Wholesale Produce Auctions: Assessing Their Viability in a Changing Food Economy

by

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ABSTRACT

Wholesale Produce Auctions: assessing their viability in a changing food economy

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Wholesale produce auctions have begun to take root in Ontario as a way of realizing the benefits that alternative food systems offer (including: improved food quality to the reconnection of producers and consumers). As such, there is an opportunity to assess the viability of this alternative food system model in terms of its ability to deliver these unique benefits. This paper explores two case studies, the Elmira Produce Auction Cooperative and the Bruce-Huron Produce Auction, while using interviews to demonstrate that despite wholesale produce auctions offering many of the opportunities to promote the benefits of alternative food systems, the wholesale food model is limited in terms of delivering a practical and functional way of distributing food to consumers. This research demonstrates that a contradiction exists with regards to alternative food systems: the desire for the associated benefits of alternatives while simultaneously seeking the convenience adopted by the conventional food system.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Overview

In recent food systems history there have been noticeable changes occurring. Among these changes are consumer demands for higher quality food, the opportunity for consumers to know the farmers who are producing their food, as well as the chance for consumers to support rural communities, either their own or regionally. These changes are best represented in the form of alternative food systems. An alternative food system is intended to offer an array of characteristics that are not customary within the conventional system. These include, but are not limited to, shortened supply chains, the redevelopment of personal relationships within the system, improved food quality, and the use of more traditional production methods. The momentum of the alternative food systems movement can be seen in the variety of models that have developed. This change in food systems can be seen throughout the Global North, with urban and rural communities gaining access to alternative models, such as farmers markets, more easily. This momentum is often related to a paradigm shift with an increased focus on ‘local’ and ‘sustainable’ within the food system.

The increase in the presence and interest of alternative food systems has generated an increase in literature that focuses on exploring and analyzing what alternative food systems offer, how they compare to the conventional food system, and if they represent the way forward for our food system in a growing, changing world. Understanding the role of alternative food systems in the various existing models (e.g., farmers markets, farm stands, community supported
agriculture, produce auctions, etc.) is critical to creating a food system that will allow us to feed a growing population. This research project sought to follow this branch of the literature, through analyzing and developing an understanding of the role of wholesale produce auctions in communities. A wholesale produce auction is a model whereby produce grown regionally is brought to a centralized location and auctioned off through the process of competitive bidding in order to receive the highest price possible in existing market conditions. This process is intended to generate a market and income for growers (that previously did not exist) and provide buyers with a social opportunity and increased access to high quality food. Through using the case studies of the Elmira Produce Auction Cooperative and the Bruce-Huron Produce Auction, the functionality and practicality of this model can be analyzed and understood in relation to the broader food system. This model has yet to be critically analyzed in existing academic literature.

1.2 Rationale

As alternative food systems (AFSs) have gained popularity in many communities (predominantly in the Global North), many types of ‘alternative’ models have developed. Some examples include farmers markets, community supported agriculture (CSA), urban gardens, community gardens and cooperatives, box programs, and produce auctions (Allen et al., 2003; Canadian Organic Growers, 2007). Each of these AFS models theoretically strives to create a food system that differs from the conventional. There is a focus on creating a more sustainable system that allows food to once again be grounded in the communities where it is grown. In order to determine whether alternatives are capable of delivering the associated benefits (such as improved food quality, rural development and a more sustainable food network) each model needs to be studied individually (Blay-Palmer and Donald, 2006; Jarosz, 2008; Maxey, 2006; Smit and Smithers, 1993). It is important to understand each AFS in order to determine which will be most beneficial in moving towards an overall more sustainable food network. These
various forms of AFSs have been studied by academics to some degree, but more focus has been paid to particularly popular AFS models, such as farmers markets and CSAs (Feenstra, 2001 Guthman, 2008; Hinrichs, 2003; Jarosz, 2008).

Limited academic literature exists on the role of produce auctions in the United States. Existing literature focuses on their ability to promote community involvement and create a new rural market (Blaine et al., 1997; Bloom and Hinrichs, 2011; Gray, 2005; Toute and Gaskell, 2004; Tubene and Hanson, 2002). In Canada, there is even less literature on produce auctions; the minimal research that exists pertains to their role within rural communities (Desjardins et al, 2011; Gingrich and Lightman, 2006; Morin, 2009). This lack of literature limits our ability to implement necessary policies that would increase the use of this model in rural communities. To date, the ability of produce auctions to contribute as an AFS remains poorly understood. This research will advance our understanding of AFSs, more specifically produce auctions, and how participants in this model relate to and evaluate its potential. By further developing our understanding of produce auctions as an AFS it can be determined whether or not they could be a key aspect in changing food systems throughout the world. A further analysis of this model will allow auctions to be evaluated, and determine what the successes and limitations are of this model. This is important for moving forward with expanding the use of AFSs in order to provide consumers with a source of locally grown, fresh produce, and for providing growers with a regional market for their products.

1.3 Research Aim & Objectives

This research was motivated by the following question: How can wholesale produce auctions fulfill the idea that as a distribution model they can help promote the benefits of an AFS? More specifically, this research aspired to document perceptions of buyers and growers of the auction, the feasibility of the auction, as well as the barriers facing the expansion of this
model. There are two research objectives associated with the completed research:

I) To evaluate grower and buyer perceptions of the wholesale produce auction model.

II) To identify barriers to the expansion of produce auctions (based on the Elmira Produce Auction Cooperative and the Bruce-Huron Produce Auction) as potential contributors to the increased sustainability of our food system.

1.4 Thesis Structure

This thesis is written in a manuscript style. An introduction (Chapter 1) provides an outline for the topic, the research rationale and the research aim and objectives. The second chapter, the actual manuscript entitled “Wholesale Produce Auctions: assessing the viability of produce auctions in a changing food economy” explores the results of the research project. It explores the role wholesale produce auctions have in Southern Ontario communities; their ability to deliver the benefits associated with alternative food systems; discusses the barriers that exist to the expansion of this particular model as a potential for creating a more sustainable food system. It contributes to the growing body of literature on alternative food systems and understanding their role in today’s changing food economy. Chapter 3 acts as a conclusion to this thesis through providing an evaluation of the theoretical and practical implications of this research as well as potential future research opportunities that could develop as a result of this research. This chapter finishes with a final reflection on the progression and results of this research. Appendix A provides a more detailed literature review on this research area, with Appendix B providing a more in-depth look at the research design and approach. Appendix C provides interview guides used for this project.
Chapter 2

“Wholesale Produce Auctions: Assessing the Viability of Produce Auctions in a Changing Food Economy”

2.0 Introduction

Over the past ten years, criticisms of mainstream food systems have developed and many point to serious environmental (Harris, 2010), animal welfare (Buller and Morris, 2003), social (Kirwan, 2004), and health problems (Lang, 2001) associated with industrial farming and associated diets. In response, there is a growing call for alternatives that address some of these issues (Renting et al., 2003). Alternative food systems (AFSs) are intended to boast characteristics such as a shortened supply chain, the redevelopment of personal relationships in the food system, increased food quality, and the use of more traditional production methods (Higgins et al., 2008; Lapping, 2004; Milestad et al., 2010; Ostrom, 2009; Renting et al., 2003). Each of these characteristics is intended to provide some value-added aspect to the food system.

One model of an alternative food system that has gained momentum in rural communities throughout North America is the wholesale produce auction. These auctions are believed to be a means of generating a market and income for growers while simultaneously offering buyers social opportunities and access to improved quality of produce.

2.1 Produce Auctions

Produce auctions represent an AFS model that has gained popularity in many rural communities. Produce auctions are intended to act as a distribution outlet for large volumes of goods to the local community (Gray, 2005). Ideal participants at auctions are looking for a model that will allow them to move large volumes of goods. At produce auctions, growers from a
designated region bring their products (e.g., fresh fruit and vegetables) to a centralized location where consumers are present to partake in a competitive bidding process for these goods (Tourte and Gaskell, 2004).

These models generally follow a similar structure, beginning with sourcing produce from within a given region. Farmers within this region bring their produce to a more centralized location where it is displayed for potential buyers. Through allowing the produce to be displayed it provides buyers with the opportunity to evaluate the produce and assess its value, which theoretically would help to drive up the prices during the process of competitive bidding. The process starts as the auctioneer offers up the produce for a price that is based in the previous auctions results (if no one bids on this original price then the auctioneer will start lowering it until someone bids). The quantity of produce being auctioned off depends on the auction itself and what rules they have created. For example, during peak strawberry season, some auctions set a rule of a minimum ten flats per purchase. However, if there is minimal interest they will often change it to be a minimum of three flats. Nevertheless, once bidding commences buyers start offering up slightly higher prices for the produce until it has reached the highest price possible given the existing market conditions (e.g., demand or prices for the same produce through alternative outlets) (Tourte and Gaskell, 2004). Once all of the produce has been auctioned off, buyers go into the office to pay for their goods and then everyone starts to depart once they have loaded up their purchases.

Presently, produce auctions have primarily been studied in the United States (Tubene and Hanson, 2002). They were originally intended to spur economic activity within the horticultural production and marketing systems. The model was particularly appealing to Amish and Mennonite communities as it allowed them to reinforce their community beliefs and bonds while working with their families and maximizing their land use (Blaine et al., 1997). Produce auctions
were also appealing for growers as they provide an effective market that allows for the highest prices possible in existing market conditions, as a result of the competitive bidding process (Tourte and Gaskell, 2004). At the time of their establishment, organizers had hoped that produce auctions would act as a means of overcoming a key barrier faced by many rural growers, a lack of access to buyers (Blaine et al., 1997).

According to some academics, produce auctions are one way to help promote a strong rural economy while simultaneously contributing to the health and social well-being of communities (Desjardins et al., 2011). The recent interest in produce auctions demonstrates the newly formed demand for organic and fresh local food production (Gray, 2005). Produce auctions in theory act as an AFS by re-socializing (linking the growers and buyers directly) and re-spatializing (providing economic returns to the local community and eliminating the ‘middle man’) the food system, which theoretically allows it to become more sustainable, provide higher quality food, and support rural development.

At present, however, there is a lack of research on the functioning of these auctions, with no literature existing on auctions in Canada. In light of this gap, the objectives of this research sought to address the following question: How can wholesale produce auctions fulfill the idea that as a distribution model they can help promote the benefits of an AFS? Ultimately, this research aspired to document perceptions of buyers and growers of the auction, the feasibility of the auction, as well as the barriers facing the expansion of this model. In order to determine this two objectives were used:

I) To evaluate grower and buyer perceptions of the wholesale produce auction model.

II) To identify barriers to the expansion of produce auctions as a potential contributor to the increased sustainability of our food system.
Through these objectives, wholesale produce auctions located in Southern Ontario were assessed with regards to their ability to meet the economic and social needs of buyers and growers in an alternative food system. The two auctions that were used as case studies for this project were the Elmira Produce Auction Cooperative (EPAC) and the Bruce-Huron Produce Auction (BHPA).

2.2 Background

The conventional food system is rife with concerns from both the public and academics across the world. Harris (2010) highlighted the fact that the key issue with the conventional food system is that it is considered to be highly unsustainable. The conventional system has managed to create large quantities of food for our ever-expanding population but with serious repercussions. Many have argued that there is a wide array of repercussions such as the loss of taste and nutritional value of food and the devolution or rural communities (Newman and Ostry, 2008; Smith and Smithers, 1993). The current system is frequently recognized as having a longer supply chain, with the distance between production and consumption of goods lengthened. The long supply chain is associated with complex combinations of upstream and downstream elements, and the development of food chain clusters (Hendrickson and Heffernan, 2002; Ilbery and Maye, 2006). This is particularly problematic, as it has resulted in relatively few individuals being involved in the decision-making process of food resources. These few people are doing the job of what hundreds of independent food firms had previously done, which has ultimately allowed our perceptions of space and time to be altered. North American consumers have become disconnected from food processes, including the places and individuals who grow, harvest, and distribute food, allowing buyers to remain ignorant of issues faced by agriculture (Hendrickson and Heffernan, 2002; Lapping, 2004).

