

MISSOULA FOOD POLICY  
ADVISORY BOARD  
**NEWSLETTER**

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# The Magic of Montana Marinara

BY BLAKE LINEWEAVER, *Mission West Local Food Promotion Program Manager*

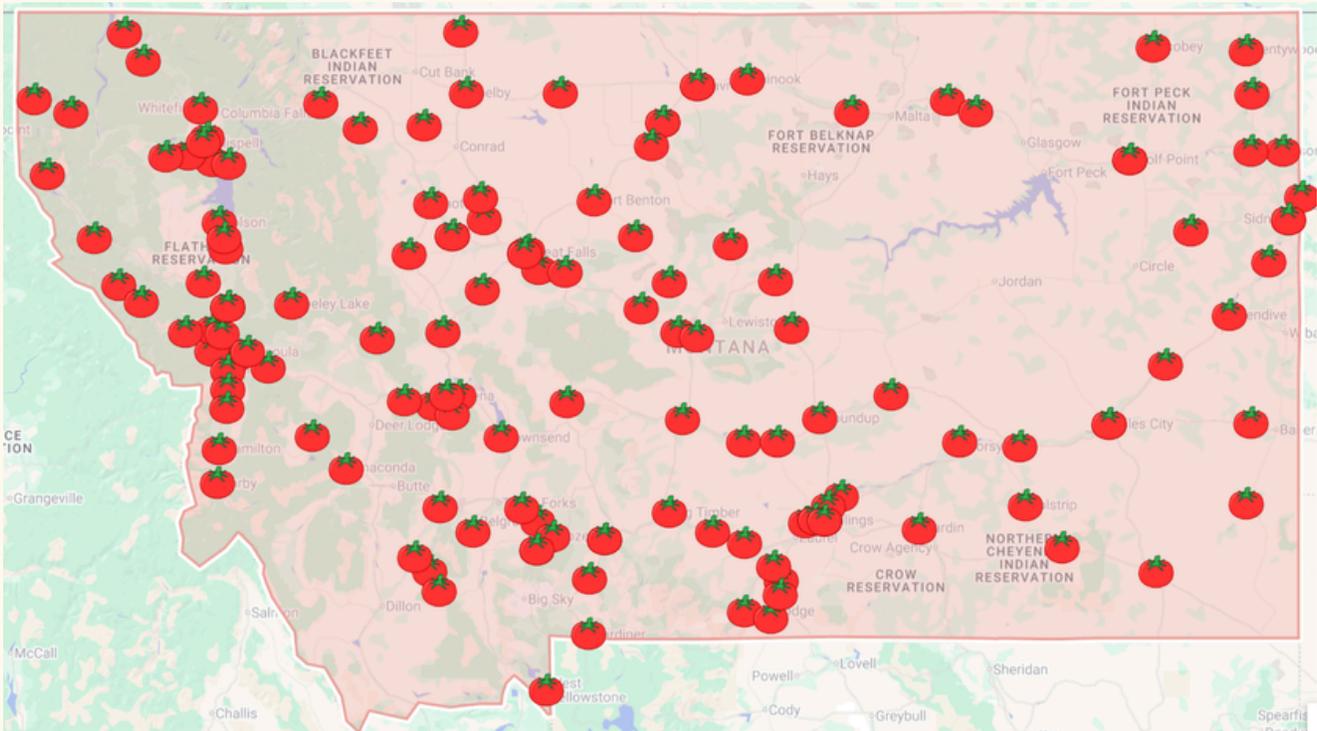
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Each year, Montana schools serve nearly 20 million meals to students (OPI, 2023). Research shows the instrumental role school nutrition plays in supporting academic success and instilling healthy food habits that last a lifetime. Beyond the cafeteria, school meal programs can be valuable partners in strengthening our agricultural economy with reliable and consistent sales to local farmers, ranchers, and food businesses.

However, many “large-volume” foodservice programs, such as K-12 schools, face challenges in purchasing locally grown foods. For the purposes of this article, ‘local’ refers to food grown or produced within the state or 400 miles of where it is consumed. The price of local food compared to subsidized conventional options is frequently cited as a barrier, as is limited awareness of which suppliers offer local food through wholesale channels. Many of Montana’s largest school districts, such as Missoula County Public Schools, also lack the capacity to process fresh,

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*Marinara, continued*



Distribution of Montana Marinara across the state during the 2025-2026 school year.

whole foods into readily consumable meals due to a lack of labor or equipment. And even when a suitable local product is available at the right volume and price, it may not be accessible through an established distributor's route.

