulantly cry about how I missed shopping online at Harris Teeter and conveniently driving up to the Folly Road location and having my groceries loaded into my car. Seriously. That's how spoiled I am. But

I'm not the only one spoiled by the cost and convenience of chain retailers who can sell mass-produced wares cheap and stay open until 10 p.m. on a slow weeknight. We are all guilty of giving in. And that's OK, says Jamee Haley, the executive director of Lowcountry Local First, a nonprofit organization that's part of the national Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE).

Haley doesn't want us to feel *too* guilty about not shopping local. "It's not a reality to localize *all* of our shopping," she says. But she hopes we'll at least make the 10 percent shift, taking a chunk of money we were spending at chain stores and moving it to the local mom and pops. "It's not always the most convenient," she concurs. "And you can go to Walmart and do one-stop shopping, but is that really where you want your money to be going?"

LLF and BALLE spout some compelling numbers when it comes to shopping locally. One study in the Chicago area found that every \$100 spent with a local firm leaves \$68 in the local economy versus \$43 spent at a chain store. In retail square footage terms, that means for every square foot occupied by a local firm, the local economic impact is \$179, versus \$105 for a chain store.

A September 2008 study conducted in western Michigan — an area that has roughly the same population as the Lowcountry — found that a 10 percent shift of money away from chains and into local establishments could give communities a \$137 million economic boost and create 1,600 new jobs with \$53 million in wages.



HUNTER MCRAE: *Mariana Ramsay Hay at Croghan's Jewel Box frequently supports local charities and fund-raisers*

Shopping locally simply means supporting your community, according to Christine Osborne, an LLF board member and the owner of Wonder Works, a toy store that's in the midst of expanding. She recently increased square footage in West Ashley from 1,900 to 4,000 and has signed a lease for a third location in the city.

"There are a lot of people out there with needs in the local community, and it's the local businesses who support them," she says. "Think about a school auction.

All you see is local businesses donating. Chain stores are not going to donate. They have to go through so many approvals. It's local business that keeps schools, churches, and nonprofits going."

Osborne opened her first toy store 20 years ago, and she has witnessed a distinct change in the retail business climate. "When Jamee Haley walked into my store four years ago, she changed my life," says Osborne. "In the past, everyone worked separately; you made an alliance here and there. But it's not like that anymore. Local businesses have banded together more than ever. People who are thriving are thriving because they are all working together."

A good example of this new climate is the recently opened Remedy Market, a shop on Spring Street that caters to the locavore with locally grown and produced foods. Proprietor Billy Pope says he wants to help local artisans find an outlet for selling their wares for many reasons.

"I think it's not only important to increase the economy locally — monetarily — but just the whole better living of it," he says.

He believes when people do what they love and work jobs they actually care about, it makes for a better way of life.

"Hopefully, by doing this, because this is something I'm passionate about, I'll be able to make some money, but I'll also go to sleep at the end of the day feeling really good," he says. "You're helping people. It's like I'm increasing their job per se."

For Osborne, whose business is thriving despite being sandwiched between Walmart and Target, the biggest toy retailers in the nation, her success is all about the community connection. Over the years, she's added a growing section of locally produced goods

"I didn't even worry about, you know, the numbers and stuff," she insists. "This time of year, I know in my heart of hearts that we take care of the needs of people coming in. You know your customers by name, their families. For generations, you help them, and they trust you. That's what a community and local business is about, and that's what you don't want to lose. Buy Local is one way to keep that going. It's pretty powerful."

Osborne has wholeheartedly embraced the buy local mission and is convinced that local businesses are what give Charleston its flavor. "If you didn't have Carolina Girls or Palmetto Moon or Bob Ellis, you wouldn't have Charleston, S.C."

Down on King Street, two distinctively Charleston businesses are concerned about the changes they see happening all around them.

Barry Kalinsky has run Bob Ellis for 20 years. His father Morris took ownership of the high-end shoe store more than 60 years ago.

"Five years ago, the quality of King Street retailers was A plus," Kalinsky says. But the exit of Saks and other high-end shops has left a hole. Meanwhile, new businesses moving onto the street aren't lasting very long. Kalinsky points to the storefront that had housed local designer Mary Norton's shop until last summer. A jewelry shop just recently filled the space, and they're already gone.



KAITLYN GANDY: *Amanda Rosen at Butterfly Consignment welcomes Buy Local Cardholders*

And then there are the trend stores that crop up together. A few years ago, it was coffee shops. This year, it's frozen treats.

"Three yogurt stores are opening within a half block of each other," Kalinsky says, flummoxed. He wishes them all the best, but they're destined to battle it out until there's one survivor and two empty storefronts.

Kalinsky himself has fought off competition from national footwear chains. It's hard to quantify what has sustained Bob Ellis, but it's clear that service has made a big difference. No mouse click will ever compare to seeing a heel in the

window, rushing inside to pull the shoe off the display, and running a thumb down the leather while the salesman finds your size.