In order to address concerns such as this disconnection between consumers and their food, it is believed that we need a food system that considers more than increased food
production. AFSs have developed as a solution for this demand for a more socially conscious food system. Academics, consumers, and activists alike continuously debate and promote these ‘alternatives’. AFSs are often defined as systems that work against the notion of ‘bulk’ food production and have a commitment to developing sustainable food production and consumption chains (Jarosz, 2008; Whatmore et al., 2003). The existence of AFSs has allowed social interactions to become re-embedded within our food system. They have allowed many cultural ideas and standards, that were lost to the conventional system – ideas and standards that originally premised the legitimacy and stability of relationships within the food system, to begin to flourish once again (Campbell, 2009). This represents just one example of the main unique characteristics provided by an AFS.

2.2.1 Alternative Food Systems

Alternative food systems seek to re-socialize and re-spatialize the food experience for participants (Harris 2010). Through this endeavor many claim that numerous benefits will develop for both the consumers and the growers of food products (Hinrichs, 2003). A re-socialized food system focuses on developing more face-to-face or proximate relationships between growers and buyers (Higgins et al., 2008). These types of relationships allow for consumers to have a direct connection with their produce through picking their own produce or purchasing it directly from the farmer themselves. Through the establishment of these types of relationships trust and authenticity develop for the food system once again. This demonstrates the important role social relations have begun to play in dictating how food systems operate. Previously, the conventional food system allowed very little to interfere with price considerations for food products with prices striving to be as low as possible, a trend described as high marketedness’ (Milestad et al., 2010). The development of re-socialized food systems, or more commonly AFSs, allows for market behaviour to become entrenched one again in social
relations (resulting in low marketedness, where prices reflect the value-added components, such as a relationship between the buyer and the grower that results in prices being higher). Ultimately, the re-socialization of food systems allows for non-price considerations, such as how the food was grown, or a personal relationship with growers to become factors in price determination (Milestad et al., 2010). Many academics feel that understanding the importance of social relationships is fundamental to AFS research (Hinrichs, 2000; Kirwan, 2004; Jarosz, 2008; Mount, 2012).

The second component, re-spatialization of food systems, is the heart of AFSs. AFSs have allowed the long, anonymous supply chain of the conventional food system to become short-circuited, thrusting the notion of ‘short’ into the forefront of food systems (Renting et al., 2003). The existence of an AFS is defined by the presence of shorter distances between production and consumption, small-scale farms, and a food purchasing outlet or the opportunity to purchase produce directly from the source (Jarosz, 2008). A shorter distance between production and consumption is beneficial on all levels: environmentally, socially and economically (Higgins et al., 2008). It results in fewer kilometers traveled by products, which means less emissions, a more direct relationship between growers and buyers, and decreased shipping costs for farmers (Wallgren, 2006). Short has also been described as the process of shortening producer-consumer relations, allowing them to become redefined by the quality and origins of food and by having a more transparent food chain (Renting et al., 2003). Through focusing on relations-of-proximity, or shortened supply chains, there is a belief that social, environmental and economic benefits can occur (Feagan, 2007). For example, according to Renting et al., (2003) the process of shortening the supply chain can also allow farming to become embedded once again with environmentally sustainable productions methods as there is a direct connection with the local environment.
The increased interest in a re-spatialized, or in other terms a local food system, has some academics debating the true meaning of local (Allen et al., 2003). Some academics even feel that consumers have developed an inherent belief that ‘local food’ means fresh and higher quality food (Ostrom, 2009). Nevertheless, the presence of small-scale farms allows growers to partake in more traditional and/or holistic production methods as well as reconnecting growers and buyers (Renting et al., 2003; Sage, 2003). This reconnection results in the need for food purchasing mediums that allow consumers easy access to locally grown produce (Marsden et al., 2000; Renting et al., 2003).

The development of AFSs that possess the qualities of re-socialization and re-spatialization allow for secondary qualities that consumers actively seek to develop. Some of these qualities include improved food quality and rural development. Both of these qualities stem from allowing the food system to become more localized, and develop from the desire for strong social relationships and the opportunity for rural communities to flourish (Blay-Palmer and Donald, 2006; Chiffoleau, 2009; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Harris, 2010; Whatmore et al., 2003). These secondary qualities illustrate the full effect of AFSs. They demonstrate that AFSs can boast more sustainable production methods, the re-integration of community values, community involvement, and price premiums for growers (Kneafsey, 2010; Lapping, 2004; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006; Smit and Smithers, 1993). For a more detailed explanation of AFSs please refer to Appendix A.

Despite AFSs boasting all of these unique characteristics, some academics are concerned about their ability to meet the needs of consumers. Firstly, there is concern about the ability of AFSs to feed a growing population (Bellows and Hamm, 2001). In order for AFSs to deliver the necessary quantities of food they will need to scale-up the operations. However, with this comes some concern about whether AFSs would lose their unique attributes and associated benefits
should they expand in size (Mount, 2012). This represents a hurdle for AFSs as they are unable to effectively feed large numbers of people, and there is no clear understanding about their potential as a larger model.

Secondly, there is concern about issues of convenience associated with AFSs. One such example comes from a research project on consumers and organic food. For many consumers who illustrated a desire to purchase organic food, it was found that the conveniences provided through supermarkets often overshadowed the potential of AFSs to provide organic food to consumers (Padel and Foster, 2005). While exploring consumer motivations for purchasing organic food, the presence of conflicting values, such as the desire to have organically grown food while still seeking a quick shopping experience that requires minimal effort, becomes apparent (Jarosz, 2008; Lockie, 2009; Padel and Foster, 2005). In order to ensure that consumers are indeed purchasing organically grown food they need to research the growers or fully understand the labeling process. However, it has been found that with hectic lives, consumers have less time to research good producers and are drawn to the ease of supermarkets where their options are straightforward (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001). More specifically, that consumer values and the underlying factors that influence their food purchasing intentions, such as convenience, remains unclear (Padel and Foster, 2005). With the surge of interest in AFSs expectations of food systems has increased, for example, buyers seek a market that provides sustainably produced food, the opportunity to understand where and how they produce was grown, as well as support their community (Jarosz, 2008). However, AFSs are also expected to match the expectations of food systems that have developed through exposure to the conventional food system such as convenience, affordability, or accessibility (Mount, 2012). Even with a handful of case studies such as this, the issues surrounding convenience and AFSs remain poorly studied, understood, and articulated within the literature. In order to address these
concerns more research is required to understand specific types of AFSs in order to better assess their ability to meet buyer and grower expectations, as well as to reflect on their potential to contribute to the food security of a growing population.

2.3 Methods

2.3.1 Methodological Approach

To explore the role of produce auctions as a way of promoting the values of alternative food systems, a case study based approach, along with participant interviews, were used to explore two specific produce auctions operating in Ontario, Canada. A case study based approach was appropriate as it allowed for information to be gathered systematically, permitting me to follow the various stages of the auctions. This ultimately allowed for a more complete understanding of the auctions to be generated (Berg and Lune, 2012). The two case studies that were used are the Elmira Produce Auction Cooperative (EPAC) and the Bruce-Huron Produce Auction (BHPA). Through exploring these case studies, I was able to make generalizations that are both appropriate and valuable in expanding our understanding of wholesale produce auctions as an alternative food system and how they relate to society (Flyvberg, 2006).

Participant interviews allowed for data to be generated and used throughout the course of this project. Data generated from this project came primarily in the form of qualitative data generated from interviews with both buyers and growers at the auction. The interviews conducted with buyers and growers were used to delve into perceptions pertaining to the auctions held by participants who frequent it as a distribution outlet. Through using interviews as my main method, and applying content analysis, I was able to access knowledge that previously did not exist in written documents. Through listening to individuals who are closely linked to the study sites, this research generated new knowledge about wholesale produce auctions (Secor,
2010). By interviewing both buyers and growers at the auction, both upstream and downstream benefits and limitations were considered. To see more details on the methodology for this project please refer to Research Approach and Design in Appendix B.

2.3.2 Case Studies

The first case study used was the Elmira Produce Auction Co-operative (EPAC), which is located within Waterloo region. EPAC is located in Elmira, Ontario, which boasts a population of 9,931 (Stats Canada, 2011). The auction itself is located only half an hour from both the City of Waterloo and the City of Guelph. Both these cities have large populations of 98,780 and 121,688 respectively (Stats Canada, 2011). The EPAC auction was established in 2004 with the intention of supporting local farmers through the creation of a new localized market (Foodlink, 2012a). This auction represents the first wholesale produce auction to operate in Ontario, Canada. Traditionally, this region specialized in livestock production. However, the 2003 Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) crisis forced the community to shift their focus to more horticultural production. The auction provides an outlet for the sale of fresh fruit, vegetables, flowers, and hay for both Old Order Mennonites\(^1\) (OOM) as well as non-OOM (Morin, 2009).

The second case study, the Bruce-Huron Produce Auction (BHPA), is located in Holyrood, Ontario. Holyrood, Ontario can be described as a hamlet, rurally situated with one intersection, and a small population (exact demographic information was not accessible). The auction is located at least 30 minutes from denser populations, such as Goderich, and Kincardine with populations of 7,521 and 11,174 respectively (Stats Canada, 2011). The populations that BHPA serves are drastically smaller and more sparsely dispersed compared to that of EPAC.

\(^1\) Old-Order Mennonites immigrated to this region between 1710 and 1756, stemming from the Swiss Mennonites and the Amish communities from Pennsylvania. They can be identified through their simple dress, agrarian lifestyles, limited (if any) use of technology, and the forbidding of motorized vehicles by their own. However, it is important to acknowledge that a spectrum of these beliefs and values exist between locations. For example, EPAC allows telephones to be used (at the auction and within family homes) while the BHPA does not use telephones at all.
This auction was developed in 2010 following the model and structure of EPAC. The auction was created with the intention of providing a localized market for buyers who normally purchase their produce from the Toronto Food Terminal (Radojkovic, 2011). This region has considered agriculture of all types to be essential for local development throughout the years (M., Weijs, personal communication, July 29, 2013).

These two case studies represent the only localized wholesale produce auctions in Ontario. It is also important to note that both auctions are organized and run by the OOM community. It is evident that OOM ideals and values play an essential role in the development of these wholesale produce auctions as an alternative food system. The OOMs felt that the creation of these markets within these two regions would provide local farmers with a more practical outlet for their products, allowing them to maintain their family farms (Radojkovic, 2011). These two auctions are organized and operated with a very similar structure. Both auctions run three times a week during peak season (beginning at 9:00am (EPAC) and 3:00pm (BHPA)). The length of the auction depends on the quantity of produce brought to the auction, ranging from 3-5 hours. The auctions offer minimum lot sizes depending on the time of year. For example, during slower times the auctioneer will declare a minimum purchase of three flats of produce per lot, whereas during peak season the minimum is often ten flats of produce. However, the smaller lot sizes means that the process takes longer to complete. There is no particular order for produce – each session, the auction starts in the same spot and works down the aisles. However, what is in each aisle depends on which growers showed up first with their products. According to auction organizers, 10% of sales are collected from growers in order to address overhead costs of running the auction (however, different participants at the auction articulated different percentages that they paid to the auction). The auctions differed in terms of their size and overall atmosphere. EPAC is open year-round and organizers have decided to use some forms of
technology (e.g., electricity, heat, and telephones). It is also a much larger operation, with larger quantities of produce (as Figure 1 depicts). BHPA on the other hand is only open during the summer and fall, and it withholds from using any form of technology. It is a much smaller and more intimate process that relies heavily on personal connections (Figure 2 displays the BHPA venue).