These pinch points are precisely where innovation and collaboration are essential to making inroads with high-opportunity markets. Montana Marinara is a homegrown example of this kind of innovation, originally inspired by a foodservice director with Missoula County Public Schools over ten years ago and successfully brought to life in 2022. The farm-to-school project combines USDA Foods diced tomatoes and paste with locally grown butternut squash, onions, and carrots sourced from the Western Montana Growers Cooperative at the Mission Mountain Food Enterprise Center based in Ronan, an hour north of Missoula. The result is a nutrient-dense, versatile tomato sauce that fits seamlessly into any school menu or kitchen – and thanks to OPI's partnership, the product is ordered through schools' annual USDA Foods survey and distributed via OPI's trucks to any Montana district enrolled in the National School Lunch Program.

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Students taste test MT Marinara at Jeanette Rankin Elementary School in Missoula.

The project is now in its fourth year and has become a cornerstone of the Montana Office of Public Instruction's efforts to bring fresh, local foods to school districts across the state. This January, over 1,700 cases of Montana Marinara were shipped to 145 school districts statewide and provided a guaranteed market opportunity for over 15,000 pounds of locally

grown vegetables. This year's program was made possible through generous funding from the Montana Department of Commerce and Department of Agriculture, which covered all procurement and processing costs on behalf of school districts.

Following the success of Montana Marinara, Mission West and partners hope to expand the model further through a cherry bar pilot designed for school breakfast programs that combines locally grown cherries, honey, and safflower oil with USDA Foods rolled oats, reflecting a growing commitment get Montana-grown food on Montana school trays.



The foodservice team at Anderson School hosted a taste test as part of a statewide Marinara Madness campaign held each spring celebrating local foods in schools.





Piglets born at the Missoula County Public School Agriculture Center. The Ag Center offers students the opportunity to learn about animal husbandry amongst other agricultural skills.

# Spring at the Ag Center

*BY TOM ANDRES, Big Sky High School Ag Teacher & FFA Advisor*

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It already feels like spring at the MCPS Agriculture Education Center. The sows have all farrowed and the piglets are growing great. We had a bumper crop of piglets from sows that the students artificially bred earlier in the school year. The 4-H and FFA kids will take over ownership in April and you will be seeing many of these market pigs at the Western Montana Fair.

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Our lambs have all been born and they will be taken on as student projects too. The first calf is scheduled to drop March 10th. The Ag Center runs a registered herd of Belted Galloway cattle but are more commonly referred to as “Oreo cows.”

Many of the Ag classes have been busy starting plants in the greenhouse and it is already starting to fill up. Watch for our greenhouse sale around Mother’s Day. Other students have been busy in the shop building metal projects, like hay feeders, that will be useful come spring. It is never a dull moment on the school farm.

Missoula high school students have been actively learning about agriculture on the 90 acre working farm for almost 100 years. We like to consider it the “Jewel of the school.” Students actively contribute to food production all the way from conception to consumption.

The MCPS Ag Center is located off of South Avenue, just west of Big Sky High School and the Fort Missoula Regional Park.



Photos of Ag Center students with their animals. Photos courtesy of Tom Andres.



Photos of Ag Center students with their animals. Photos courtesy of Tom Andres.



# BOOK RELEASE

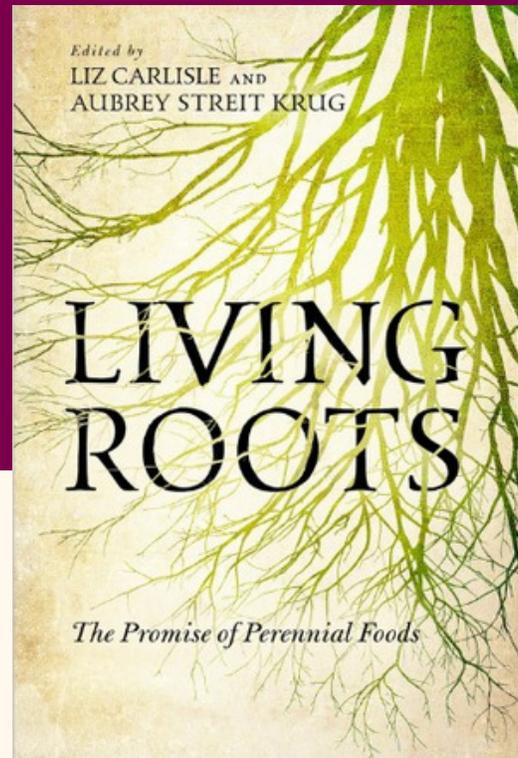
**DATE:** Thursday, April 14

**TIME:** 6 - 8 pm

**LOCATION:** Balsamroot Conference Room, 1<sup>st</sup> floor Exploration Center

**REGISTRATION:**

[www.missoulaeduplace.edu](http://www.missoulaeduplace.edu)



