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# 2017 Hot Food Trends A Good Fit For County Farmers

By GILLIAN POMPLUN  
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ARONIA JUICE AND BERRIES are great examples of the kinds of purple foods consumers are increasingly demanding for their nutrient density, and the kinds of crops that county farmers can

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Crawford County farmers could score big wins in growing the farm economy, protecting the unique and fragile ecosystem, and mitigating public safety threats from flooding, by taking steps on their farms to cash in on growing trends in the food industry.

Anti-inflammatory foods, regenerative grazing, and purple foods are among the top food trends for 2017 listed by food industry leaders. In addition, continued growth in demand for organic foods is creating growing demand for organic hay, which commands a premium price.

While 2015 and 2016 food trends focused on "antioxidants," consumer awareness has evolved to an understanding that antioxidant-rich foods are part of a larger dietary focus of reducing inflammation.

Chronic inflammation is linked as an underlying cause of many chronic health conditions such as heart disease, obesity, autoimmune disorders like arthritis and lupus, cancer, and more. Increasingly health practitioners see dietary changes as a key way to combat chronic inflammation, and prevent or slow development of these conditions.

Regenerative production methods such as grassfed, pastured and free-range meat, grassfed dairy, and organic meat and dairy have been increasing trends with consumers for years.

The most passionate advocates of these farming and food production systems will tell you that they have encapsulated the concept of "regenerative" all along, and for the most part that is true.

What has shifted is less in the world of farming and more in the world of consuming. The trend of "regenerative agriculture" is an indication that consumers are increasingly concerned about not only "is it good for me," but also about "is it good for the environment?"

The trend towards "purple foods" is really a consumer trend towards food that provides nutrient density. Foods that are a deep purple color, most notably berries such as Elderberries, Black Currants and Aronia, along with such foods as purple Cauliflower, Black Rice, purple Asparagus, purple Sweet Potatoes, and purple Corn, are foods that pack a real punch in providing the kinds of healthy – and anti-inflammatory – nutrients that consumers are increasingly seeking out. Maximizing the nutrition contained in every bite of food is really the trend.

### Anti-inflammatory foods

Acute inflammation in the body is a normal and healthy response to injury or attack by germs. We can see it, feel it and measure it as local heat, redness, swelling, and pain. Think, sprained ankle. On the other hand, whole-body inflammation refers to chronic, imperceptible, low-level inflammation.

Mounting evidence suggests that over time low-level, chronic inflammation sets the foundation for many serious, age-related diseases including heart disease, cancer and neurodegenerative conditions such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases.

Recent evidence indicates that chronic inflammation may also contribute to psychological disorders, especially depression, and exacerbate autoimmune conditions such as arthritis and lupus.

The extent of this chronic inflammation is influenced by genetics, a sedentary lifestyle, too much stress, and exposure to environmental toxins such as secondhand tobacco smoke.

Diet also has a huge impact, and it is likely that most people go through life in a pro-inflammatory state in part, as a result of what they eat.

One of the most important things the diet does is provide balanced amounts of Omega-3 and Omega-6 fatty acids, which can only be obtained from diet. Most people consume an excess of Omega-6 fatty acids, which predominate in many vegetable oils and in meat and dairy produced with a corn-based diet.

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The body uses Omega-6 fatty acids to synthesize compounds that promote inflammation.

Most experts agree that the ideal Omega 6 to 3 ratio from diet should range from 1:1 to 5:1. The reality is that it now ranges from 20 to 50:1 for most Americans.

Omega-3 fatty acids – from organic and grassfed beef and dairy, organic and pastured pork, organic and freerange chicken and eggs, oily fish, walnuts, flax, and more can help to reverse this imbalance, and have an anti-inflammatory effect.

Antioxidants also have strong anti-inflammatory effects. Antioxidants are organic compounds found in food, especially brightly colored fruits, vegetables and grains.

Antioxidants act to reduce oxidative stress on body tissues, which is a natural byproduct of metabolic function.

### **Regenerative agriculture**

There is a growing movement called regenerative agriculture, in which different farming practices are used to restore soil degraded by planting and harvesting crops. One way to regenerate the topsoil is to graze cattle or hogs on land used for growing crops, because their manure and left-behind forage act as natural fertilizers.

Melissa Abbott, vice president of culinary insights at Hartman Group, a food consulting firm in Bellevue, Washington observes, "It's not enough just to know the diet animals were fed, but also to understand the impact those animals have on the environment."

In the next three years, Abbott expects, restaurants and food companies will highlight that their inventories and menu items were raised in a regenerative-grazing fashion.

### **Shifts in land use**

In 1930, 57 percent of Crawford County's 310,863 acres in agricultural production was used as pasture. As of U.S. Census data for 2012, only 12 percent of the 205,971 acres in agricultural production in the county are in pasture – an 86 percent reduction in acres.

Along with this staggering 86 percent decrease in agricultural lands in pasture, the county has seen many farmers abandon the practice of contour stripping on ridge top cropland popularized in the 1930's to help control soil erosion and correct damage done to agricultural lands in the aftermath of the clearing of the land by the county's farming pioneers.

