

RURAL GROCERY INITIATIVE
JUNE 2025

CASE STUDY

BALLS FOOD STORES



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Select photos throughout case study are courtesy of Balls Foods Stores.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Founded in 1923, Balls Food Stores (BFS) has grown to include 25 stores across the Kansas City metropolitan area.¹ Today, the company owns and operates its own central warehouse, which enables them to efficiently source local food from roughly 100 local producers located within a 250-mile radius. From there, BFS distributes local food to their stores as well as more than 30 stores owned by other retailers in the metro. In 2024, the company paid \$4 million to local producers in Kansas and Missouri, with local food accounting for 20-25% of all produce sales during the growing season.

This case study examines how BFS innovated to maintain local food offerings in their stores. Lessons learned from this case study aim to help other grocery stores that are seeking opportunities to integrate more local food options in their stores.

OVERVIEW OF BALLS FOOD STORES	
LOCATION —	Kansas City metro area
POPULATION —	2.2 million
OWNERSHIP STRUCTURE —	Domestic For-Profit Corporation
YEAR ESTABLISHED —	1923
KEY PARTNERS —	100 local producers
PROBLEM —	Local food was always an important part of the company's identity, but as the grocery industry evolved over time, sourcing became more logistically complicated.
SOLUTION —	Balls Food Stores established their own central warehouse, enabling local producers to bring product to just one location that the company would then distribute to its 25 stores.
KEY OPERATIONS —	Retail sales at brick-and-mortar grocery stores; aggregation and distribution of local food
INCOME SOURCES —	Sales to retail and wholesale customers

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Business Model and Operations: BFS utilizes their own central warehouse to source, store, and distribute local food products. This has made the local sourcing process much more efficient: local producers transport product to just one location, and then BFS distributes it to over 50 stores across the Kansas City metro. The company also adds to their competitive advantage by using the central warehouse to store “forward-buys” from their primary wholesaler: BFS buys large quantities of shelf-stable products on sale, then holds them at the warehouse until needed.

Financial Strategy: BFS has a number of revenue streams that make their central warehouse financially feasible. These include retail sales at their 25 grocery store locations, sales of local food to other grocers in the Kansas City area, and even sales to food pantries. The operational costs of the warehouse are charged back to BFS stores. Using the warehouse to store forward-buys also helps the warehouse cash flow.

Equipment, Technology, and Infrastructure: Unlike traditional grocery supplier warehouses, with its focus on local sourcing, the BFS facility can accommodate a variety of supplier volumes. The company is also in the early stages of implementing an AI software that uses historical data to streamline ordering and reduce waste.

Product Offerings: BFS works with 100 local producers located within a 250-mile radius of Kansas City to source local produce and eggs. The company and local producers meet annually to adjust local product offerings based on customer demand.

Partnerships and Community Engagement: In-store marketing efforts highlight the benefits of local food and build connections between customers and producers. The company’s partnership with Good Natured Family Farms allowed BFS to significantly increase their producer network and local food offerings.



INTRODUCTION

Balls Food Stores was founded in 1923. More than a century later, the company has 25 stores located across five counties in the Kansas City metropolitan area.

Local food was always an important part of the company's identity, but local sourcing became more logistically complicated as the grocery industry evolved. Large wholesale distribution systems are inaccessible to many local producers who grow smaller volumes of specialty crops, making it more difficult to sell their items in grocery stores. As a result, Balls Food Stores established a central warehouse so that it could aggregate and distribute local food on its own without relying on its primary wholesaler. Today, the company works with 100 local producers within a 250-mile radius.

This case study examines how Balls Food Stores scaled its local sourcing program to meet the growing demand for local food. It provides an overview of how the company was established, how it evolved over time, key business operations, challenges, and lessons learned along the way. By sharing the story of Balls Food Stores, other businesses and organizations will be more equipped to consider establishing their own warehouses to increase the availability of local food in independent grocery stores and other outlets.