A customer should have a great experience, "whether you buy no pairs or 10 pairs," Kalinsky says. And providing those great experiences over the decades has built more than just a reputation, it's built generations of loyal customers.

"It's not uncommon to have three generations come shop together," Kalinsky says.

Nestled not too far away, Croghan's Jewel Box has been around for more than 100 years. Owner Mariana Ramsay Hay's grandfather, William Croghan, opened the business. The craftsman wasn't a very good salesman and didn't have much inventory, but Mariana's mother, Mary Croghan Ramsay, was the salesperson that helped the small business thrive.

"What worries me is that the rents have gone up so high," says Hay, also an LLF board member. Long ago, business owners retired and began living on the rent they could get for their storefront. These days, major retailers have been willing to pay more and more. "It makes it hard for local people to open local businesses."

Hay echoes Osborne when talking about how Croghan's is invested in Charleston. It's evident right there on the counter, where they frequently promote local charities or fundraisers, including Buy Local Month. It's also about an investment on the backend, with supplies like computers and toilet paper coming from other local businesses and Hay's own groceries coming from her neighborhood corner store.

"We turn around and pass it on," she says. "That's how you get the trickle-down effect. It just keeps multiplying."

The trickle-down effect is not just measured in money. It's measured in good deeds too. Osborne gets emotional describing the ways in which she and her employees at Wonder Works are involved in the community. "We've embraced community, and they are my customers and my family."

Earlier in the day, she donated toys for two families participating in the Families Helping Families project, which pairs those who want to help with those who are in need. Nobody asked her for a donation. She just heard the stories — one family coping with the recent death of their father and the other with a child

undergoing open-heart surgery — and decided that she wanted to do whatever she could to make sure their Christmases would be cheerful.

"That's what a local business is about, and that's why you thrive," she says. "It's about family, community, and heart. There's no management where you have to go and get that approved. My managers create magic and wonder with whoever needs it every day."

Amanda Rosen, who owns Butterfly Consignment, expresses a similar sentiment. "You get to participate in the community fully. You get to know a lot of people. You get to choose your own philanthropic causes within the community, help them. You get to employ local people and their daughters and their sisters and their aunts, and it really bonds you in a special way."

Rosen has two shops, one on King Street and one in Mt. Pleasant, and is participating in LLF's most recent promotion: the Buy Local Card, which costs \$20 and entitles you to discounts and deals at LLF businesses throughout the area. You also get to be an official card-carrying local, and who doesn't want to be that? At Butterfly, Rosen is giving patrons who spend \$25 or more a free pair of earrings.

At Wonder Works, Osborne will give you a free gift when you spend \$100. "We're adding businesses every day," says Osborne. "We are working as fast as we can to get businesses up with their deals. All you have to do is buy a card and walk into a store and say, 'What's my deal?'"

For business owners, the card grants them tons of flexibility. They can change their deal day to day, week to week, which encourages customers to keep coming back.

And it helps counteract one of the reasons you might have for not shopping local — cost. Shopping local generally comes with a higher price on similar goods. Dolittle's just can't get the same volume discounts on dog food that PETCO can and has to work harder to get you to choose their store. In addition to striving for better service and higher quality, they reward customer loyalty with a frequency card. Collect 12 bone stamps and you'll save \$25. Many local businesses offer these kinds of rewards, and they work to keep you coming back. Piggly Wiggly is even giving away free Cuisinarts in their latest customer appreciation promotion.

"Everyone is looking for the best deal and the best bargain," says Haley of the LLF's mission. "But we have to continue to make sure they know they're voting with those dollars. Maybe they're spending more, but they're getting a good product and supporting local at the same time."

Over at Remedy Market, Pope buys local because when he spends his money, he knows he is supporting somebody's family or business. "It's easy to go to a convenience store to get something or go to Bi-Lo or Sam's or something like that and you get bulk," he says. "It takes somebody to open their mind up and go away from the norm, which is kind of funny because before 1950 that's how everything was."

For me, it's convenience that ends up derailing my goal to buy local, as the bunny episode illustrates. I generally shop in the evening or late at night when the kids are in bed and I can surf the far corners of the internet. I can order groceries, books, shoes, and have them delivered to my door within a few days. I can run to Walmart and grab last minute school supplies at 10 p.m. It's the reality of my hectic, overprogrammed life.

You could consider my intensive buying local project a failure because I shopped at PETCO and ate prepared foods from Publix. But I'm choosing to look at it in a different light. Most of the time, I spend my money in local establishments. My husband is on the LLF board, so patronizing local businesses is a big part of life. And while I may have to get my bunny supplies at PETCO, I'll still be shopping for my dog and cat food at Dolittle's. I'll be serving guests locally made Giddy Goat Cheese. I'll be stopping by Blue Bicycle Books when I need a new read. And generally I'll be going the extra mile because to me, buying local is a worthwhile choice to make.