While modern no-till farming methods have created great gains in preserving topsoil in the county, farming practices have tended to compact the soil and not done as much to increase soil organic matter as historically when farmers were obliged to safeguard their soil fertility through means of animal and green manures. Combined with a decrease in pasture and grassy contour stripping, this has resulted in greater quantity and velocity of runoff in catastrophic rain events.

### **Savanna – like it used to be**

Crawford County used to be dominated by a landscape known as the "oak savannah." Before the arrival of Europeans, fire defined the landscape. Set by lightning or native hunters, it thinned out underbrush each year. Left behind were prairie grasses and a handful of oaks. This oak savannah landscape covered roughly 5.5 million acres south of a line from Eau Claire to Madison. When European settlers brought in fire suppression, then the forest as we know it today took over.

One group that seeks to reintroduce the multiple benefits of a savannah-like pattern of land use and agriculture is the Savanna Institute. Keefe Keeley, graduate of North Crawford High School, is an executive director of the institute.

"Much attention has been given to implicating agriculture in the greatest problems of our time: mass extinction, climate chaos, and environmental injustices," the Savanna Institute's website, savannainstitute.com notes. "With important exceptions, little attention has been given to developing solutions that address the root causes of these problems. Most efforts have instead relied on incremental improvements to mitigate biodiversity loss, carbon emissions, and soil and water resource degradation."

The basic strategy put forward by the Savanna Institute is to develop agricultural systems modeled after an exceptionally productive ecosystem: the savanna. Savannas protect soil, regenerate nutrients, filter water, sequester carbon, harbor wildlife, and contribute to human well-being.

Their premise is that "agricultural savannas" can also function this way, taking the form of natural savannas, but with intentionally-designed and intensively-managed combinations of plants and animals that are valuable to humans for food, fuel, and fiber.

"The bottom line is we need more perennial vegetation to slow rainfall before it becomes flash floods. Back when more farms had dairy cows and other livestock, there was more pasture and hay ground that slowed the runoff and gave it more chance to infiltrate into the soil," Keeley explained. "Planting a lot more perennials -- pasture, forages, apples, aronia, prairie strips, et cetera -- that might help our flood problem."

### **Pasturing initiatives**

Some of the most exciting initiatives in the county's agricultural landscape in recent years have been the success of a grassfed beef cooperative, and the recent initiative to form a pastured pork cooperative. These initiatives are on trend to capture the economic opportunity of changing consumer demands.

Wisconsin Grass-fed Beef Cooperative, now ten years old and profitable, started in 2006 with just 15 members and has now grown to be 162 member-owners strong. They market their products under the "Wisconsin Meadows" brand.

"In the grassfed beef co-op, our mission is to provide the farmer-owners with a 20 percent premium over the conventional price," explains General Manager Rod Offe. Their website emphasizes the health and environmental benefits of grassfed beef production.

One local organization in the Kickapoo Valley that works to promote this style of agriculture is the Kickapoo Grazing Initiative.

Their website [www.kickapoograzinginitiative.com](http://www.kickapoograzinginitiative.com) puts forward a simple message, "Farms that have healthy, managed pasture areas will increase organic matter in the soil and reduce runoff to our streams and river. At the same time, farmers and landowners can produce a value-added product that will sustain their farm and the local economy. The topography, market availability, interest in healthy food and sustaining small farms, and commitment to finding the practices that protect our river and its world class trout streams all contribute to the success of this project."

In 2013, KGI produced a Managed Grazing of Grass-Fed Beef toolkit for farmers and landowners. The toolkit is available to producers interested in pursuing this method of production.

Now in December of 2016, yet another group has gathered to discuss the idea of forming a pastured pork cooperative.

“There is no question there is a market for pastured pork, and no question that we are definitely moving forward,” meeting organizer Mike Mueller said.

At the meeting, names of potential farmer-members were gathered, and organizers plan to foster a way to move the conversation forward with online discussions and/or another meeting early in 2017.

For more information, Mike Mueller can be reached at 608-412-0725, or by e-mail at [pioneergardens@gmail.com](mailto:pioneergardens@gmail.com).

**Purple foods**

While another 2017 hot trend is promoted as “purple” foods, the real trend is for foods which pack a real punch in terms of delivering healthy nutrients. These kinds of foods are known as “nutrient dense” foods.

The Aronia berry, as well as other native berries and fruits, such as Elderberries and Black Currants, are well positioned to allow farmers to capture the market potential of this trend in healthy eating while converting acres on their farms into the type of mixed woody perennial and grassy terraced configuration best designed to prevent catastrophic runoff in extreme weather events.

While sources of dietary antioxidants like Pomegranates have gained considerable traction in the marketplace, propelled by huge marketing investments, they represent neither an economic opportunity for American family farmers, nor a native, locally grown, sustainable source of high antioxidant foods for North American consumers.

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest among the farming community in diversifying production on their farms with easy-to-grow, native and hardy perennial sources of high antioxidant foods, such as Aronia, Black Currants and Elderberries.

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