HISTORICAL, GEOGRAPHIC, AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

The Kansas City metropolitan statistical area is a 14-county region in northeast Kansas and northwest Missouri.² As of 2024, it had a total population of more than 2.2 million people.³ The most populated cities in the region are Kansas City, Missouri; Overland Park, Kansas; Kansas City, Kansas; Olathe, Kansas; Independence, Missouri; and Lee's Summit, Missouri.⁴

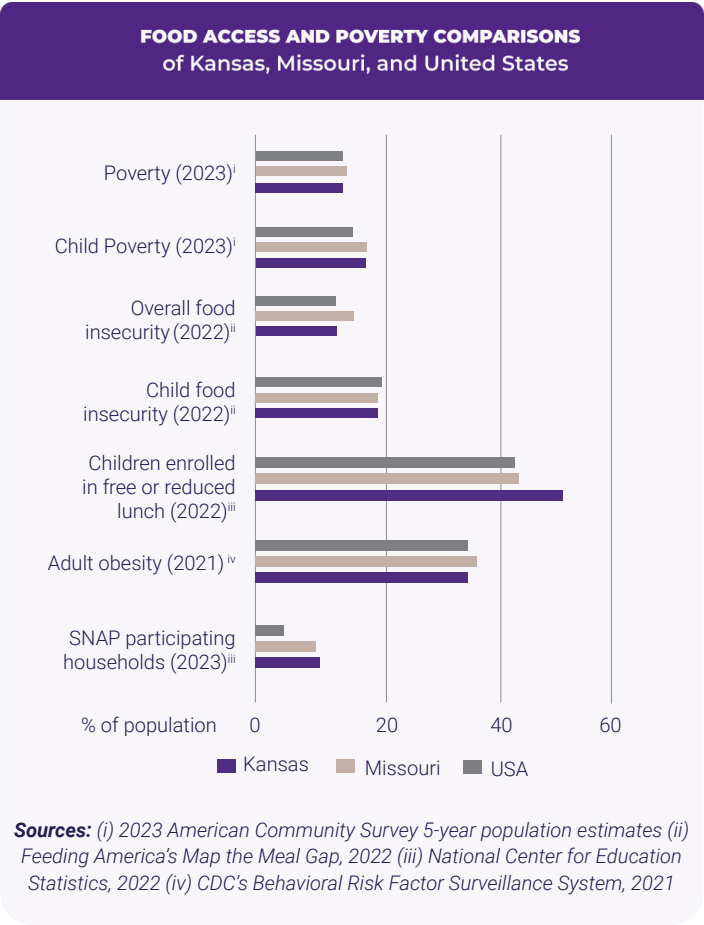
In 2023, the median household income in the Kansas City metro was \$79,842 which was greater than the median household income in both Kansas (\$70,333) and Missouri (\$68,545).⁵ When compared to the rest of the United States, the Kansas City metro has a higher median household income, a lower poverty rate, and a higher rate of people who have obtained their bachelor's degree.^{6,7,8} According to the Kansas City Area Development Council, Kansas City "has long been a leading center of

transportation and distribution, eCommerce, manufacturing, animal health, technology and the financial industry."⁹

In terms of agricultural production, Kansas (known as the "Wheat State")¹⁰ ranks first in the country in the production of the commodity crops of grain sorghum and winter wheat,¹¹ with other top principal crops including corn and soybean.¹² Similarly, corn and soybeans are top crops in Missouri.¹³ The beef cattle industry is another important economic driver for the region. In fact, Kansas City's Major League Baseball team was named the Royals as an homage to the American Royal livestock show, hosted in the Kansas City Stockyards beginning in 1899.^{14,15} Specialty crops are not a leading agricultural activity in Missouri or Kansas, though both states have experienced growth in farmers markets and other local food activities over the past few decades.^{16,17}

DEMOGRAPHIC COMPARISONS			
Kansas City Metropolitan Statistical Area, Kansas, and Missouri			
VARIABLE	KANSAS CITY METROPOLITAN STATISTICAL AREA	KANSAS	MISSOURI
Population	2,219,865	2,940,547	6,196,156
Median household income (in 2023 inflation-adjusted \$)	\$79,842	\$70,333	\$68,545
Median age in years	38.4	37.9	39.3
% of population under 18, over 65	23, 17	23, 18	22, 18
% of population 25 & older who earned a bachelor's degree or higher	40.8	35.8	33.2
Race/ethnicity, as a percentage of the population:			
White	69.2	72.8	76.5
Black	11.6	5.2	10.7
Asian	2.7	2.6	2.1
American Indian and Alaskan Native	0.2	0.4	0.2
Native Hawaiian, Other Pacific Islander	0.2	0.1	0.2
Two or more races	4.6	4.9	4.8
Some other race	0.5	0.4	0.4
Hispanic or Latino	11.1	13.7	5.3

