

Moving the Food Movement: Introducing Open Food Network Canada

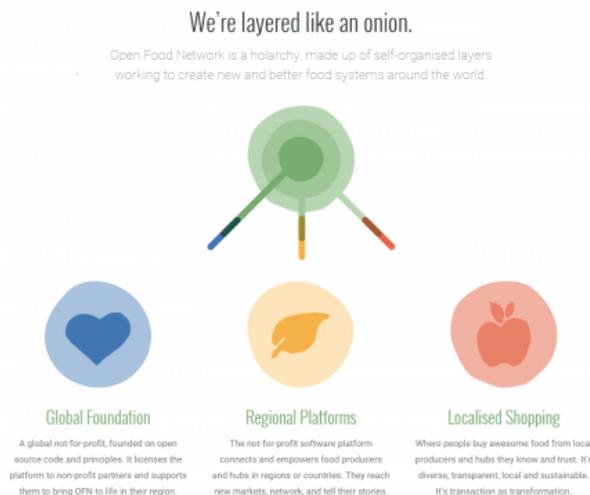
Theresa Schumilas



Sometimes the best way to fix a system is to build a new one.

That's what is happening as small scale ecological farms and food artisans in Ontario swap their pitch forks for keyboards and smart phones to help launch and test a new on-line platform that promises to "move the food movement" around the world.

Open Food Network Canada (OFN-CAN) is a newly registered not-for-profit organization that is leveling the technology playing field and empowering small scale producers, artisans and food hubs to 'get on-line' with a new open source platform. The Open Food Network (OFN) acts as a directory, advertising space, online marketplace and tool for sharing information and resources about sustainable food systems. The OFN platform is layered – like an onion. You can start simple and 'grow' into the more powerful features.



Start with a profile on the map and expand when you are ready.

A ‘profile’ on the OFN and its searchable map gives producers, processors and artisans a way to market themselves. This is a brief description of your farm, food business or retail store, very similar to what you likely already have on a [Buy Local Buy Fresh type map](#), or on [Ontario Fresh](#) for example. The profile can be used to promote your products and services, share your story and provide contact details. A profile makes you visible and contactable to eaters and other enterprises who might wish to trade with you. A profile helps you build networks. On OFN, a profile takes about 10 minutes to set up and it is completely free.

Producers, Empowered.

An OFN shop is like a profile, but it also includes all the functions needed for producers to sell directly to eaters and other buyers online. This includes an online shop with full checkout capabilities, as well as behind the scenes tools to aid in administration, such as reporting of payments and inventory. The OFN is flexible, scalable and has producers’ interests at heart. Producers set their own prices and tell their stories. You determine your inventory level - whether it is 5 bunches of beets, a ton of potatoes, 6 jars of pickles, a side of beef, cut flowers, CSA shares --- whatever!! You decide the timing of orders, pick-up/delivery details, payment mechanisms, and if you want to work through distributors/hubs, sell direct to eaters, or both.

But OFN is more than a bunch of on-line stores. We are building a food system – a network of networks. Unlike an independent shop (like you might set up with Shopify for example), OFN shops can be networked. So you can link to other OFN stores, food hubs and online markets. This means that you can manage and update your ever-changing inventory in ONE place! With the OFN the producer is queen. You grant permission to other shops and hubs to sell from your inventory. No more lists of how many kg of this, or bunches of that, or flats of something set aside for so and so. No more last minute calls to your retailers to tell them you have extra product. No more frantic trips back out to a rainy field to see if there are two more bunches of chard to be cut because in the chaos of managing your farm you lost a phone message and now you are short. (Oh yeah - we’ve been there!) The platform takes care of all this inventory management. But sorry, you still need to do the back breaking work to produce it. We haven’t written the code for that yet.

Food Hubs, Unlimited

Whatever your business model, we support you. However you change, we’re with you. We’re non-profit, independent and open-sourced.

We are the software partners you’ve dreamed of.

The OFN makes it easier to sell directly to eaters. But we also know that we can help more people get more good food, and help producers sell more, if we can build a new kind of ‘middle’ in the system. In fact the power of this technology really shines when we think about hundreds of small, medium and large food hubs, on-line markets, specialty stores and so on, that are all working together as a network of networks.



Dear supermarket, I'm breaking up with you. PS. I've met someone on-line.