**Figure 1:** Elmira Produce Auction Cooperative

![Elmira Produce Auction Cooperative](image1)

**Figure 2:** Bruce-Huron Produce Auction

![Bruce-Huron Produce Auction](image2)

### 2.3.3 Data Collection

Participants for interviews were selected through the type of produce they purchased or sold through the auction. For the project, it was decided to focus solely on strawberry growers and buyers (although they frequently were purchasing or growing other types of produce) in order to streamline potential participants. The participants of the auctions are a mix of growers...
and buyers who occasionally fall into both\textsuperscript{ii} categories. There are a number of buyers who return for each auction, while others come once a week or less, only attending as their need for produce develops. A large portion of buyers would classify themselves as wholesale\textsuperscript{iii} buyers – having the intent to re-distribute the produce after the auction. However, there is tension at the auctions between wholesale buyers and retail buyers (individuals who are purchasing for their own consumption). The growers, on the other hand, are less consistent. There are some growers who bring their produce to the auction faithfully, but the majority brings only their surplus produce that they cannot sell through their own business, due to lack of consumers or as a result of sheer quantity.

While there is a wide variety of produce grown in both regions, the decision to focus on strawberries was based on two reasons. Firstly, they were seasonally available (both grown and sold) during the time frame for this project (Foodlink, 2012b). Secondly, given the amount of time available for the research, only one type of produce could realistically be evaluated in relation to the auctions. Therefore, strawberries in this project are representative of a larger category of products (seasonally available & locally grown produce) that will hopefully allow results to be applicable to more than just strawberries. Once initial strawberry growers were identified, a snowballing technique was implemented in order to locate other interviewees. The buyers were identified solely based on whether or not they were purchasing strawberries. In the end, 48 interview participants were identified, and the breakdown between categories (such as buyer and grower) can be seen in the table below. The number of participants was capped when saturation had been achieved and no new information was arising (Guest et al., 2006).

\textsuperscript{ii} Participants who utilized the auction as both a buyer and a grower were categorized as the position in which they were interviewed. For example, if initial contact was made with the participant because they purchased strawberries, they were slotted as a buyer even if they also use the auction as a grower for their own produce.

\textsuperscript{iii} Wholesale buyers at the auction purchase produce with the intention of reselling it at a secondary location to their own buyers (e.g., at a farmers market or farm stand). Wholesale buyers are usually looking for large quantities of produce (10 or more flats). A retail buyer on the other hand purchases produce for his or her own consumption and is usually seeking a smaller quantity of produce (1 – 3 flats of produce).
Table 1: Participant Breakdown

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Buyer</th>
<th>Grower</th>
<th>Old Order Mennonite</th>
<th>Non-Old Order Mennonite</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EPAC</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BHPA</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.3.4 Data Analysis

In order to analyze the qualitative data, grounded theory and content analysis were used. Grounded theory allowed me to develop a hypothesis gradually. The first study site, EPAC, was approached with an open mind that allowed for a wide range of information to be gathered (initially interview guides can be found in Appendix C). This process allowed for the second site, the BHPA, to be approached with more direct questions (Birks and Mills, 2011). Content analysis was used to analyze interview responses, allowing me to determine what the common ideas were among participants. This allowed me to make extrapolations from the interview data pertaining to the role of produce auctions. This also allowed me to determine the frequency at which various perceptions about produce auctions occurred throughout the course of the interviews (Krippendorff, 2012). These two types of analysis ultimately allowed me to discover and explore perceptions that buyers and growers hold about the study sites. Qualitative software was used to electronically code and group themes within the interviews. From these themes, categories were established that allowed for a hypothesis to be created that pertained to the role of the wholesale produce auctions as an alternative food system.
2.4 Results: Perceived Benefits of Wholesale Produce Auctions

Overall, and when both buyer and seller interviews were included from both case studies, the analysis revealed four broad themes that represent the key contributions (or benefits) that respondents perceive the produce auctions as offering. These themes are:

• Increased food quality – participants perceive that they are receiving higher quality food from the produce auctions, compared to other food outlets.

• The development of a buyer-grower relationship – it is believed that a relationship is able to develop between these groups allowing for trust to be built between buyers and growers.

• Supporting the community – interviewees believed that the auctions offered a means of supporting community development.

• Economic opportunities – it was perceived by participants that the auctions offer economic opportunities that previously did not exist for many growers.

These themes are summarized in Table 2, which also presents an illustrative quote and gives a breakdown of the relative importance placed to each theme by buyers and growers in the two auctions. Each of these themes will now be explored in more detail.

Table 2: Perceived Benefits of Produce Auctions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Food Quality</th>
<th>Development of Relationships</th>
<th>Support the Community</th>
<th>Economic Benefits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#&lt;sup&gt;i&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>%&lt;sup&gt;i&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPAC Buyer</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grower</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BHPA Buyer</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grower</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.4.1 Food Quality

Participants identified that they felt they received higher quality products when they purchased through the produce auctions. As noted in Table 2.0, this theme was only apparent in comments made by buyers and was not mentioned by growers. Possible reasons for this discrepancy will be explored in the discussion. Furthermore, this theme was mentioned a similar amount of times in both of the case studies. Generally, responses mirrored the following quote,

*Sometimes we pay more than we would normally have to, but we’re willing to do that because we want to support the producer and we want high quality produce* (Buyer, EPAC).

Despite feeling that they are getting better quality produce, the majority of participants did not expand on why they felt this produce from the auction was better. There was only one (1) individual that expanded on why they felt these strawberries were of higher quality than others. The interviewee stated that,

*We only buy at the auction because we wanted to support the auction, and because the berries are of higher quality. They’re not small and seedy like at a lot of other places* (Buyer, BHPA).

The lack of further explanation pertaining to food quality could potentially indicate an assumption about locally grown food and higher quality produce. Much like the academic literature suggests, there is an association with the development of an AFS that allows people to perceive freshness and higher quality. According to many academics, the presence of higher quality produce represents one of the distinct characteristics correlated with the presence of AFS (Goodman, 2003; Jarosz, 2008; Smith and Morton, 2009). This could explain why many participants who mentioned food quality as a benefit did not expand on this point. Buyers at the produce auction could inherently believe that by shifting away from the conventional food system they are shifting themselves away from produce that is grown with an array of pesticides.
or herbicides, which have unknown health effects (Jarosz, 2008; Renting et al., 2003).

Nevertheless, buyers at the auction feel they are receiving higher quality food, which demonstrates that these produce auctions offer this associated AFS benefit.

2.4.2 Development of a Buyer/Grower Relationship

At the heart of AFSs, there is a strong focus on the social components, more specifically the re-socialization of the food system (Feenstra, 2002; Hinrichs, 2003; Renting et al., 2003; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006). Participants identified that produce auctions allow for the generation of a stronger relationship between buyers and growers. The presence of this relationship was acknowledged by 54% (26/48) of participants. In Table 2.0 it can be seen that the perception of the development of a buyer-grower relationship was mentioned a similar amount across the buyer grower division, as well as between both locations. Both groups are comforted by the fact that they are able to communicate with one another, as was articulated in the following quote:

*You get a closer connection between buyers and growers than you would if you were buying from a wholesaler. I think that the growers and the buyers can talk to each other more so than they could at any other place where people bring their produce* (Grower, EPAC).

Through this communication at the auctions a certain level of friendship and loyalty develops. The system allows buyers to perceive a feeling of accountability towards the growers. This was articulated well when one interviewee stated that:

*They [the produce auction] have their own regulatory system and it just happens to be the buyers. You take your cues from them, they have been stung before, they know who to buy from* (Buyer, BHPA).
On the other hand, the growers feel that if they have a strong relationship with the buyer they will be able to get more consistently good prices for their produce. This was expressed on several occasions in a similar fashion to this quote:

*If I went to the auction every week, they [the buyers] would get to know me, and I would get more money for my produce. The more consistent sellers get higher prices for their produce* (Grower, EPAC).

As much of the AFS literature explores, the development of this relationship allows the food system to become ‘grounded’ once again, which results in low marketedness, which ultimately results in a price premium being offered for produce (Milestad et al., 2010). The structure of produce auctions allows for this type of relationship to develop. The growers themselves (or a close family member) bring the produce to the auction and stick around until the end. This provides buyers with the chance to approach growers and ask questions about the produce, and to get to know the growers. The produce auctions are offering the opportunity for the reconnection between buyers and growers to develop, which is again, a key component of an AFS. The re-socialization of the food system allows other factors to begin impacting the price of food, shifting away from the race to the bottom (having the lowest priced produce, with little regard for production impacts) that consumes the conventional food system.

2.4.3 Supporting the Community

Participants also discussed that the produce auctions offer a means of supporting the community. The idea of supporting the community was well represented across each of the various groups, as can be seen in Table 2.0. This theme was frequently mentioned in passing, with statements similar to the following:
The main reason I go to the auction is to support the community (Buyer, EPAC).

Supporting the community is 100% important [when reflecting on if it is important for the auction to support the community] (Grower, EPAC).

When participants explained further, they stated that the auction provided a means for the OOM community to generate income, as well as maintain their lifestyle. This was best explained when an interviewee said:

The auction helps us [the OOM] to preserve our lifestyle a bit better. We don’t like to use the phone more than we have to, and we don’t have to use it at all with the auction, but we do have to use it if we want to sell directly to the consumer (Grower, BHPA).

Similar to higher food quality, the idea of supporting the community rarely came with any further explanation although it was often acknowledged. Supporting the community could represent another theme that is inherently associated with AFSs, where participants believe that by purchasing their food locally they are in turn supporting their local community. The notion of supporting the community is rooted deeply in what AFSs try to offer (Bellows and Hamm, 2001; Feenstra, 2002). Given its importance, it should be discussed by more than 46% of participants. This could demonstrate that the auctions’ ability to support the community is limited, and that there are only select individuals who are truly benefiting from the auction. However, when prompted more specifically about whether the auctions support the community, participants responded positively, indicating that they felt it was of utmost importance. This reveals that the auctions ability to support the community is not forefront in their minds but is indeed something that the auction offers. Nevertheless, the fact that the produce auctions are believed to support the community demonstrates that produce auctions offer this component of what is meant by an AFS. These participants identified that they felt the auction was generating support for the community while re-connecting the buyers and the growers – something that is essential to the development of a successful AFS.
2.4.4 Economic Benefits & Opportunities

The ability of auctions to offer economic benefits and opportunities for participants by increasing rural markets that provide an outlet for local growers was mentioned by 71% (34/48) of participants. The distribution of times that this theme was discussed is demonstrated in Table 2.0. The distribution between locations was relatively similar with this theme. However, the growers mentioned economic opportunities more than the buyers. This divergence will be explored further in the discussion section. Produce auctions have increased the availability of rural markets for the OOM community, as well as for other farmers. Prior to the development of the produce auctions, many of these farmers were forced to sell produce off their land, either through farm stand or hosting pick-your-own farms, or they struggled to find potential buyers who would need produce on a reliable basis. More specifically, the auctions create the opportunity for the OOMs to generate income without having the public on their land throughout the day. This can be seen as a benefit for two reasons: a) it allows them to regain some privacy in their own lives, and b) it means that they personally, or a hired person no longer have to be constantly at a farm stand. This form of benefit was best articulated when one participant stated:

Some of these growers couldn’t move the volume direct to the consumer even if they wanted to and they are not necessarily interested in having the public in their yard every day, all day. So this [the auction] gives them the option of getting some of that extra revenue without the headache of opening a farm market or going direct to the consumer (Buyer, EPAC).