Source: 2023 American Community Survey 1-year estimates





ORIGINS OF BALLS FOOD STORES

DEFINING THE PROBLEM

In 1923, Sidney and Mollie Ball created the Balls Food Store company and opened their first grocery store in Kansas City, Kansas.¹⁸ From the very beginning, the company had a focus on local food, as nearly all products were sourced in the nearby area. As was common at the time, the small store served approximately 40 to 50 families in the surrounding neighborhood. Groceries were delivered directly to their customers' houses, and families were billed monthly.

The Balls opened their second store in 1934, using the new "cash and carry" model that provided customers with lower prices for paying with cash, rather than credit. Fourteen years later, the Balls went on to open the first large-scale supermarket in Kansas City.¹⁸ They continued to expand in the following years, eventually growing to become "the largest retail grocer in Kansas City" by 1996.¹⁹ Today, the company owns 25 grocery stores across five counties of the Kansas City metropolitan area under different banners, including Hen House Market, Price Chopper, Sun Fresh Market, and Payless Discount Foods.

Since 2000, the company has been led by third generation grocer, David Ball. David grew up in the family business and recalls seeing farmers pull up to the back door to deliver their crops. However, in the intervening years, the grocery industry changed immensely: with intensified competition and consolidation among grocery stores and wholesale suppliers, supply chains evolved to maximize consistency and efficiency.²⁰ Across the country, many farmers found it challenging to match the scale and speed now required by the industry.²¹

Local sourcing as it had been done during David's childhood was no longer possible. Yet, local food remained a key part of the BFS identity, as it helped the chain differentiate itself. For local food to remain a key feature in their stores, the company needed to find alternative local sourcing solutions.

FIRST STEPS

In 1995, Diana Endicott, co-owner of Rainbow Organic Farms, started selling tomatoes to BFS.²² At first, she would coordinate ordering and delivery logistics with produce managers at different store locations, then drive across the Kansas City metro to drop

off her product. This process was time intensive and inefficient. Eventually, it was streamlined so that Diana could bring all of her tomatoes to just one grocery store, from which BFS would distribute to other stores. This afforded Diana more time to ramp up agricultural production. In the peak of growing season, she supplied BFS with thousands of pounds of tomatoes weekly. As a result of this initial success, their local sourcing partnership expanded to include beef.

Realizing there was still more demand for local food than what she could supply on her own, Diana developed the for-profit alliance, Good Natured Family Farms (GNFF), in 1997. Local producers who adhere to certain farming practices (e.g. crops grown with limited use of pesticides, animals raised free range)²³ can join GNFF to receive assistance in meeting BFS requirements for packing, labeling, insurance, and Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification. While product labels still identify the name of each farm, they also include the GNFF logo, which has become a recognizable and trusted symbol for BFS customers.

The early partnership with GNFF greatly bolstered local food offerings across BFS stores. In 2004, the value of products supplied by GNFF to BFS reached \$2 million.²⁴ Today, GNFF boasts a membership of 150 small farms.²⁵

*"The whole mission of Good Natured Family Farms and Good Natured Family Farms Alliance is **growing the local food system and being able to try to develop aggregation and distribution units.**"*

Diana Endicott

Co-owner of Rainbow Organic Farms and founder of Good Natured Family Farms

"If you can buy it at the farmer's market, you should be able to buy it at our stores."

Lou Malaponti

Director of Produce and Floral Operations at Balls Food Stores

In the early 2000s, BFS took additional steps to highlight local products throughout their stores and connected with Food Routes to utilize their "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" slogan and branding. While it was initially utilized solely in their Hen House stores, whose primary clientele includes higher income households, it is now used across the board in all of their stores. In 2006, the company also started offering a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program in two of their stores. For \$25 per week, customers could join the CSA, receive a basket of locally grown produce, and save up to 25% on local foods. In their first year of offering this in-store CSA program, Director of Produce and Floral Operations Lou Malaponti reported a 41% increase in their sales of local product. In 2007, the company expanded this program to five stores, eventually offering it throughout their entire company. It ran for roughly a decade. At the height of the CSA program, approximately 1,500 households were participating. The program ended due to the time and labor it required at each store, yet the company's commitment to local sourcing continued.



