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## Interview with Joel Gunderson

Tim Greenwood

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**Researchers Name:** Tim Greenwood

**Event:** Interview with Joel Gunderson

**Place:** The Village Inn

**Co-workers Present:** none

This is Timothy Greenwood , interviewing Joel Gunderson in Gambier, Ohio. It is March 1, 2007. We are going to be talking about the local food production, beef and the future of the local food systems.

JG: what exactly is the title of your class that this is for?

TG: Fieldwork and Rural life

JG: So you guys are actually out on the farms and stuff?

TG: Yeah

TG: and we are basically going through and seeing local food production and how that goes about and people who do it and choose to do it.

JG: so do you have a regular assignment that you go to every week?

TG: no, it's a pretty free class, I have been to farms, I have been to processors, I have spoken with the Rickards and the Conards, Eli Hofsteler who does the organic milk.

JG: I know all those suppliers well, from middle ground

TG: those are the people I am interviewing or have interviewed and been getting around and getting to know . Allan Stockberger, he does local popcorn and sends it out one of the large companies. And his used to be all organic, but its not anymore.

JG: the organic bylaws are funny some people keep farming the same way they have farmed for years and that's fine. They just choose not to pay for the certification anymore. After a while they say it's a pain because they are paying an extra fee and they have to get inspected. And they say that the inspector doesn't really do much. And some farmers think it's a waste of time and money. But as long as their clients know their farming practices and know that their farms are clean and that they abide by these good farming principles then I think its fine.

TG: I agree. How long have you been in the area?

JG: Three years and I opened Middle Ground in the middle of 2003

Tg: how long have you been interested in doing restaurants?

JG: being here and doing this was a total departure for us. Because we had lived in Manhattan and New Jersey, and we became involved with food because when we were in Manhattan. You are in the biggest city in the United States and you are surrounded by concrete and metal and things that you really appreciate those things. And our entire building or co-op in Manhattan had a, it's called a CSA (a community supported agriculture) setup so we actually coordinated with a farm in upstate New York. And it was offered by the president of the co-op board, said if you wanted to be a share in this farm, it was pretty much like a stock option, you would buy a share in that farm and when the farm delivered the goods once a week, on the big truck. We would unload it portion it up into shares and it was a lot of fun. And I have lived in New York for about five and a half years by the time we joined that and you just appreciate it. We used to walk down to the Union Square Farmers Market and get stuff and this way it came right to our door which was nice. And it was fun too, because you got a share and whatever was ripe and ready to be picked and you got a percentage of that and we were getting vegetables and stuff that I just hadn't dealt with previously. Like okras and things like that and the farm was they would bring you recipes for some of the more esoteric vegetables and stuff that was a little more specialized. And we really became involved in the food co-op and when we moved New Jersey. My wife was the regional director for the Purple Dragon food co-op and that was again about sourcing this locally and it almost came to a point where that was more interesting to me than my corporate job. It came to the point where I said I would like to make a career out of this more than put on my suit everyday. It just sort of grew from that. I think here in Knox County you tend to get spoiled because you see we are surrounded by farm land. It's so rural here, but the irony is you walk into Kroger and not one single piece of produce that has not been shipped here from California or Mexico. And there is something wrong there. There is a disconnect. The farmers market is great because that addresses it but we wanted to use local ingredients. And in forming Middle Ground that was a cornerstone and what we wanted to be all about. And I think too having the juxtaposition of the city, the city is just great, it's wonderful. But one thing it doesn't have is a lot of green spaces and a lot of connection with the natural and so I remember when this truck would show up and you would throw open that gate and you just see this bounty of you know, it just felt like the garden of Eden was being transferred down. So it grew of that.

TG: is that really when you got into the local foods?

JG: yeah, I think that's was ... when we met those local farmers. They had a box truck and they would drive down and you would start talking to them. And then coming here we knew that this was going to be one of the platforms for middle ground and so when we came here we spoke to Howard, before we came in and we got his homegrown book and we just started calling farmers. And we started setting up our own purchases and deliveries and yeah, it's been a challenge. We have a lot of suppliers which is difficult but you find out that the farmers want to work with you. The Rickards deliver beef. The Snavelies deliver pork, which is nice, I don't even have to go get it. Which is really nice because a lot of restaurant owners they don't want to do local A. because of the price bump and B. because of the hassle of deliveries. And it is a factor but if it is important to you then it is definitely

more fun to get it. Its fun for us, for me its part of what keeps my interest in this is getting to know the farmers as people and seeing their struggles and seeing their philosophies. And its fun for me to talk to them and know what they are up to and sort of knowing the food chain from A to Z instead of most people. If you walked into a typical kindergarten class and asked them what animal beef came from I bet at least half of them wouldn't know that it came from a cow, because you got to the supermarket and its wrapped on its little tray. That's beef but where does it come from? People are disconnected from their food sources and that's sad. My kids are the opposite extreme, I have a six year old and a three year old and one summer we bought 10000 chickens and we paid a farmer to feed them off and my kids not only know where chickens come from but they have put on their boots and gloves chased free range chickens and put them in their cages to take them to the slaughter house and that is pretty amazing to think about.