This new market also allows farmers access to an overflow or supplementation tool for when their own crops are producing higher or lower yields. For some, the auction allows farmers to sell their excess produce before it goes bad, while for others, who only grow a few select crops, it allows them to provide more variety to their own consumers. This brings to light the fact that the auction provides a dualistic opportunity for farmers who also happen to be buyers – those who have opened a farm stand on their property or have a store off their property. This
type of benefit is best demonstrated with the following quote:

*The auction is a good place to go with your farm surplus, and it’s a good place to go if you need a bit more produce when you don’t have enough for your farm stand. The auction is really good because it means that you don’t have to let your produce go to waste, rather, you can sell it* (Grower, EPAC).

Lastly, the increase in rural markets allows participants to benefit economically from supporting local community. It provides participants with the opportunity to receive higher prices from the secondary customers (as they are wholesale buyers at the auction). This is best represented when a respondent stated:

*I always advertise where I get my produce from – customers like to know that it’s local food* (Buyer, EPAC).

*People ask me (the vendor) questions, so I like to be able to tell them the truth that the food is either local, or very freshly picked. This is such a different system from the one in California where food has to travel for many days* (Buyer, EPAC).

For them, it is supplying their customers with the answers they want when it comes to the food they consume. For wholesale buyers, having the ability to boast locally grown produce is increasingly important in North America where AFSs have gained such momentum and low marketedness has become increasingly important to consumers (Milestad et al., 2010).

**2.5 Results: Perceived Limitations of Wholesale Produce Auctions**

Further analysis of results revealed that buyers and growers from both locations described four broad themes that represent key limitations of the produce auctions. These themes are:

- **Consistency** – participants often described inconsistency of products as a major limitation along with price volatility that made auctions difficult to rely on.
- **Accessibility** – the auctions were seen as being inaccessible both physically, and in terms of time consumption. Other venues are perceived as offering a much more accessible set up.
• Costliness – prices at the auctions were described as being costly and expensive compared to other outlets.

• Minimal Returns – participants described the auctions as not being a model, which a farmer could depend on for income generation in order to survive.

Each of these themes are summarized in Table 3, which also provides an illustrative quote and gives a breakdown of relative importance of each theme by buyers and growers at each location. Each of these themes will now be explored in more detail.

### Table 3: Perceived Limitations of Produce Auctions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Consistency</th>
<th>Accessibility</th>
<th>Costliness</th>
<th>Minimal Returns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#(^{iv})</td>
<td>%(^{v})</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EPAC</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buyer</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grower</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BHPA</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buyer</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grower</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{iv}\) Number of respondents who mentioned this theme

\(^{v}\) Percentage of respondents who mentioned this theme

#### 2.5.1 Consistency

Participants frequently identified inconsistency at the auction as a limitation. The inconsistency referred to two areas: product availability, and price volatility. As Table 3.0 demonstrates, the most predominant groups that discussed this theme were buyers and participants from the EPAC location. Possible reasons for this discrepancy will be explored in the discussion section. The issue of product availability and price volatility was best articulated when one participant stated:
...you could never run your business only on this place [the auction] because of the volume. You need something and there is only two boxes of it here, that is what kills the thing. If you go to the food terminal there are all kinds of Ontario guys there too. You need something, the price is set, forget about the volume, it is always there (Buyer, EPAC).

For buyers at the auction, there are alternative options that offer regional produce, and are able to provide the quantities they need at a set price. However, it is imperative for buyers to remember that farmers are dependent on the weather - there is no way to control the weather and therefore no way to control what is able to grow (in terms of variety and quantity). In the summer of 2013, it was wetter and warmer than normal during strawberry season. This resulted in the strawberries ripening early and flooding the market at the auctions. Both buyers and growers spoke to this issue, as the following quotes demonstrate. One grower stated that:

…we sold 6 flats there, 36 quarts, because the heat on the Sunday just flipped them all to red. The market was flooded that week, and the price for the berries was very low because everyone had that problem (Grower, EPAC).

While one of the buyers said:

*It is either one or the other, the auction is either flooded with something (such as tomatoes) or has none at all* (Buyer, EPAC).

This problem is magnified since the auction operates as an overflow mechanism for some farmers. As the weather turned, strawberry farmers were faced with high volumes of strawberries that they were unable to sell through their regular outlets, forcing them to sell the excess through the auction.

Price volatility represented an inconvenience for both buyers and growers at the auction. In order for the auction to be successful, the prices need to be fair for both parties. However, the prices at the auction currently are not consistently in a good range for either group causing both groups to look for alternative arrangements. This trend undermines the stability of the auction –
pulling participants away, participants who are necessary for the existence of the auctions. Often, participants spoke of the prices at the auction in similar ways to the following:

*The market [farmers market] price is fairly steady, whereas the auction is very volatile* (Grower, EPAC).

*The price at the auction is not very consistent, but the prices from the restaurants are always dependable* (Grower, EPAC).

Overall, the auction was believed to have:

… *the most inconsistent prices that you’ll find anywhere* (Buyer, EPAC).

2.5.2 Accessibility

The issue of accessibility was another barrier that was discussed by both types of participants. Both buyers and growers mentioned this theme equally, as Table 3.0 demonstrates. However, there was a slight discrepancy in locations, as participants from EPAC mentioned this theme more than those at BHPA. Potential explanations for this difference are explored in the discussion section. Accessibility is essential at auctions as they are run by the OOM community and are intended to move large volumes of produce. The issue of accessibility was mentioned with regards to physical accessibility as well as in regards to time consumption (e.g., if the auction gets too long it becomes less accessible for certain types of participants). Some participants felt that the auction was too far physically from their farms and that having more auctions spread throughout Southern Ontario would be useful. The issue of distance was particularly problematic for some of the OOM community who use the auction as an outlet for their produce as they rely on horse and buggy in order to participate in the auctions. This was best articulated when one interviewee stated:

*The auction is a little bit further away than I would like it to be. It takes a good chunk out of the day to get there and drop off the produce* (Grower, EPAC).
Secondly, there was the issue of time consumption that made the auctions less accessible. It was often mentioned in a similar fashion to the following quote:

In terms of time, it can already take too long to get through the auction. Not everyone can wait around all day for it to finish. The big buyers tend to get impatient, but it’s fine for me (Grower, EPAC).

But overall, the general feeling of this theme is best summarized by this quote:

...no restaurant guy is going to spend three hours here hoping to get what he needs (Buyer, EPAC).

These participants felt that the auction was too time-consuming, which was frustrating and deterred them from frequenting the auction more. For many buyers, there is more time and effort required to purchase through the auction compared to other wholesale distributors where buyers can submit their orders online, or over the telephone.

2.5.3 Costliness

It was often discussed by auction participants that despite offering economic opportunities, the produce was often expensive. A total of 29% (14/48) of participants had concerns about the high prices for produce sold through the auction. As Table 3.0 illustrates, this theme was particularly apparent in comments made by buyers, and only mentioned minimally by growers. Likewise, it was mentioned in comments from BHPA participants more frequently than EPAC, which could be explained as a result of large buyers, who are able and willing to commute long distances for the produce, causing prices to be higher for local participants. For many participants, the presence of retail buyers was the cause of high prices, as they are purchasing for themselves and have no concern with resale value or whether they are able to make a profit. For these individuals, the fact that the auction tries to tailor to two types of buyers (wholesale and retail), despite its reputation for being a wholesale outlet, is problematic.
Many participants expressed similar feelings as the following quote:

_The auction attracts both wholesalers and retailers, and it’s very hard to compete with retailers because they’ll pay anything to get the produce_ (Buyer, BHPA).

It is important to reflect on the two types of buyers present at the auction – those who purchase for their own consumption (retail), and those who are purchasing in order to resell the produce to their own customers at a secondary location (wholesale). The individuals who were perceived as retail buyers were frequently looking for small lots sizes, usually three flats or less. Wholesale buyers on the other hand are looking for much larger quantities, as much as ten flats per type of produce. It is the belief of the wholesale buyers that the retail buyers drive up the overall price for produce, as they are not concerned with generating a profit. The following quote best articulates this theme:

_City people will pay more for produce, so I have to compete with them when I’m buying at the auction, but my customers will get upset if I charge too much. This means I can’t pay too much at the auction_ (Buyer, BHPA).

The fact that participants feel the auctions is expensive limits the auctions’ role as an AFS as community members are not able to benefit through this rural market. In this sense, the produce auctions are not successfully acting as AFSs. The high prices deter buyers from returning to the auctions regularly. High prices (as well as the inconsistent prices mentioned earlier) make it difficult for buyers to prepare their budgets beforehand. This is difficult for buyers who rely on this produce for their own businesses. However, the high prices are most likely more concerning for wholesale buyers since the higher prices directly translate to their potential customers. Customers could be dissuaded from purchasing produce from them in the future if their prices are too high. Retail buyers are already paying out of pocket, with no concern for prices afterwards, allowing them more room in terms of how much they are willing to pay.
2.5.4 Minimal Returns

Lastly, it was identified by 21% (10/48) of participants that the auction does not provide enough income for growers to sustain themselves. This theme was particularly apparent in comments made by growers, as is demonstrated in Table 3.0. Also, participants from EPAC more frequently articulated the theme. This could potentially be explained as a result of EPAC being close to dense populations and large cities, which would have higher living costs compared to the rural location of BHPA. Participants who mentioned this theme spoke similarly to the following quote:

*If farmers were to rely on only the auction, it would not support them or the community* (Buyer, EPAC).

For many of the growers who mentioned this theme, it was openly acknowledged that selling produce off their land was more profitable, either through ‘pick your own’ venues or farm stands:

*I tend to get lower prices for my strawberries at the auction than I would get at home* (Grower, EPAC).

As was mentioned before, this is compounded by the fact that growers pay a portion of their profit to the auction:

*I think it is a good tool [the auction], but it takes 4% commission off everything that is sold, so that takes away a fair profit from the growers* (Grower, EPAC).

The reduction of profit through commission at the auction is compounded by the fact that the auction is a wholesale model. This means that the buyers who attend the auction are looking for cheaper produce in larger quantities – much like when people buy things in bulk in order to gain a discount. The target audience of wholesale buyers indicates that the prices will be lower, and this is what the buyers are seeking. Despite the previous theme (of produce being too
expensive) the cost of strawberries sold through the auction were actually less than alternatives.

The overall prices from the auction for strawberries were compared to other potential distribution outlets and were found to be lower than alternatives. However, it must be acknowledged that some of these alternative outlets are wholesale outlets, which have higher prices in order to make a profit (they may have even purchased strawberries through the auction throughout the summer). Throughout the duration of the project, strawberries were always sold for less at the auction (with the exception of the Rock Garden Farm during the week of June 10\textsuperscript{th}, 2013). Figure 3 demonstrates the differences in prices between these various outlets, which were located close to EPAC. The different types of outlets include a grocery store, a farm stand, as well as a ‘pick your own’ farm. These alternative strawberry suppliers were contacted and their prices for a quart of strawberries were recorded. This data was used to contrast the average price for a quart of strawberries sold through EPAC. For the most part, the cost per quart of strawberries sold through EPAC is substantially lower than alternative distribution models, which demonstrates that the auction model is not providing the price premiums AFSs are thought to offer growers.

**Figure 3:** Price Comparison for Strawberries Sold within the EPAC Region

![Price Comparison for Strawberries](image)
2.6 Discussion

Wholesale produce auctions are able to offer the unique characteristics and benefits associated with AFSs. However, there are many barriers that face this particular model, barriers that limit its ability to become a prominent contributor to creating a more sustainable food system. This discussion will be broken down into two sections. Section One will discuss the various barriers that are currently limiting this model's ability to scale-up. The second section will highlight and discuss why this model will likely remain in its current state (as a unique outlet that acts mostly as a re-socialization tool), as a result of convenience issues.