GROWTH AND EVOLUTION

As demand for local food across BFS stores continued to grow, the company sought other innovations to streamline sourcing logistics. To do so, BFS established their own centralized warehouse for local sourcing.

Managing a warehouse was nothing new for BFS. The company had managed a “forward-buy” warehouse since the 1970s: BFS would buy large quantities of shelf-stable products when they came on sale, then hold them at the warehouse until needed. This allowed BFS to keep prices low for customers, adding to their competitive advantage. However, this original forward-buy warehouse was not used for local sourcing. It wasn’t until 2000, when BFS moved into a larger 55,000-square-foot warehouse, that the company started dedicating some warehousing space for local products.

Then, in 2023, BFS leased a 125,000-square-foot warehouse. Unlike their previous warehouses, this new warehouse was specifically designed with local sourcing in mind. The facility includes four 10,000-square-foot coolers, each with a different temperature zone catered to a family of produce. In peak growing season (July to August), over 50% of the cold storage space is taken up by local



food. The warehouse, which employs 31 individuals, also includes 80,000 square feet of dry storage. Local producers unload product at the central warehouse, and then BFS distributes it to their 25 stores and another 30 stores owned by other retailers in the Kansas City metro.

Another use of the warehouse is to store product for food pantries. According to David Ball, the warehouse is the “largest food provider for pantries in the greater Kansas City area.” Food pantries are able to purchase food “at half the price they could buy it anywhere else,” per David. The food pantries purchase all local product when it is available in the summertime.

“We’ve always been involved with local producers and growers, and then what really got us into our big local program was our warehouse.”

David Ball

President of Balls Food Stores



TIMELINE OF Balls Food Stores

- 1923**
Sidney and Mollie Ball open their first store in Kansas City, Kansas.
- EARLY 1970s**
BFS begins using a forward-buy warehouse.
- 1995**
BFS establishes a partnership with Diana Endicott, co-owner of Rainbow Organic Farms.
- 1996**
BFS becomes the largest retail grocer in the Kansas City metro.
- 1997**
Diana Endicott establishes Good Natured Family Farms, which helps bolster local sourcing opportunities across BFS stores.
- 2000**
Third generation grocer David Ball takes over leadership of BFS. The company begins using warehouse space to store local food.
- EARLY 2000s**
BFS purchases a charter to utilize the “Buy Fresh, Buy Local” slogan and branding to market local products in their stores.
- 2006**
BFS starts an in-store Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program.
- 2023**
BFS moves into their current central warehouse, designed to expand local sourcing capacity.



OPERATIONS

AGGREGATE PRODUCT AT CENTRAL WAREHOUSE

To sell to BFS, farmers must have GAP certification and have a \$1 million liability insurance policy. Product labels must also identify the field where food was grown for food safety and traceability purposes. BFS does not impose any minimum volume requirements or slotting fees, and farmers are paid on a net 14 payment schedule.

For larger farms producing specialty items such as corn and watermelons, BFS calls to request a truck of product when needed. They can also accommodate spur-of-the-moment deliveries from smaller independent farmers. The company also picks up products from some producers for a small fee. This is particularly relevant for the Amish and Mennonite communities in southeast Kansas who lack refrigerated storage and transportation equipment. During the summer months, BFS leaves two 53-foot refrigerated trailers at the farm and picks them back up every other day. If the season goes well, this frequency is increased to daily.