On Tuesday, April 14, we at Missoula County are super fortunate to have author, activist, and Professor, Liz Carlisle join us once again.

Liz is one of Missoula's favorite daughters. She grew up right here, went to Hellgate high school and then things kind of went south for her for a bit – Harvard undergrad, a successful music career, a PhD from UC Berkeley, a professorship at UC Santa Barbara and then she wrote a trio of celebrated and influential food and farming books: *Lentil Underground*, *Grain by Grain* and *Healing Grounds*. On Tuesday, April 14, I will be moderating a discussion with Liz about her latest, and brand-new book *Living Roots*, at a public event at the G. W. Marks Exploration Center.

Researchers have documented well the environmental, social and climatic costs of our industrial food system; a system based on the factory-style production of annual crops. Liz and her co-author Aubrey Streit Krug compare our food system to fast fashion. It meets a short term need quickly, easily and with nearly no friction for the consumer. Yet the system creates astronomical and horrific associated costs and embodies ecological precarity.

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At its core, farming attempts to use, bend, manipulate, and mimic natural forces, paths of energy, to meet specific goals – primarily food. Farming is biology first, but then, via food, farming touches literally every aspect of culture. No matter how you live, you are in it. As Wendell Berry said, “Eating is an agricultural act”.

With *Living Roots*, Liz and Aubrey acknowledge both the precarity of the food system and its widespread impact. At the heart of their book lies the question, “How do we build a food system that is made to last?” To divine an answer worthy of the scope of the problem, they cast the widest of nets and created a collection worthy of the scope of the problem. Liz and Aubrey assembled a rich array of essayists, scientists, poets and artists and tasked them with exploring a new path, “the promise of perennial foods”.

I hope you can join us in this homecoming to hear Liz talk about the results of that exploration. See you there.

Josh Slotnick  
Missoula County Commissioner



## READ, LISTEN, WATCH

MFPAB's suggestions for further learning

### **PODCAST: Reframing Rural Season 4: Succession Stories**

Telling stories of people and places not fully represented in the media or pop culture is at the heart of Reframing Rural's mission to reframe the narrative on rural America.

In Season Four, Reframing Rural unearths the stories laying beneath the logistics, stories from families navigating complex social and environmental factors as they work to preserve their agricultural way of life.

### **DOCUMENTARY: Gather**

Gather is an intimate portrait of the growing movement amongst Native Americans to reclaim their spiritual, political and cultural identities through food sovereignty, while battling the trauma of centuries of genocide.

# MFPAB wants to hear from you!

Community groups, individuals, and organizations all over Missoula County are advocating for increased access to healthy food for all. If you are a part of this effort, we want to hear your story! The more we stay connected to local action, the more effective we can be as a whole.

**Contact us to share your story!**

**foodpolicyadvisoryboard.msla@gmail.com**



## Who We Are

**The Missoula Food Policy Advisory Board (MFPAB) was established in 2020 to advise local government on policies and programs related to food and agriculture.**

MFPAB is specifically charged with providing recommendations to elected City and County officials to support the following:

- Healthy food access & nutrition
- Sustainability of human & natural resources necessary for agriculture
- Economic development of small & mid-sized food & farming businesses
- Strong & vibrant local food systems

The Board is comprised of nine appointed volunteer members who represent a variety of key interests within the food system, including members with expertise in food access, health and nutrition, local food production, food businesses, farm to school education, food system governance and analysis, and land use.

### **Meetings are open to the public!**

3rd Monday of the month, excepting holidays

3:30 pm - 5:00 pm

Exploration Center

1075 South Ave. West, Missoula, MT 59801

Clover Board Room, 2nd Floor

### **CONTACT**

**foodpolicyadvisoryboard.msla@gmail.com**

### **JOIN OUR NEWSLETTER**

