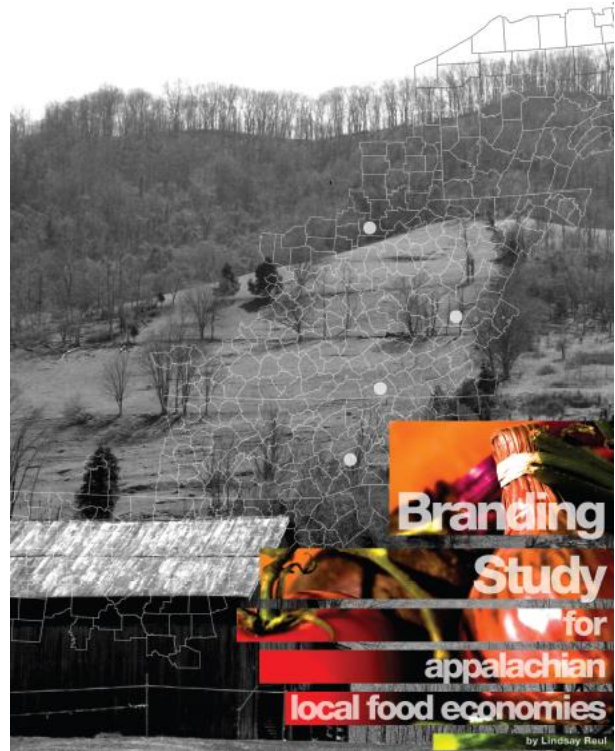


# Branding Study for Appalachian Local Food Economies

## Executive Summary

of the Report Prepared for the  
Central Appalachian Network by  
MIT's "Keeping Wealth Local"  
Clinic



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# Introduction to Appalachia and Background for the Food Branding Study

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Appalachia is a region characterized by mountainous landscapes, deeply rural communities, and strong agricultural traditions. While many areas of Appalachia remain relatively isolated, there is a growing movement to connect rural and agricultural communities to urban markets. CAN fosters market connections and distribution linkages through local food value chains that allow small and medium-scale producers and food entrepreneurs to tap into larger markets. A central part of this strategy is the ability to differentiate products that are produced sustainably and fairly within the region. To do so, several CAN member and partners have pursued branding strategies as a way of building broad consumer support for Appalachian local food products.

CAN has recognized that Appalachia's local food economies are booming, and with the increased demand and markets for local food comes a need to deepen our understanding of effective place-based branding efforts for local foods. With this in mind, CAN entered into a research collaboration with the MIT Keeping Wealth Local Clinic, who provided recent Master's program graduate Lindsay Reul to be the primary researcher and author of a branding study. The study had four main components:

- A literature review of branding and marketing best practices
- In-depth case studies of established Appalachian brands
- A scan of national place-based brands
- Conclusions and recommendations for effective branding efforts

## Branding and Marketing Literature Review and Best Known Practices

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There is a rich literature on branding and marketing, and an emerging body of research on place-based branding. This section of the study provided an overview of the basics of branding, some core branding principles, as well as best practices for place-based branding. Some of the highlights are described here.

**Branding is a component of a marketing strategy.** Branding helps to differentiate products, to describe their qualities and to show how they are different from other products. Branding is also an appeal to consumers' aspirations, because it offers a connection to consumer identity, values, location, and lifestyle.

