

## ***WMU teams up with local farm to create food chain***

By Alyssa Barraco

*Western Michigan University partners with local Kalamazoo farm, Bare Foot Farm.*

Ten acres of soft, fertilized, ready-to-plant soil; four acres of over 100 pink and muddy pigs; and one barn make up [Bare Foot Farms](#).

Over the past couple of years, [Western Michigan University Dining Services](#) has teamed up with [Bare Foot Farms](#) to create their own food chain. WMU buys meat and produce from Bare Foot Farms, keeping the scrapings from certain produce cut up in the dining halls and then gives the scrapings back to the farm for the pigs to eat.

“Most dining services I know try to keep options in their cafeterias, but I think having a connection with a local farm keeps things fresher and gives life to the food that the students are eating,” said Tracie Abram, a professor at Michigan State University who specializes in improving nutrition and physical activity.

The partnership started when WMU Dining Services wanted to do a farmer’s market luncheon that featured food purchased from farmers from West Michigan, said Judy Gipper, director of dining services at WMU.

Paul Choke, chef and assistant director of dining services at WMU, visited the farmer’s market frequently to find out which vendors in the farmer’s market were actual farmers and who was just buying produce and selling it claiming they were farmers, she said.

“We connected with Bare Foot Farms and we purchased a lot of food for our first farmer’s market luncheon, which was about five or six years ago,” Gipper said. “Through that connection we learned a tremendous amount on what it’s like to do business directly with a farmer.”

Bare Foot Farms is an organic farm located in Paw Paw, Mich. The farm uses no antibiotics, preservatives or hormones in any of their meats or produce.

WMU dining services and Bare Foot Farms really started to develop a relationship that has evolved to more than just the farmer’s market luncheon. WMU purchases pork sausages and other pork products from Bare Foot Farms, Gipper said.

Not only does WMU benefit from Bare Foot Farms, but Bare Foot Farms benefits from WMU as well. Pre-consumed scrapings like peelings from green peppers, cucumbers and carrots, rinds from melons, tops of strawberries are collected in blue bins in all WMU dining halls, Gipper said.

Every Tuesday and Friday, Bare Foot Farms collects the bins, brings the bins back to their farm, and feeds the scrapings to their pigs. Bare Foot Farms then sanitizes the bins and brings them back to WMU, she said.

Working with WMU was a big step for Bare Foot Farms. The transition from being just a farm to working with a big institution was an experience for the farm owners.

“Western Michigan University was our first big anything, and it was definitely a leap of faith,” said Sandi McNeese, owner of Bare Foot Farms. “My husband, Kim, was in construction and taking care of the farm. The first year was really hard and there was no winter farmer’s market so we’d take the van, where the farmer’s market is, in the middle of winter, and it managed to bring us through the winter. That’s when we developed the relationship with WMU.”

For the food chain process started in September 2011 through January 2014, WMU donated an average of about 39,248 pounds of vegetable scrapings per year to Bare Foot Farms.

Some students at WMU are interested in knowing about the food they're consuming.

Sam Nemerski, a junior majoring in speech pathology, only eats organic and has said she has a hard problem with picking out what to eat in the dining halls.

"I was unaware that the produce and some of the meat in the dining halls was organic. I've been eating in the dining halls for three years and mostly only ate things I knew were 100 percent organic or just a salad," Nemerski said. "I'm happy to know WMU is trying to make more food organic and are informing the students more."

Not only does the relationship between WMU and Bare Foot Farms' make the dining services a healthier place, but it also makes WMU's campus a more sustainable living place.

"The sheer amount of food we're diverting to a natural produce farm instead of putting the scraps down the drain is making campus a more sustain place," said Kelsey Patterson, manager of nutrition services at WMU. "The food trimmings you can't donate to a food pantry and there's not much you can do with them, it just really helps with the food waste on campus."