2.6.1 Section 1: What are the Barriers to this Model?

When we step away from the details of the results generated from this research, there are four barriers that appear to be understood by participants as preventing this model from reaching its full potential. Each of these barriers is represented in Table 4, which provides an explanation, as well as an illustrative quote pulled from the interviews.
Firstly, despite buyers feeling that they receive higher quality produce (a theme that was only mentioned by buyers, potentially as a result of growers consuming their own and other locally grown food throughout their lives) it is believed that the lack of consistent volumes and types of produce deters buyers from the auctions. It was frequently mentioned by participants that the big buyers, such as chefs, are deterred from the auctions because there are more accessible outlets that offer more consistent supplies.
Secondly, the breakdown in communication has resulted in an inherent issue with the model. Without communication there are no clear, agreed upon goals or ideals for what the auction tries to accomplish, causing the expectations and realities of both parties to differ. Buyers at the auction are unable to contact the auction, causing them to feel insecure as they are unsure if they auction has the produce they need. Without knowing what is available many buyers run a risk by waiting to find out what is available and they may end up without the products they need. Currently, buyers feel disconnected from the auction and therefore create unrealistic expectations for what the auctions *should* offer. Improved communication will allow a greater chance for an understanding to develop between buyers, growers and the auctions.

Thirdly, despite growers frequently mentioning that the auctions provided an economic opportunity (which could be explained as a result of the target audience being old-order Mennonites who did not have access to a market prior to the development of the auctions), this model is limited through poor organization. This is particularly relevant with the wholesale/retail debate, as having these two groups together creates a more time-consuming event (adding upwards of three hours to the auction process). For larger buyers, purchasing over the telephone or Internet is much easier. As it operates currently, the auction model inadequately serves both groups.

Lastly, each of the previous barriers contributes to a lack of participants. Through addressing each of these previous barriers, the auctions would be able to expand and accumulate more buyers. The presence of more buyers would allow the process of competitive bidding to excel and achieve higher prices. High prices would peak the interest of growers, which would result in more produce, ultimately creating a cyclical relationship between buyers and growers. However, currently this relationship is not flourishing, and there are economic limitations that create a lack of participants. Each of these barriers would need to be overcome in order for this
particular model to expand. These barriers cause the auctions to be highly inconvenient, which ultimately limits the future of this model, as there are other AFSs that are more convenient for buyers and growers.

2.7.2 Section 2: Reflecting on the Convenience of Wholesale Produce Auctions

When the results presented here are seen in light of the AFSs literature that talks about re-socialization and re-spatialization, there is one key tension that emerges: convenience. Common themes throughout all of the interviews presented above suggest that to a large extent participants, by whom we mean both buyers and growers, are motivated by convenience. For producers, this is the convenience of the ease of which they are able to sell their produce as well as their ability to receive price premiums that act as their livelihood source. While for consumers this is the convenience of accessibility and availability of the products that they require. Despite the optimistic claims contained within AFSs literature that institutions such as wholesale produce auctions hold the potential for a great reform of our food system, it has to be acknowledged that in many ways the AFS is simply less convenient than the conventional food system.

This demonstrates that we may be faced with a pervasive dilemma. In particular, one of the perceived benefits of the produce auction was that it provides an opportunity to build buyer and grower relationships as well as the opportunity to support the community. The importance of reconnecting people to their food system and developing face-to-face interactions is abundantly demonstrated in the quotations cited above. But this contradicts the idea that our food system should be convenient. Convenience is defined within psychology literature as something that can be done with reduced effort, and in relation to food it reflects consumers being able to save or reduce the effort required to eat, whether it be reduced time or lessened mental and physical effort exerted (Scholderer and Grunert, 2005). In fact, time pressures have been articulated as representing one of the key factors influencing what consumer’s purchase. As consumer
lifestyles continue to be increasingly hectic their ability to invest more time in making ethical, or social responsible purchases, decreases and the desire for convenient purchasing outlets increases (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001).

It must be acknowledged that consumer’s purchasing decisions are driven by their personal values, moral norms, internal ethics and other such ideas (Carrington et al., 2010). However, if convenience means low cost, predictability, and diverse products along with geographical ease of access, then the goals of convenience and the goals of re-socialization are at odds with one another. Research has suggested that despite increasing numbers of consumers having absorbed and are being motivated by values that are rooted in social and environmental consciousness, their actual behaviour does not demonstrate the same trends (Carrington et al., 2010). A previous research study demonstrated that most consumers paid little to no attention to social attributes, such as the many qualities supplied by AFSs, when making their purchasing decisions (Carrigan and Attalla, 2001). A second, more recent study found that despite 30% of consumers stating that they would purchase more responsibly, with consideration for social and environmental impacts, only 3% followed through (Carrington et al., 2010). Therefore, as long as consumers prioritize convenience over the other benefits, the alternative food movement, and organizations such as wholesale produce auctions will forever be relegated to the margins and be unable to reach the necessary scale at which the proponents of such models believe they need to attain.

Acknowledging this conundrum is essential to moving forward with the development of strong AFSs. If consumers are struggling to utilize food systems such as wholesale produce auctions, or to choose the social and/or environmental benefits of an AFS as has been documented, it is even less likely that they will choose an AFS over a grocery store as a result of the inconveniences demonstrated in this research. In order to address this issue changes need to
be made that would all this model to increase the conveniences it offers. In order to achieve this, here are some potential modifications for the wholesale produce auction model. Firstly, there could be better partnering between produce auctions and large institutions (such as hospitals or universities) may help address some of these issues. In this case, positioning the auctions adjacent to these institutions may be one conceivable means of addressing convenience and re-socialization simultaneously. Diminishing the distance between buyers and growers may allow for more participants to utilize this model of AFS. A second opportunity would be the integration of technology in order to increase the ease of communication between the auctions and its participants. This could be in the form of an online auction that would allow buyers to access information necessary to attain the produce they desire while still sourcing their products from a local grower. Or, the solution could stem from developing more leniencies within supermarkets to purchase local food. Allowing supermarkets to increase the amount of produce they are allowed to source from local buyers would open up the number of large-institution buyers that are seeking wholesale volumes of produce\textsuperscript{vi}. Through implementing one, or a combination of these policy goals, the wholesale produce auction model would be able to increase its participants, and by extension increase the amount of local food being consumed. If buyers were able to demonstrate interest and a commitment to the auctions, the likelihood of growers committing and supplying increased volumes of produce would be improved, which would allow the wholesale produce auction model to begin to make an impact.

\textbf{2.7.0 – Conclusion}

In the end, it is apparent that wholesale produce auctions offer many of the characteristics that AFSs are intend to deliver to buyers and growers. The two case studies used in this project

\textsuperscript{vi} Grocer store owners interviewed during this research articulated that as part of their contract with produce suppliers that had to use a given amount of produce from their warehouse through their contracted supplier.
demonstrate that buyers believe they are receiving a higher quality product than food purchased through more conventional routes. Secondly, produce auctions provide a means of reconnecting the growers and the buyers by creating the opportunity for a relationship to flourish. Additionally, the auctions provide an economic opportunity to both parties as well, through the creation of a localized market for buying and selling produce. Lastly, they help to support the community where the auctions are drawing produce from, allowing for this model to function as a rural development component. However, despite all of these benefits, there were some limitations that participants regularly discussed. For both buyers and growers, the auctions often lacked convenience, which was a prominent limitation as the auctions were initially intended for wholesale businesses that are looking for a ready supply of produce. This limitation was augmented by the fact that the auctions were often found to be inaccessible. Lastly, despite participants mentioning that the auctions provide an economic opportunity for both buyers and growers, they also mentioned, contradictorily, that the produce was too expensive and that it did not provide enough returns to be a reliable business avenue for growers.

Therefore, despite demonstrating many of the qualities that AFSs are expected to deliver, the wholesale produce auction model is limited in how thoroughly it can deliver these; auctions lack convenience, which has been demonstrated through this research as being a key motivator for buyers and growers when selecting a food system. For many participants, the auctions merely represent a unique way to purchase locally grown food and support the community, clearly providing the opportunity for re-socialization to occur. However, for other participants the benefits of re-socialization is overshadowed by the need for improvements to this particular model before it can contribute significantly as part of their food system. More specifically, the desire to participate in a more social and/or environmentally conscious system is outweighed by the desire for convenience that is expected by many buyers. If the auctions hope to increase their
presence, there are some barriers that need to be overcome. Firstly, there is a need to improve consistency for both groups in order to make the auctions a more useable model of AFSs. Secondly, there needs to be more communication between the auction and those who use it as a purchasing or selling outlet. Currently, there is a disconnect between the type of buyers interested in purchasing and what the auctions have to offer, leading to the need for improved operational organization. However, as was mentioned previously, this research highlighted a bigger dilemma: the need to balance the desire for AFSs characteristics with the need for convenience that drives much of society. Without address these conflicting values within AFSs, particularly wholesale produce auctions, they remain limited in their ability to deliver high quality food to consumers. As it stands, the wholesale produce auction model in Southern Ontario exists as a unique way of selling and purchasing local produce, where re-socialization is able to flourish but is limited by issues of convenience. Therefore, the wholesale produce auction model is not a key component of feeding a growing population.
Chapter 3

Conclusion

3.1 Scholarly Implications

This study provides some key scholarly contributions. It confirmed that the model of wholesale produce auctions promotes the benefits of an AFS – primarily through re-socializing and re-spatializing the food system. Through this, the auctions are able to provide high quality food, and contribute to the development of the communities in which they exist. However, the research also exposed some limitations and barriers that exist to this model as a potential key contributor to feeding a growing population. Limitations included inconsistency, issues of accessibility, expensive produce, and that it does not provide enough financial returns to growers for them to persist. However, the overall sense was that the auction potentially provides more value to the community in its current state than it would should it overcome existing barriers. For example, if this particular model, as operated by the Old Order Mennonite community, were to scale up it may deteriorate its ability to deliver some benefits such as the development of relationships between buyers and growers. This connection may be lost if produce was being pulled from a larger region and people had less time to interact with one another. The research also indicated that this model is perceived as being an important part of the community that participants enjoy, despite its drawbacks.

This study provided a comprehensive analysis of wholesale produce auctions, through incorporating both the growers’ and the buyers’ perceptions of this particular model. This research focused on revealing perceptions, more specifically the benefits and limitations as well as a series of barriers (that are rooted in perception and practice) that challenge and limit the
ability of auctions to deliver the benefits of an AFS. On a broader scale, this research demonstrated that there might be contentions with the idea of an AFS when addressing buyers who are seeking to purchase their produce wholesale. The unique characteristics that are associated and sought out with the existence of an AFS may actually result in the limitations that hinder this model from playing a larger role in creating a more sustainable food system in the future.

Through this analysis, the wholesale produce auction model is assessed in terms of its viability as an AFS, with benefits and potential improvements highlighted. A manuscript (Chapter 2) contributes to the local food and AFS literature. It provides a much needed, modern analysis of this model. Furthermore, this research sought to fill a scholarly gap in existing literature that has yet to address the role of wholesale produce auctions in a Canadian context, or develop a comprehensive analysis of the ability of this model to deliver AFS benefits while contributing to communities as a viable model for production and consumption. This research also generated two clear case studies that articulate this relationship, while laying the groundwork for future research on wholesale produce auctions.

3.2 Practical Implications

The practical implications generated from this study pertain primarily to determining the future role that the auction model poses as an AFS in the Canadian context. This research generated and articulated what the auctions currently provide to their respective communities and what the limitations of this model are for both buyers and growers at the auctions. It provided a realistic assessment of what is needed in order for this model to increase in presence, and for it to play a more prominent role in the AFS movement. In the end, it was determined that although this model does produce and deliver many of the associated benefits of an AFS to both buyers and growers, it is limited to social benefits primarily. Economically speaking, the model is
currently limited by a range of inconsistencies. This information will be written in a report and delivered to the auction organizers, allowing them to access and use the information as they see fit. The report will allow auction participants to understand the role that the auction currently plays within their community, and determine when moving forward how they would like it to contribute in the future. Despite an interest from academics and activists alike about the environmental benefits of AFSs, this was not a theme that participants of these study sites mentioned. Nevertheless, this research laid the groundwork for future research into the possibilities of this model.