TG: Is there any specific reason that you chose grass-feed beef as opposed to run of the mill beef?

JG: Obviously, price comes into it. And the grass-feed beef all the articles show that it does have more nutrients, more Omega -3s a piece of grass-feed beef a lot of studies show has more Omega-3's than a piece of fish which is pretty amazing. Certainly it's the nutrition, I think you can tell a taste difference for certain. If you travel overseas, to England or New Zealand you know the beef doesn't have all the hormones and stuff in it, and it tastes different. You know it is definitely for health considerations. I always like to say that I wouldn't serve anything at Middle Ground that I wouldn't feel comfortable having someone come into my home and serving them the same thing. And we try really hard to eat clean, and especially now that I have small children, I just think, you know, the longer I can have them go without having a McDonalds hamburger the better. I don't know how realistic that is, when you get into birthday parties and things. But yeah we try to be really careful of what we eat at home. And we try to eat local meats and it's the same philosophy when you buy from someone. It has higher nutrition content it has higher Omega- 3s and its more pure.

I still can grasp the concept that you have to put antibiotics in the feed, if not the food could kill the animal, and then you are going to eat that meat. that's crazy.

TG: even the farmers are getting into alternate routes, the feed is costing more

JG: it is and that's the problem, again you see these farmer struggles. And gosh our prices change and we absorb some of those costs but, I am more willing to do it when I know the people and I know their struggles and that they are attempting to do it the right way. And sure the price sometimes goes up but I will still buy it because I want to support those guys. And want to keep the money in the community. A community like Knox County is not specifically booming. So I think its really important to keep money in the community and that is certainly another factor for it.

TG: before you did the whole restaurant thing what was your previous job?

JG: before that I worked for the Cleveland Indians for five years. I graduated from Oberlin.

And I sort of said to myself I wanted to have a career that was fun and based on one of my personal passion and baseball has always been at the top and I was lucky enough to hook up with the Indians and I did that for five years. I was one of their traveling press guys and I did that for five years. I have a World Series ring to give to each one of my kids when they get older.

TG: too bad it wasn't the Championship ring

JG: Yeah, but that was great, I did that for five years. Got burnt out on that its too many hours on the road 180 days out of the year. And after I got married that's just not going to work anymore so I did that. Then I went to New York and worked at Christie's Auction House for a little over 5 years, and that was cool because I have always had an interest in art and art history. My father teachers sculpting here. So I grew up in a house with art so I did that. That was a huge change of pace for me. But that was fun too. Where else can I say I sat in auction house sky boxes and with Steve Lindt and Donald Trump and watched them buy 35-40 million dollar paintings. That was a different taste of life. I thought baseball players were rich but these were the guys that owned the teams. It was a whole different style of life. It was great. I did both of those things and I sort of knew when I was doing both of those things that it was not going to be the end. Baseball, baseball is just too hard I would have loved to stay in baseball a long time but its too hard. Baseball sort of chews people up and spits them out because what they pay you, you only do it for so long for the perks of traveling with the team. It just wears you down and some of those guys are definite pre Madonna, they get a little hard to deal with and when it is your job to make them friendly and personable in the media it is tiring job.

TG: any specific stories?

JG: we would have to turn off the tape recorder. Well just imagine giving 25, 19 year olds five million dollars each and seeing what happens. A lot of these guys if they were draft picks come into the league millionaires. It gets hard to deal with those guys. But no, it was great I have lucky enough to have to very interesting jobs. And honestly I feel like what I am doing now is just as interesting to me.

TG: Since your primary foods you serve at Middle Ground are local are there any specific reason you chose the farmers you did?

JG: I feel when I first came into town three and a half years ago I talked to a lot of farmers, and you talk to some farmers you know and everything sounds like it could be positive and work out but if the are dropping the ball about product, that's hard. Middle Ground has been picking up and that's a positive thing but it has been hard for some farmers to keep up with the demand. I mean the Rickards have been great. Some farmers don't want to though, some don't have the land or I don't have the finances. But you have to do some experimenting, you have to do some things. Sometimes you have to chalk some things up to experience. But the good thing is that you know you are helping to support people. And they even sometimes ask me when its growing time, if I want them to grow certain types of products and that is the kind of report we have. These are the kind of relationships if you

are in a big city like New York you don't get.

TG: you were speaking about going out to buy in the summer is it harder for you or for the farmer when the students are not here?

JG: yeah, I mean Knox county has such a short growing season its kind of hard because when its time to harvest most of my business is slowing down. that's kind of ironic but we do well enough in the summer. But one of the things I love is that I don't buy a tomato that is grown outside of Knox County for over four months. But yeah it is kind of hard for the farmers. But it probably would be good for us to start thinking about new methods of storing and preserving. But the farmers are able to move their products they go to farmers markets and stuff like that. But there are also independent vegetable brokers who drive through and buy produce cheap and try to sell it to smaller markets. Its funny its kind of if own little economy. The guy that I buy a lot of produce from, he is always selling to those independent brokers.

TG: well I don't want to take up too much of your time. I see you are really busy here.

JG: ok

TG: well if I have anymore question would it be ok if I stopped back by.

JG: sure, that wouldn't be a problem