DELIVER PRODUCT TO STORES

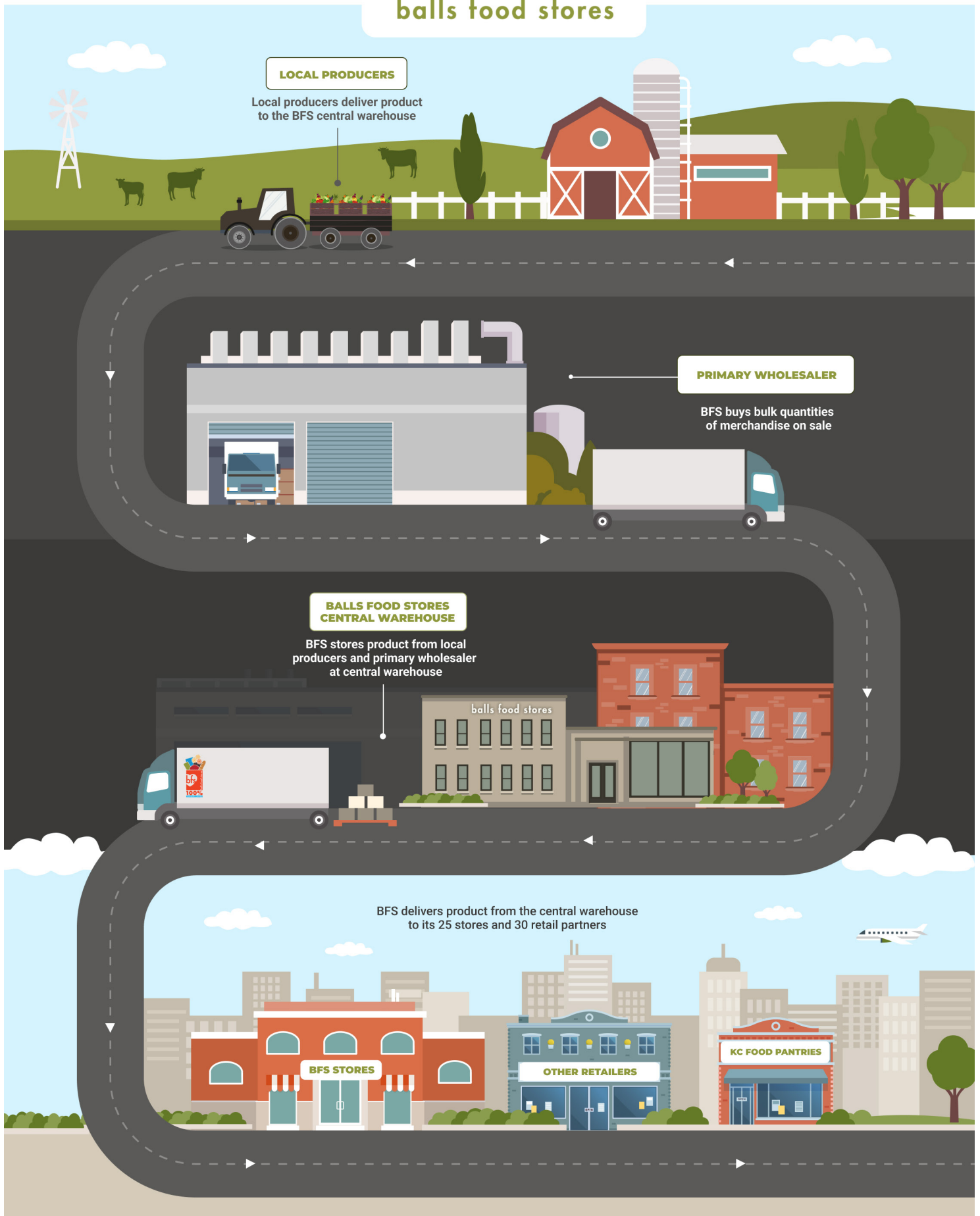
Regardless of how the local products arrive, they are logged as warehouse inventory so that BFS and partner stores can place

orders as needed. The warehouse receives orders, pulls, palletizes, and delivers products from their warehouse to over 50 stores within a 45-mile radius, including those owned by BFS and other retailers in the area. All of this work is completed by the 31 warehouse employees, including a warehouse supervisor, head produce buyer, assistant produce buyer, grocery buyer, receiving people, inspectors, pickers, and handlers. Unlike traditional grocery warehouses which add a markup to their products, the BFS warehouse does not mark up their products for their stores. Instead, the costs to keep the warehouse functioning (such as the cost of utilities, rent, and employee salaries) are charged back to the BFS stores on a quarterly basis.