3.3 Future Research Opportunities

In the future there are many avenues in which this research could be continued. Firstly, spending an increased amount of time at the auctions would allow for a large dataset to be collected. This, combined with the researcher using participant observation, and partaking in the auction process to increase their understanding/perceptions of the auction model, would allow for a greater understanding of the role that the auction plays in the mind of participants. By embedding themselves within the community, the researcher would be able to gain a more intimate understanding of the process that occurs throughout the auction.

Secondly, it would be relevant to compare the auctions in the United States to those in Canada to determine how they differ. Many participants of the study sites alluded to the fact that the wholesale produce auctions in the United States function at a much larger scale, and are able to successfully address many of the limitations and barriers that exist in the Canadian context. Through comparing their similarities and differences, it would become clear why the United States wholesale auction model appears to be more successful economically, and whether it has been able to maintain the social benefits that are associated with AFSs.
A third avenue for potential future research is comparing and contrasting the Toronto Food Terminal with these wholesale produce auctions. The food terminal provides a similar structure – offering large volumes of produce to buyers. However, this model does not guarantee locally grown, fresh produce. This was one alternative form of purchasing outlet that many participants mentioned when discussing the limitations of the two case studies. It would be beneficial to examine how these two models, which operate on a similar basis, operate and what components buyers enjoy, as well as which components deter them from using one or the other.

Lastly, in order to further understand the role of the auction model in these rural communities, it would be necessary to compare and contrast this AFS with others that exist as well. A project that compared the auction model to other AFSs would allow the similarities and differences to be determined. This would ultimately allow researchers to determine which components of various AFSs excel, and which are limiting their ability to contribute to a more sustainable food system. Ultimately, this would allow the role of the auction to be determined in a large picture. This information could play a role in policy development that would allow AFS to become an integral part of societies.

### 3.4 Final Reflection

Alternative food systems can exist in a variety of settings and in a variety of models. However, if they are truly going to impact that overall sustainability of food systems throughout the world, they need to be successful in all areas of sustainability; economically, environmentally and socio-culturally. The wholesale produce auction model provides key socio-cultural benefits to participants, but struggles in the economic department. The overall environmental sustainability of this model was not evaluated in this project. Therefore, the true sustainability of this model remains unseen. Having said this, the economic component currently limits this model’s potential as a key contributor to our changing food system. Participants are unable to
depend on this model to survive, either as a grower, or as a buyer at the auction. There is a need for the model to become more consistent in order to meet the needs of participants.

Despite the need for more consistency in order to address some of the more economic concerns, the wholesale produce auction model acts as an active component of these rural communities. Through the use of this model there has been a reconnection between growers and buyers that has allowed for relationships to flourish. This relationship has reintegrated trust into the food system, where buyers know how their food is grown, and trust the individuals who are growing their food. There is a desire from participants to support their communities, and this model offers them this opportunity. The auctions are supplying the demand for a local food outlet that offers them the chance to build strong relationships with the individuals in their community as well.

In the end, this particular model does represent a form of AFS that delivers many of the associated benefits. However, there are limitations to the current structure in the Canadian version of these auctions. Despite offering many of these key benefits, the model is not something that participants have come to depend upon; it represents more of a fun, unique way to interact with community members and access some locally grown, fresh produce.
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Appendix A

Literature Review

*Food Systems in Transition*

Today’s food system is evolving in an attempt to meet the needs of a growing population while providing a food system that appeases consumer wants for a more sustainable system. Previously, the food system has operated, in what is now considered, unsustainably in regards to environmental, social, and economic components (Harris, 2010). The conventional food system provided increasing quantities of food for a growing population, but at a high cost. Many have argued that a variety of repercussions have occurred as a result, from a decrease in taste and nutritional value of food, to the devolution of rural communities across North America through the elimination of small-scale farms (Harris, 2010; Newman & Ostry, 2008). Additionally, there are an array of environmental concerns that plague the conventional food system, from the heavy reliance on fossil fuels to the increased use of pesticides in farming.

One portion of the conventional food system that has received a large amount of attention is the idea of social and economic concerns becoming increasingly intertwined as the food industry has become consolidated, with only a handful of companies possessing power (Grey, 2000). The conventional food system has become highly integrated vertically, which is one concern that alternative food system models seek to address. The idea of vertical integration is explained as one corporation (or a group of closely related corporations) having control in all steps of the food system (from the creation of raw materials to the marketing and sales of these products) (Grey, 2000). This results in products travelling longer distances: these corporations have globalized the food system, lengthening the supply chain in order to access the lowest costs for their production process. Despite the globalization of the food system, the power remains in the hands of a few, powerful corporations (Lang and Heasman, 2004). This monopolization has created what are now known as ‘food clusters’, which now do the job of what hundreds of independent food firms have previously done (Lapping, 2004). In 2004, more than 50% of the market was in the hands of a mere five firms, which demonstrates the development of hegemony within the food system (Lapping, 2004).

It is believed that in order for us to move forward, away from the conventional food system, there are two key dynamics that must be addressed. Firstly, there is a need to secure social legitimacy within food relations (Campbell, 2009). With the rise of the conventional food system, many cultural ideas and standards have been lost – ideas and standards that originally premised the legitimacy and stability of relationships within the food system. And secondly, there is a need to understand the importance of ecological dynamics within global food relations (Campbell, 2009). In order to develop a more sustainable food system, the food system itself needs to become more embedded within our social and ecological values. As our population continues to grow, and these various environmental, social, and economic impacts are felt, finding a sustainable agricultural system is becoming increasingly crucial (Newman & Ostry, 2008). Alternative food systems have developed as a solution within the space opened up by the demand for a more sustainable food system. Academics, consumers, and activists continuously debate and promote these alternatives that have developed. Alternative food systems (AFSs) are often defined as systems that work against the notion of ‘bulk’ food production (Whatmore et al.,
and have a commitment to developing sustainable food production and consumption systems (Jarosz, 2008).

**Alternative Food Systems**

As was mentioned previously, AFSs have developed in response to the conventional food system – acting as a means of redistributing power throughout the food chain. Shifting away from the monopolization of the food industry and allowing producers and consumers to play a more prominent role in the decision-making process. This is done through the re-socialization and re-spatialization of the food system, meaning that there is a need to make the food experience a social interaction between producers and consumers once again, while operating on a much more localized scale (Harris, 2010; Sonnino and Marsden, 2006).

The re-socialization of the food system represents a distinct type of relationship that develops between producers and consumers. These relationships are often labeled as face-to-face, or proximate. The first is type of relationship, face-to-face, is exactly how it sounds: producers and consumers are given the opportunity to come in direct contact. This type of relationship occurs with farmers’ markets or at ‘pick your own’ farms. When a food system offers this type of relationship, it allows for trust and authenticity (of both the products and the system) to develop through personal interaction (Higgins et al., 2008). The second type, proximate, goes slightly beyond the direct interaction, where producers sell within a close or given region. In this type of relationship, the products are not sold directly by the farmer but through an intermediary (likely an employee) who knows the producer and is therefore able to answer questions about the products should consumers ask. The presence of someone who is connected to the farmer allows for trust and authenticity to develop once again (Higgins et al., 2008).

By allowing these two types of relations to flourish, AFSs will allow social relationships to begin to play a relevant role in how the food market operates once again. In the past, with the development of the conventional food system there was very little that interfered with price considerations for food products – this trend is described as high markedness. Through the use of AFSs, market behaviour has once again become more entrenched in social relations, a trend that is described as low markedness. The re-socialization of food systems allows for non-price considerations, such as how the food is grown, or a strong relationship with the farmer to become an important factor in price determination once again (Milestad et al., 2010). There are many academics that feel that understanding the importance of relationships is a fundamental part of AFSs research (Hinrichs, 2000; Kirwan, 2004; Jarosz, 2008; Kloppenburg et al., 2000; Mount, 2012).

The second component, the re-spatialization of the food system, represents the attempt to shorten supply chains, shifting away from a heavily globalized food system and towards a more localized network. According to Jarosz (2008) an AFS is defined by the presence of one or more of the following attributes: shorter distances between production and consumption, small-scale farms, and food purchasing mediums. With the focus on creating shorter distances between production and consumption has come increased support for the idea of ‘local’. However, the meaning of ‘local’ remains unclear to both academics and the public at large. According to Allen et al., (2003) the definition of local can stem from two areas – common interests between individuals, or geographically local. Ostrom (2009) believes that for consumers of local food systems, there is often an association between local and freshness and quality, however, a true definition remains to be developed (Mount, 2012).
The development of AFSs that can reconnect producers and consumers while operating on a more localized scale helps to address many of the concerns that developed through the use of the conventional food system. Theoretically, this allows the power and decision-making of the food system to be redirected, and allows for a more sustainable food system to develop. Through the implementation of AFSs that focus on re-socialization and re-spatialization, various secondary benefits have developed, such as increased sustainability, improved food quality, and rural development, which can be seen in the following table.

**Table 5:** Characteristics of AFS, what they represent, and academic references.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Characteristic/Benefit</th>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Academic References</th>
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| Sustainability         | Decreased reliance on ‘luxury’ or ‘niche’ foods that are imported from afar.  
- More sustainable farming practices, e.g., decrease in contamination of groundwater as less nitrates and other chemicals are used.  
- More holistic and traditional methods of production being used.  
- Commonly refers to environmental, socio-cultural, and economic factors being considered together.  
- Unique to any given situation, the ability to be more sustainable depends on biophysical resources present (e.g., soil fertility, climate, water resources, etc.) | - Smit & Smithers, 1993  
- Wolf & Allen, 1995  
- Maxey, 2006  
- Jarosz, 2008  
- Kneafsey, 2010 |
| Food Quality           | Fewer health concerns than food produced through the conventional system.  
- Smaller scale production allows farmers to focus on producing high-grade products.  
- Accountability within the food system is developing once again between producers and consumers.  
- A direct link between the idea of ‘quality’ and anything not associated with the conventional system, that there are social processes of qualification that are constructed within communities. | - Whatmore et al., 2003  
- Lapping, 2004  
- Blay-Palmer & Donald, 2006  
- Sonnino & Marsden, 2006  
- Chiffoleau, 2009  
- Harris, 2010 |
| Rural Development      | Shifting away from the focus on biophysical processes or economic productivity, there is a renewed focus on the social systems of food.  
- Many rural communities faced uncertainty with the conventional food system. However, through partaking in AFSs, they are finding their place once again.  
- Allows rural community members to participate in the food system, putting | - Smit & Smithers, 1993  
- Feenstra, 2002  
- Feagan, 2007  
- Kneafsey, 2010  
- Sumner et al., 2010 |
the culture back into agriculture.
- Guided by the three P’s: public participation, partnerships, and principles - each established for the sake of bringing people together as well as their values.

Contention in the Alternative Food System Realm

There are two areas of contention that arose from this literature review – bridging the divide between conventional and alternative, as well as the need to scale up alternatives. Each of these contentions stem from the fact that despite AFSs offering an array of benefits (environmental, social, and economic) there is still some debate about their ability to feed our growing population (Bellows and Hamm, 2001). Firstly, some academics feel that the strength or weakness of an AFS can be assessed in relation to its ability to engage with, or its potential for subordination, by the conventional food system and operation within a globalizing territory (Watts et al., 2005). In order to develop a food system that provides enough and remains sustainable, it needs to be understood that creating a divide between these two forms of food systems is counterproductive; they should be seen as highly competitive and relational (Sonnino and Marsden, 2006). Bellows and Hamm (2001) suggest that a certain degree of import substitution is necessary for the success of AFSs. Complete reliance on local food is not feasible (e.g., in Ontario we are unable to grow bananas) or sensible (there is always the possibility of floods or droughts). Feenstra (2002) articulated the solution best when she stated that a holistic approach to creating a sustainable food system will need to be inclusive – it will require a variety of dimensions, activities, and actors.