The OFN provides logistic support that makes it really easy for people who are not producers to be part of building new sustainable food systems. You can start a food hub, buying club or on-line farmers' market in your workplace, community centre, neighbourhood, school or wherever. It can distribute products from a handful of producers, or it can coordinate distribution for 200 producers. We're scalable. The OFN manages your hub's product listings and stock levels. It organizes orders and online payments, generates invoices and export reports, and keeps track of customer details. You can have different business relationships and payment or delivery terms with different suppliers. You can have different arrangements (prices, delivery, and product availability) for members versus non-members. We build the OFN to deal with some of the thorny logistical issues that have been holding back food hubs. For example, the OFN:

- Tracks dynamic inventory as supplies from producers increase or decrease because of weather challenges or crop failures
- Adds up orders to pre-set minimums to solve minimum case orders from distributors
- Collates volumes from multiple small scale producers in order to meet demands of larger buyers
- Allows for simultaneous order cycles that are targeted differently (different delivery days, different user groups, different producer groups...)
- Enables the formation of buying groups, 'sub-hubs' or pop-up markets attached to larger hubs
- Integrates easily with social media platforms to help you build your networks
- Curates a resource centre that shares resources on sustainable food systems and food hubs and links Canada's sustainable food innovators with like-minded people around the world
- Is mobile! We've built OFN to work on touch screens, and to scale to fit your device. Whether you're on a personal computer, a tablet, or a smart phone, as long as you're connected to the internet then you have full access to all features.



Ethical Shopping, simplified

For ethical eaters, the platform helps you buy your food from a range of producers and food hubs near you, lowering your food miles and helping you make sustainable food choices. You can search the network for producers and hubs by location or by product. Or you can narrow your search to only organic, grass-fed, free range, non-GMO, pesticide free products, and so on. The network will help producers share their stories, so you can learn about farming challenges as you shop. You can shop as a guest or sign up as a regular. Signing up as a regular shopper makes your weekly order easier to place. OFN remembers your details and preferences when you check out, so you can re-order quickly without scrolling through the shop next time.

Plus, the OFN enables full transparency. Because all food traded on the OFN must be linked to the farmer who produced it, eaters can see where their food originated from and how it was produced. In OFN shops, the pricing is also transparent, so customers can see what cut of the sale price went to the producer. Our ultimate goal is fair price to farmers and affordable, good food for eaters.

Is it hard to learn?

Like any new technology, there is a learning curve. OFN-Canada is a not-for-profit organization and we are looking for funding so we can offer producers support to help them get started. But we are not there yet. Right now we are building a ‘train the trainer’ model, and we are looking for a group of interested users and volunteers to help us. We are nested global network of supportive ‘power users’ and technical experts who are available to help us along this learning curve until we can stand on our own feet.

How much does it cost?

I know this all sounds like a sales pitch. It is not. If you are currently using a software program or platform that does what you need it to do, at a price that works for you, then you should **NOT switch** to the OFN. Don’t fix something that is not broken. We are interested in building more sustainable and collaborative food systems, not in building a tech empire. **Indeed, we are the anti-Uber.** We are food, **unincorporated.** Our goal is to get more good food to eaters at affordable prices, make earning a livelihood easier for food producers and artisans, ignite a new kind of ‘middle’ in our food system, and move the food movement to a new place.



Setting up a profile on the site is, and will always be, free. If a producer, artisan, store or hub wants to sell goods, then 2% of transactions (up to a monthly maximum that is still to be determined) will support OFN-Canada's work. All proceeds are re-invested back into the open source code. We are building a technological commons that supports food system change. Your fees go to OFN to pay for server maintenance, technical support, and new feature development.

Crowd-sourced roadmap

We believe the best way to determine the roadmap of development for OFN is to ask the people with a vested interest – small scale producers, food artisans, food hubs, buying clubs, small on-line stores and engaged eaters. So for now, we are waiving all user fees so people can check out the platform and 'play around'.

Help us transform food systems fairly.

We understand your passion for changing the food system. It's why we get out of bed every day. We're a global network of not-for-profits, based on open source code. We know you have big ideas, and so do we. But big ideas usually start with modest, practical manifestations. So we've set up a few little shops. Yes there are a few glitches - we are still on a learning curve. But **check them out**, make a purchase or two. Let us know what you think and if you want to get more deeply involved in growing Open Food Network Canada.

You can follow this project as it develops. We'll keep posting updates here on the [FLEdGE Research site](#), on our [facebook page](#), and of course we'll be sharing all things related to food systems and tech on our twitter feed [@openfoodcanada](#).

Theresa Schumilas is a postdoctoral fellow with the Laurier Centre for Sustainable Food Systems. Her research focuses on how emerging internet and communication technologies offers new opportunities to Canada's diverse sustainable food movements.