ADJUST LOCAL PRODUCT OFFERINGS BASED ON DEMAND

At the end of each season, typically in October or November, the BFS team meets with local producers to review sales from the prior year and plan for the year ahead. An informal agreement is developed to include the type of products and estimated weekly quantities that BFS needs to meet customer demand. This timely planning allows BFS and local producers to adjust seasonally based historical sales data. On occasion, BFS provides loans for up-front seed costs so that producers can supply BFS with in-demand products.

balls food stores



IMPACT SUMMARY

2024 IMPACT SUMMARY



\$5 MILLION

IN GROSS LOCAL FOOD
SALES OVERALL



\$4 MILLION

PAID TO LOCAL PRODUCERS



**31 FULL-TIME
STAFF EMPLOYED**

AT CENTRAL WAREHOUSE



**100 LOCAL
PRODUCERS**

SUPPLYING TO BFS



20-25% OF PRODUCE SALES DURING
GROWING SEASON ARE
LOCALLY SOURCED



285,000

WEEKLY SHOPPERS
ON AVERAGE, ACROSS BFS STORES



**2,700 TEAMMATES
EMPLOYED**

ACROSS THE ENTIRE BFS COMPANY
(BOTH FULL-TIME AND PART-TIME)



OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

While there are many benefits to local sourcing, making the commitment to source local products comes with challenges. After BFS agrees upon a price with a local producer, they may later find a lower priced product from a non-local source. For example, BFS may have agreed to pay a local producer \$0.60 per pound for zucchini. If there is a sudden flush of zucchini available from Mexico for \$0.25 per pound, it can be tempting from a business perspective to take advantage of the lower cost product. However, doing so would break trust and damage the relationships that BFS has established with local producers. BFS aims to stay true to their commitment to certain price points with local producers: in order to meet the company's local sourcing goals, they must have local producers who want to supply to them.

“Are you really committed to support the local [producer]? Because when the price comes down over here, you can’t just say: ‘Sorry, you have to lower your price.’ There’s a working relationship there.”

Lou Malaponti

Director of Produce and Floral Operations at Balls Food Stores



Another challenge BFS faced in establishing their local food program was the labor required to support these efforts. Lou Malaponti, Director of Produce and Floral Operations, recalls “spending hours and hours on phones” to manage relationships with local producers on top of his other job responsibilities. Eventually, BFS moved a produce manager to the warehouse to be their dedicated point person for local sourcing. This dedicated labor was essential in empowering BFS to effectively communicate with local producers and build their local food program.



KEY FINDINGS AND LESSONS LEARNED

BUSINESS MODEL AND OPERATIONS

A critical component of the BFS local sourcing model is their central warehouse. Before, local producers had to coordinate orders with numerous produce managers and transport product to various locations across Kansas City. This was inefficient for both the producers and stores. The central warehouse, however, streamlines this process by allowing local producers to coordinate and deliver products to just one location. BFS does not ask for a minimum quantity from local producers, which allows them to try new products and adjust as needed.

FINANCIAL STRATEGY

BFS has established a number of revenue streams to make their warehouse financially feasible, including sales to the stores under their banner, sales of local food to other retailers in the Kansas City metro, and even sales to food pantries. Furthermore, the company buys bulk quantities of merchandise from their primary wholesaler when it is on sale and holds it in their central warehouse. This enables the company to keep prices low for customers, adding to their competitive advantage. Furthermore, the 25 stores owned by BFS are not charged a markup on the products supplied by the BFS central warehouse.

EQUIPMENT, TECHNOLOGY, AND INFRASTRUCTURE

The current warehouse utilized by BFS was designed with local sourcing in mind. This includes everything from the drainage system for cleaning, to new LED lighting for greater energy efficiency, to more cooler space for storing larger volumes. The BFS warehouse has 23 dock doors which can accommodate a variety of volumes, and specific docks are used for specific trucks.

Right now, BFS staff do much of their ordering by instinct. To more accurately track sales and improve ordering efficiency, BFS is in the process of implementing new AI software that uses historical data to inform stores what they most likely need to order. The company hopes this technology can help them make better day-to-day decisions, eliminate out-of-stock items, and reduce over supply at stores.