Secondly, there is the issue of scale. More specifically, the ability of AFSs to scale up and be an effective system that will provide large enough quantities (Mount, 2012). However, through the process of scaling-up these systems, there is concern that these ‘value-added’ aspects that people are seeking, such as the reconnection between producers and consumers, will be lost (Mount, 2012). There have been cases were small-scale producers have been able to successfully infiltrate larger markets (such as universities or hospitals), but in each example it required the cooperation of a wide range of actors to bridge these two realms (Friedmann, 2007). In order for a sustainable food system to be created that will provide enough food for our global population, these two issues need to be addressed; without the ability to bridge the conventional and alternative food systems they will remain at odds, falling short in their own respective ways. One means of addressing this is scaling-up alternatives in order to integrate them into the conventional system. Many academics believe that a sustainable food system is, “a collaborative effort to build a more locally based, self-reliant food economies – one in which sustainable food production, processing, distribution and consumption is integrated to enhance the economic, environmental and social health of a particular place” (Feenstra, 2002, p. 100). It remains clear that alternatives are needed in order to achieve a sustainable food system. One alternative that has been discussed as a means of selling local through a conventional structure, as well as to larger markets (i.e., the process of scaling-up), are produce auctions (Blooms and Hinrichs, 2011).
Produce Auctions

Produce auctions represent one model of AFS that has started to gain popularity in many rural communities. Produce auctions are often described as a means to generate a rural market for farmers, while moving large quantities of product (Gray, 2005). At a produce auction, producers from a designated region bring their products (e.g., fruits, vegetables, flowers, etc.) to a centralized location. On auction day, buyers (who are seeking bulk quantities of products for the purpose of resale) evaluate the products and prepare for the auction to commence (OACC, 2009; Morin, 2009). Once the auction begins, the auctioneer accompanies buyers around the site, product by product, allowing bidders the opportunity to out-bid one another until the highest price is achieved (also known as competitive bidding) (Tourte and Gaskell, 2004). During peak season in Ontario, auctions occur 3-4 times a week, while during the slower season they occur as little as once a week (Foodlink, 2012a; Foodlink-Grey Bruce, 2012).

According to some academics, produce auctions are one way to help ensure a strong rural economy, while simultaneously contributing to social and health attributes of rural communities (Desjardins et al., 2011). The idea of produce auctions is not new, but represents a resurgence that seeks to fill the demand that now exists for more organic and fresh, local food production (Gray, 2005). Produce auctions operate as a link between producers and consumers, allowing the importance of a more localized food system to be stressed. By focusing on locally grown food, produce auctions are able to provide economic returns to the local economy and eliminate the “middle-man” (Gray, 2005). Therefore, produce auctions act as an AFS by re-socializing and re-spatializing the food system for local communities.

At this point in time, wholesale produce auctions have primarily been studied in the United States. For example, in Pennsylvania produce auctions have been found to provide numerous benefits to rural communities within the auction region. They provide a marketing outlet for producers, and a convenient shopping centre for wholesale buyers. These auctions also provide a secure source of fresh and locally grown produce (something that is key to what AFSs are intended to offer). Lastly, produce auctions provide an opportunity for exchange and networking amongst producers and consumers to occur (Tubene and Hanson, 2002).

In the United States, produce auctions were originally intended to spur economic activity within the horticultural production and marketing system. They simultaneously became an avenue for communities with large Amish and Mennonite populations to grow their economic development (Blaine et al., 1997). This particular model of food system became appealing to Amish and Mennonite populations because it allowed them to reinforce their community bonds while working with their family, to take advantage of larger family labour pools (as large extended families are highly valued within these communities), as well as allowing them to use their land in the most productive fashion possible (Blaine et al., 1997). Produce auctions are also appealing as they provide an effective market for producers that allows for the highest price possible given the existing market conditions, through the process of competitive bidding (Tourte and Gaskell, 2004). At the time of their establishment, organizers hoped that produce auctions would act as a means of overcoming the traditional barriers that producers face, such as lack of access to buyers (Blaine et al., 1997). Produce auctions represent one form of AFSs that have gained momentum within rural communities and have the potential to be carrying out all of the values of an AFS (Desjardins et al., 2011).
Research Opportunity

As AFSs have gained popularity in communities across the world, many different types have developed. Some of these include farmers markets, community supported agriculture, urban gardens, community gardens and cooperatives, box programs, and produce auctions (Allen et al., 2003; Canadian Organic Growers, 2007). In order to determine whether alternatives are capable of delivering the associated benefits (such as rural development and improved food quality) each model needs to be studied individually (Blay-Palmer and Donald, 2006; Jarosz, 2008; Maxey, 2006; Smit and Smithers, 1993). It is important for the development of a sustainable food system to fully understand them and determine which will be most useful in moving forward.

As it stands currently, there is limited academic literature that exists on the role of produce auctions in the United States. Existing literature focuses on their ability to promote community involvement and create a new rural market (Blaine et al., 1997; Bloom and Hinrichs, 2011; Gray, 2006; Toute and Gaskell, 2004; Tubene and Hanson, 2002). In Canada, there is even less literature on produce auctions, with minimal research existing that pertains to their role within rural communities (Desjardins et al, 2011; Gingrich and Lightman, 2006; Morin, 2009). To date, the ability of produce auctions to contribute to the development of a more sustainable food system remains poorly understood. Conducting research that will address this idea will advance our understanding of AFSs, but more specifically produce auctions, and how participants of this model relate to and evaluate its potential. By further developing our understanding of produce auctions as an AFS, it can be determined whether or not they can be a key aspect in changing our food systems throughout the world.
Appendix B

Research Design and Approach

This research aims to explore produce auctions as an alternative food system that will help to improve access and distribution of locally grown produce. This research aspires to document perceptions of buyers and growers of the auction, the feasibility of the auction, as well as the barriers facing the expansion of this model. This chapter explains the methods used for data collection and analysis.

The development of primary data was primarily used to explore and understand the role of produce auctions as an alternative food system based on two case studies in Ontario, Canada. Primary data was used to explore perceptions and barriers that exist and limit the ability of the model to be expanded. Qualitative and quantitative data provided the basis for determining an understanding on the produce auctions as an alternative food system. The ability of produce auctions to operate as an alternative food system was depicted through these data sets.

Research Approach

An in-depth literature review guided the development of this project. A case study based approach was used to ascertain the necessary information required for fully exploring the role of produce auctions as an alternative food system. The use of a case study approach allowed for information to be gathered in a systematic fashion to better understand wholesale produce auctions through focusing on two specific cases: the Elmira Produce Auction Cooperative (EPAC) and the Bruce Huron Produce Auction (BHPA) (Berg and Lune, 2012). Through exploring these case studies, generalizations can be made about wholesale produce auctions more broadly that are both appropriate and valuable in expanding our understanding of wholesale produce auctions as an alternative food system and how they relate to society as a whole (Flyvberg, 2006). Additionally, through the use of a case study based approach, a mixed methods approach was used for data collection and analysis that allowed for the necessary data to be collected. Research participants are members from both communities (EPAC and BHPA) that use the wholesale produce auctions to sell their produce or purchase produce through one or both of these outlets. These two case studies were selected because they represent the first wholesale produce auctions in Canada. EPAC was the first, while BHPA represents the second that developed in response to farmers looking for a closer selling outlet. Examining these two sites will provide the opportunity to explore how well wholesale produce auctions are functioning as an alternative food system, and whether the model could be instituted more throughout Ontario. It must be acknowledged that these wholesale produce auctions are run within Old Order Mennonite (OOM) communities. Therefore, there is cultural distinctiveness that must be accepted and understood as being potentially influential to understanding wholesale produce auctions as an alternative food system.
**Study Sites**

Field research was conducted in two locations, at EPAC and at BHPA. The two auctions represent the initial point of contact with research participants. A handful of interviews were conducted at the auctions while others were done at farms (of the growers) or at stores (belonging to individuals purchasing through the auction). Interviews that took place away from the auction fell within the surrounding region (a 75km radius – as designated by the auctions) that uses the auctions as a produce outlet. The regions using the produce auction expand across many counties within Southern Ontario. In this next section the case studies will be introduced in more detail.

**Elmira Produce Auction Cooperative**

EPAC is the first study site, and is located within Waterloo Region. This auction was established in 2004 with the intention of supporting local farmers through the creation of a new, localized market (Foodlink, 2012a). EPAC is also a cooperative, meaning that it is run by the producers in the community who are interested in increasing family farm revenue, while also encouraging a more localized food network (Foodlink, 2012a). The auction itself collects 10% from sales to cover overhead and operational costs (Gray, 2005). Traditionally, this community specialized in livestock production. However, the 2003 Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) crisis forced the community to shift their focus to more horticultural production. The auction provides an outlet for the sale of fresh fruit, vegetables, flowers, and hay for both OOMs as well as non-OOMs (Morin, 2009). EPAC is located in Elmira, Ontario, which boasts a population of 9,931 (Stats Canada, 2011). The auction itself is located only a half hour from both the City of Waterloo and the City of Guelph. Both these cities have large populations of 507,096 and 141,097 respectively (Stats Canada, 2011). However, both of these cities also happen to have large universities, meaning their populations fluctuate regularly to include more people during the school year.

**Bruce-Huron Produce Auction**

The second site, BHPA, is located in Holyrood, Ontario. This auction was developed in 2010 following the model and structure of EPAC (run as a cooperative, taking 10% for operative costs from sales, offering fresh fruit, vegetables, and flowers) (Foodlink-Grey Bruce, 2012). The auction was created with the intention of providing a localized market for buyers who normally purchase their produce from the Toronto Food Terminal (Radojkovic, 2011). This region has considered agriculture of all types to be essential for their development throughout the years (M., Weijs, personal communication, July 29, 2013). Holyrood, Ontario can be described as a hamlet, rurally situated with one intersection and a small population (exact demographic information was not accessible). The closest town with existing demographic information is Lucknow. Lucknow is a mere 15-minute drive from the auction and has a population of 1,100 residents (Explore the Bruce, n.d.). After Lucknow, the location of the nearest cities ranges from 20-40kms, which have similarly small populations (e.g., Wingham, Ontario is 20km West and has a population of approximately 3,000 residents).

OOMs are a dominant component in both communities and represent the largest portion of growers contributing to the auction; furthermore, the auctions are also organized and run by the OOM community. It is evident that OOM input and ideals are essential to understanding the wholesale produce auction as an alternative food system. The OOMs in this community
immigrated to this region of Southern Ontario between 1710 and 1756, stemming from Swiss Mennonites and Amish communities that originated in Pennsylvania (Morin, 2009). The OOMs can be identified through their simple dress, agrarian lifestyle, limited technology permitted, and the forbidding of motorized vehicles for transportation (Gingrich and Lightman, 2006; Morin, 2009). Over the years, Anabaptist groups have gradually been divided into groups based on their religious beliefs and practices: Mennonites, Amish, and Hutterite. However, a spectrum exists that bridges these groups together. For example, the OOMs attending EPAC have different beliefs than those who consider themselves OOM at the BHPA (Morin, 2009). This can be seen through the use of cell phones in Elmira, whereas in Bruce-Huron they are not used at all, although both groups associate with being OOM. The OOMs felt that the creation of these markets within these two regions would provide local farmers with a more viable market for their products, allowing them to maintain their family farms (Radojkovic, 2011).

Data Sources

This project focused on one type of data source in order to successfully explore wholesale produce auctions as an alternative food system. In this next portion of the chapter, this data source will be explored in more detail.