EQUIPMENT AND SPACE BREAKDOWN OF BFS CENTRAL WAREHOUSE

USE OF SPACE	SQUARE FEET**
Cold Storage	40,000 square feet (4 coolers, each 10,000 square feet)
Dry Storage	80,000 square feet
Receiving and Staging Area	8,000 square feet
Vehicles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 53-foot refrigerated trailers with diesel tractors • 1 28-foot refrigerated box truck
Warehouse/Aggregation Equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 sit-down forklifts • 1 stand-up forklift • 14 rider jacks • 6 motorized electric power jacks
Technology	Produce Pro* software for ordering and warehouse inventory management

***Note:** Brand names appearing in this publication are for product identification purposes only. No endorsement is intended, nor is criticism implied, of similar products not mentioned.

****Note:** There may be overlapping functions for the same square footage.

PRODUCT OFFERINGS

BFS has worked to establish relationships with 100 local producers located within a 250-mile radius of Kansas City. BFS adjusts its local product offerings based on customer demand. At the end of each season, the BFS team meets with local producers to review how their products sold. This enables local producers to plan for planting for the next growing season and build the supply needed to meet customer demand. The products in highest demand in 2024 included watermelon, sweet corn, and tomatoes.

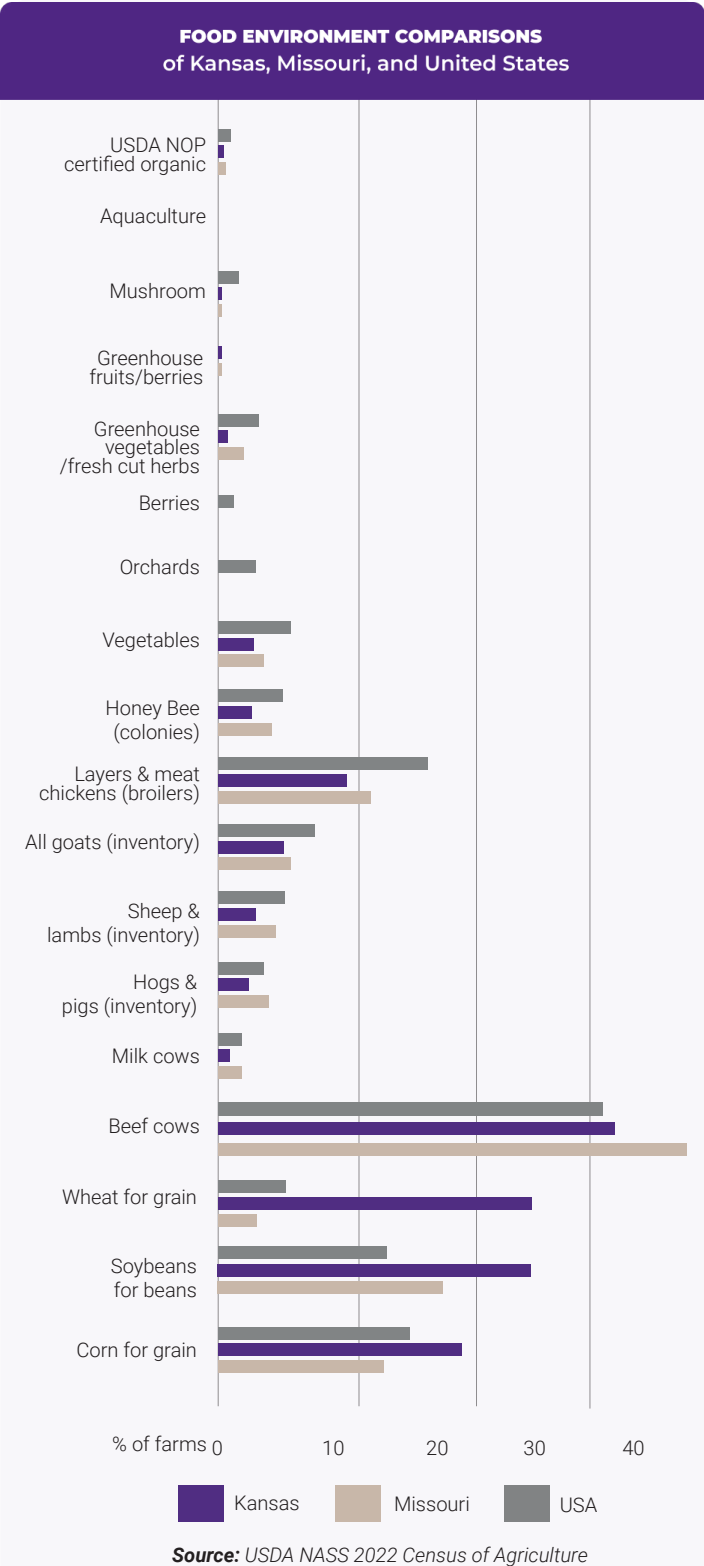
PARTNERSHIPS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Contributing to the company’s successful local food program is marketing community engagement. The company’s marketing efforts, which includes “Buy Fresh, Buy Local” signage, highlights the local food offerings and the benefits of buying local food. Additional marketing materials, including brochures that feature pictures of local producers, encourage customers to “enjoy the freshest, most delicious locally grown and produced foods from the Kansas City area and support local family farmers 1,000’s of Miles Fresher!” Importantly, BFS seeks to ensure customers know where local food products are coming from. They have even hosted “Meet the Grower” events in their stores to build connections between customers and the people who grow their food.²⁶

“You can’t have a sign up that says ‘Local Squash’ and then have a teammate putting out something that says ‘Product of Mexico’ on the box. The sign integrity is crucial to making sure that our customers trust what we are saying when we say something is local. It has to be local.”

Lou Malaponti
Director of Produce and Floral
Operations at Balls Food Stores

In addition to community engagement, partnerships have been critical to the BFS model. An initial partnership with Diana Endicott from Good Natured Family Farms enabled BFS to greatly expand their producer network and local product offerings.



CONCLUSION

When it began in 1923, locally sourced food was a mainstay of Balls Food Stores. More than a century later, even as the grocery industry has evolved to prioritize scale and efficiency, the company has remained committed to offering local food. By establishing a central warehouse designed for local sourcing, BFS has been able to significantly

streamline operations and expand the local food offerings at each of their 25 store locations. The lessons learned from this case study aim to provide insights into one option for larger scale grocery stores to source more local food.



ABOUT THE PROJECT

PROJECT OVERVIEW

This case study is part of a larger research project that highlights innovative models for increasing access to local foods in independent and locally owned grocery stores. Through in-depth explorations of businesses and organizations that are leading the way, we sought to answer the following research question: What lessons can be learned from innovative local sourcing models that could help locally owned, independent, and rural groceries become better integrated into local and regional supply chains? To read other local sourcing case studies in this project, visit www.ruralgrocery.org.

PROJECT TEAM

This research project was carried out through a Cooperative Agreement between the Rural Grocery Initiative at Kansas State University and USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service. Funding was provided through USDA Cooperative Agreement No. 23-TMLRF-KS-0021. The Rural Grocery Initiative aims to sustain locally owned rural grocery stores to enhance community vitality and improve access to healthy foods. It does so by identifying, developing, and sharing resources that support grocers and rural communities. The Agricultural Marketing Service administers programs that create domestic and international marketing opportunities for U.S. producers of food, fiber, and specialty crops. It also provides the agriculture industry with valuable services to ensure the quality and availability of wholesome food for consumers across the country and around the world.

METHODOLOGY

This research project was broken into four phases:

PHASE ONE –

In Phase 1, the project team developed a Project Advisory Committee to confirm project goals. The Project Advisory Committee was made up of key stakeholders who convened virtually four times over the course of the project to provide feedback and direction.

PHASE TWO –

In Phase 2, the project team solicited examples of innovative local sourcing models from across the country. As examples were received, the project team conducted preliminary research using secondary sources and saved this data in a catalog. This preliminary research allowed the research team to categorize models and determine which five examples to interview.

PHASE THREE –

In Phase 3, the project team conducted interviews with two to four stakeholders (e.g. grocers, producers, distributors, community organizations, etc.) from each of the five distinct local sourcing models selected.

PHASE FOUR –

In Phase 4, the team drafted in-depth case studies about each model and worked with a graphic designer to develop visuals. These resources were then promoted to partners and stakeholders.

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