Interviews

In order to delve into the perceptions of the produce auction through the lens of buyers and growers, interviews with both of these parties were required. The use of interviews as a data collection method allowed knowledge pertaining to the auction to be explored that does not currently exist in the form of written documentation. Listening to individuals who are closely linked with the two study sites will generate new knowledge about wholesale produce auctions (Secor, 2010). Interviews were the main data source throughout the development of this project. Through interviewing both buyers and growers, insight about this food distribution model from both downstream and upstream perspectives from the auction was gained. Initially, a third group was identified for interviews – the auction managers. However, the process of networking at the study sites allowed for this group to be interviewed through the grower interviews (as the growers are also the auction managers). A list of interview questions for both groups (buyers and growers) can be found in Appendix C. Semi-structured interviews were used for this data collection; this method allowed the topic to be explored while still exerting the feeling of a naturally occurring conversation, which allowed participants to feel more at ease and offer unanticipated pieces of information (Hay, 2010).

Prior to starting interviews, the auction managers were contacted in order to introduce the research project as well as myself, the primary researcher. Given that the research was being conducted during a peak time for agriculture, interviews were conducted at a variety of locations. In order to minimize any inconvenience that interviewees may encounter, the interview location was selected by the participants, either by telephone, at the auction, or at their farm, or store. Audio recorders were used for a portion of the interviews. However, as the project was working with the OOM community, it was important to be respectful of their preference to not use modern technology. Therefore, at the beginning of each interview the use of the audio recorder was explained and then participants had the opportunity to state whether they were comfortable with being recorded or not. In the end, only a small portion of interviews was recorded as many of the OOMs did not feel comfortable and preferred that field notes were taken. This meant the field notes were the preferred method for many of the interviews. Interviews were conducted.
until theoretical saturation was achieved. Theoretical saturation was acknowledged when I continuously observed many of the same ideas (themes) and I felt that there was nothing new to learn (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). I intended to spend a month (minimum) at each location, conducting interviews until saturation had been achieved. In the end, a total of 48 interviews were conducted. A breakdown of interview participants can be seen in Table 6.

Table 6: Participant Breakdown

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Buyer</th>
<th>Grower</th>
<th>Old Order Mennonite</th>
<th>Non-Old Order Mennonite</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EPAC</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BHPA</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sampling Strategy

Entering the two communities was a matter of attending the auctions and spending quality time there to learn the system as well as the people who are using the auction as a purchasing and selling outlet. At EPAC, a local non-OOM community member escorted me to the auction, where I was introduced to some of the key players (being growers and buyers) who participate in the auction. At the BHPA a local food advocate, who works closely with the auction to promote it throughout the region, conducted the introductions. Both introductions allowed me to become familiar with the study sites and made me, the researcher, a familiar face in the auction communities. The first introductions were made to the auction managers; this introduction was essential since I wanted to explain the research project in detail and gain their approval prior to commencing any research.

Once the auction managers approved the project, an information sheet was posted at each auction that explained the details of the project for potential participants. Field research was carried out between mid-May and late August 2013. Research was conducted at EPAC from mid-May until the end of June, and at the BHPA from July to August. Buyers for interviews were identified through attending the auctions and talking with them. The growers were identified through attending the auction and using the grower numbers associated with certain produce items brought to be sold. Once the grower numbers were identified I was able to go to the main office and request the grower information (this is a feature of the auction that is often advertised as a traceability system, which allows buyers to know where and how the produce was grown). Recognizing that many of the OOM community members are new to using telephones or do not use them at all, face-to-face contact was used as the primary means of communication to establish relationships and identify participants. Once willing participants were identified the interviews began. In the end, there were 48 participants in total, with 20 females and 28 males.

Strawberries

In order to streamline potential interview participants, the project focused on strawberry buyers and growers exclusively. While there is a wide variety of produce grown in both regions, the decision to focus on strawberries is based on two reasons. Firstly, they were seasonally available (both grown and sold) during the time frame for this project (Foodlink, 2012b).
Secondly, given the amount of time available for the research, only one type of produce could realistically be evaluated in relation to the auctions. Therefore, strawberries in this project are representative of a larger category of products (seasonally available and locally grown produce) that will hopefully allow results to be applicable to more than just strawberries.

**Random Sampling**

One component of the research required a random sample of six locations that sold strawberries. These samples were used to compare prices for strawberries sold regionally (within the EPAC and BHPA regions). Local food maps were used to identify the various locations within each 75km radius that sold strawberries. Once a list of locations was compiled, Microsoft Excel was used to randomly assign each location with a number between 0 and 1. The six locations with the highest numbers were selected and used for the price comparison component of the project. By allowing the computer to randomly generate numbers, it ensured that there was no bias involved in the location selection. In the event that one location was unable, or unwilling, to participate, the next highest number replaced the previous. This process allowed for the produce auction prices to be compared to regional outlets that also sell strawberries.

**Research Limitations**

This particular project was limited in part by the decision to focus on one type of produce. Strawberries were originally chosen to narrow the potential interview pool and act as a representative of the local, fresh food movement in general. However, the weather throughout the course of the summer resulted in a shortened strawberry season, which meant that the window for interviews was shortened as well. Also, by focusing on a single produce type it meant that there were days when interviews were not possible as there were simply no strawberries available that day. The fact that these two case studies pulled from some of the same population sources also made it so that there was often crossover in participants. Often times, one participant that was interviewed from auction A was found purchasing strawberries at auction B, which made it difficult to gather new, and different information.

**Analytical Approach**

For this project, a mixed methods approach to the analysis was used. The statistical analysis of more quantitative data allowed me to infer and confirm the role of EPAC and BHPA within the local strawberry market and their respective regions. More specifically, the quantitative data was monetary in nature. Quantitative analysis was a bivariate analysis, which was used on these values in order to demonstrate the relationship between value received and value gained from purchasing and selling through produce auctions. This analysis allowed for the perceived benefit of selling through produce auctions to be evaluated in relation to whether producers are gaining these benefits (more specifically, whether producers are gaining a price premium through selling their products through produce auctions over other marketing outlets [in regards to strawberries specifically]). Secondly, a comparison of prices from randomly selected marketing outlets (again for strawberries specifically) was conducted in order to analyze this data further. These prices were then compared with prices for strawberries sold through the auction. This allowed an understanding of where benefits exist in the auction structure to be explored, more explicitly determining if there is a relationship between how many wholesale buyers are purchasing strawberries for, versus the strawberries’ resale value.
The qualitative data generated through this project will be analyzed using grounded theory and content analysis. These two types of analysis ultimately allowed me to discover and explore the perceptions of produce auctions (through the eyes of growers and buyers) as well as the limitations and barriers that exist to their expansion and further use as an alternative food system. The HyperRESEARCH program was used to code and discover common themes within the respondents’ interviews. From the themes developed, categories were established that allowed a hypothesis to be created pertaining to the role of produce auctions as an alternative food system.

Grounded theory played a key role in the development of the hypothesis. As there is little known about the role of produce auctions, particularly in Canada, and I am looking to generate a theory that holds explanatory power, grounded theory was essential (Birks & Mills, 2011). Data collected at the first site (EPAC) was coded and grouped in order to streamline the interviews at the second site (BHPA). The preliminary grouping of themes allowed questions to become more clear and focused. The interview guide was revamped in order to strengthen the final data set (the elimination of questions that were not resulting in useful data, or the addition of more specific questions). Interviews at the primary location were approached with an open mind, while at the second site a preliminary hypothesis had been developed and was guiding the questions, focusing the interviews significantly. Grounded theory was also essential when interviews were coded. The data was coded and analyzed for ‘incidents’, meaning the presence of reoccurring phrases, explanations, etc. Instead of having predetermined themes, they developed organically (Birks & Mills, 2011). However, it is important to acknowledge that the codes were influenced by my previous knowledge on alternative food systems.

Content analysis was also used as it allowed me to make extrapolations from the interview data, which pertain to the role of produce auctions. It also allowed me to determine the frequency at which various perceptions about produce auctions occur throughout the course of the interviews (Krippendorff, 2012). Through this analysis, along with grounded theory, I was able to develop a theory about the validity of produce auctions as an alternative food system from auction participants. Additionally, each of the themes developed through the course of the data collection and analysis considered the role of sex, age, function within the auction, and background of participants. This additional analysis was intended to determine whether any of these demographic identifiers contributed to the responses generated through the interviews.
Appendix C

Interview Guides

Producer Interview Guide

Name: 
Gender: 
Year of Birth: 
Farm Location: 
Contact Information: 
How many strawberries approximately did you grow this season? ________________

Can you list where your strawberries were sold and what approximate percentage was sold at each location?

Location 1: ___________________________; _______%
Location 2: ___________________________; _______%
Location 3: ___________________________; _______%
Location 4: ___________________________; _______%

Why did you use __________________________ for selling the majority of your strawberries?

Why was __________________________ used to sell the smallest quantity of your strawberries?

What is the maximum price you received for your strawberries this season?

What was the minimum?

What was the overall average for your strawberries throughout the season?

How do prices received through the auction compare to other selling outlets?

Are you happy with the minimum bid allowed on strawberries (or produce in general)? Is there a minimum bid?

Could you please rank the following benefits for me, with 1 being important and 4 being not important?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1 – Yes, it is important</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4 – No, this is not important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Convenience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Good Prices for Produce
Supporting the Community
Information Exchange
Networking

Why did you rank ____________________________ as the most important?

You ranked ____________________________ as least important, why?

Are there any other reasons that you feel are important for selling through the produce auction?

Do you think the produce auction helps to create open communication between growers and the buyers? Y/N - Why or why not?

Do you think it is important for the buyers to know the growers personally?

Do you think it is important to communicate to the buyers what will be available?

Do you think feedback from the buyers would be useful for yourself?

Would you like to see the produce auction change at all? Y/N

If yes, how so?

If not, why?

Overall, do you think the produce auction is a marketing tool that can/should be used more in Ontario? Y/N

Why or why not?

Would you like to see more of them in Ontario? Would you use more than one?

Do you think the produce auction is successful? Why or why not?

Do you think it would work in a different context?

Consumer Interview Guide
Name: 
Gender: 
Year of Birth: 
Occupation: 
Location: 
Contact Information: 
How many strawberries do you purchase weekly? ____________________________

Can you list all of the places where you purchase your strawberries and estimate what percentage comes from each location?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location 1:</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location 2:</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location 3:</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location 4:</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why was __________________________ your biggest purchasing location?

Why was __________________________ your smaller purchasing location?

Why did you decide to start purchasing from the auction?

** If produce auction as not listed**

Why do you not purchase through the produce auction? Can you please list three reasons? AFTER ask them to reflect on their order of importance. “Which of these would you say is the most important? Least?

** If the produce auction is listed as one of their purchasing locations**

How would you rank the following benefits of the produce auction from 1-4, with 1 being very important and 4 being not very important?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit</th>
<th>1 - Yes, very important</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4 - No, not very important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Convenience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better Food</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
You ranked __________________ as the most important, why?

You ranked __________________ as the least important, why?

Are there any other benefits, that I have not listed, for why you have chosen to use the produce auction?

Do you think the produce auction creates an open environment for communication between the buyers and the growers? Y/N

If yes, could you expand on your experience?

If no, how could the produce auction achieve this?

For what purpose do you purchase wholesale strawberries?

Resale for consumption as is: _____
Personal consumption: _____
Used in another product: _____
Other: ________________________________

If you are reselling the strawberries, what is the value increase on average? _____

The length of the auction is often times a concern do you think having the auction more frequently throughout the week or dividing up flowers from produce would help this? Are there any other changes you think would benefit the auction?

How do you think the auction could draw in more buyers?

Do you think it would benefit the auction to have a separate section that was open to the public for retail as well as a wholesale section?

Do you think technology could help improve the auction? Maybe having a website or something that displayed what was available?
Do you find the inconsistency of available produce to be frustrating?

Overall, do you feel that produce auctions are a marketing tool that would be effective across Ontario?

Would you like to see more of them in Ontario?

Do you feel the auction is successful?

Do you think a produce auction would work outside of the Mennonite community? Why or why not?