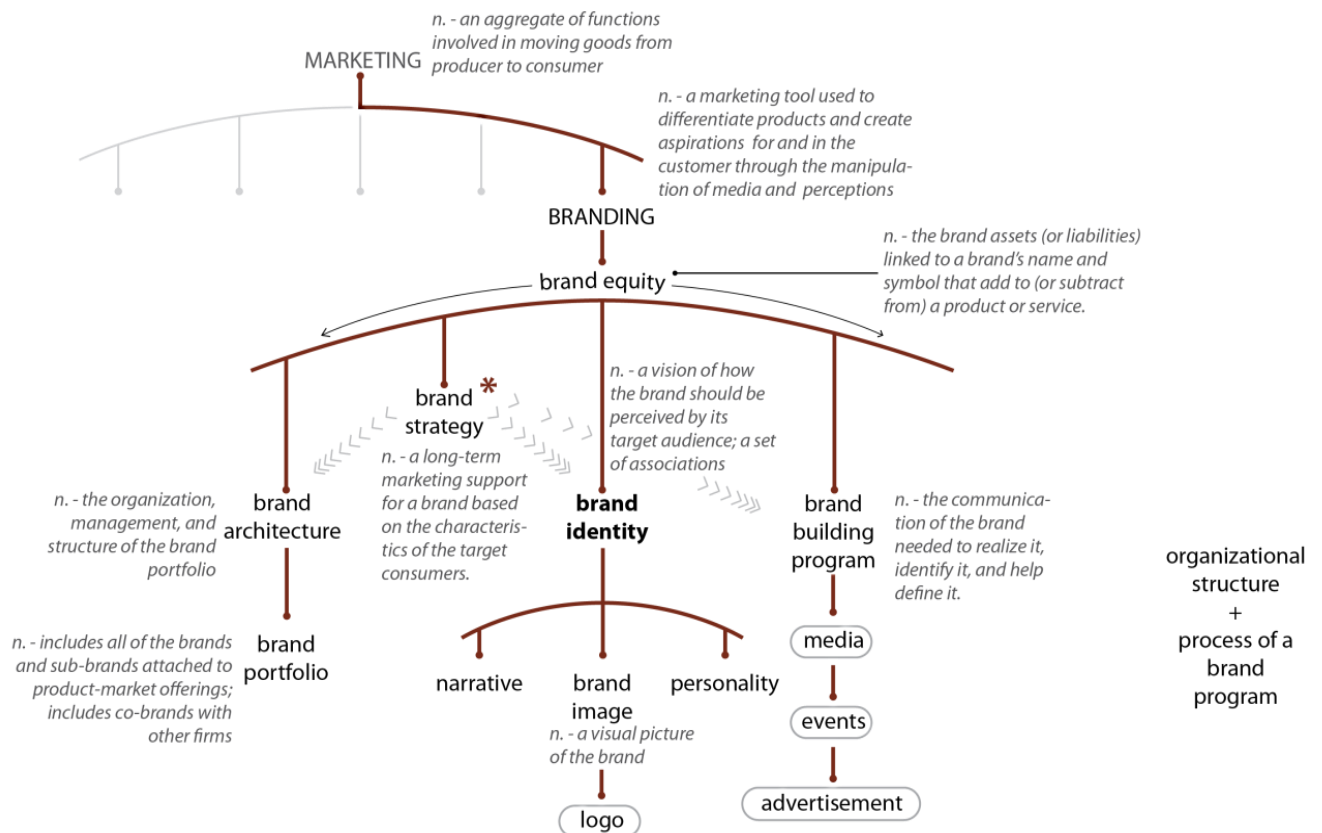
**Brand equity is more important than brand image.** While brand image is how a brand is perceived in any given moment, brand equity is the long term value of a brand. Brand equity is the set of qualities and assets that a brand invests in over time.

**Brand identity is what consumers associate with a brand.** This is the value proposition that a brand offers to a consumer. By purchasing your product, consumers are able to identify with certain values, locations, practices, and qualities that are associated with your brand. For place-based brands, the focus should be on narratives, imagery, and characteristics attributed to the source region.

**Place-based brands must craft a strong message.** The cardinal error of branding efforts is to over-complicate and confuse the brand identity, so don't try to be everything to everybody. Select one or two attributes to promote, and be sure to capture the driving idea behind the brand. Think about your target audience, and communicate with them in a way that is clear, precise, and differentiates your product.

**Local communities must identify with place-based brands.** Place-based brands need to involve consumers in their brand identity in order to be successful. This begins by engaging local communities and ensuring that the brand is developed from the inside out, reflecting the experiences and traditions of the local population. This co-creation of a brand ensures that it will have a consumer audience.

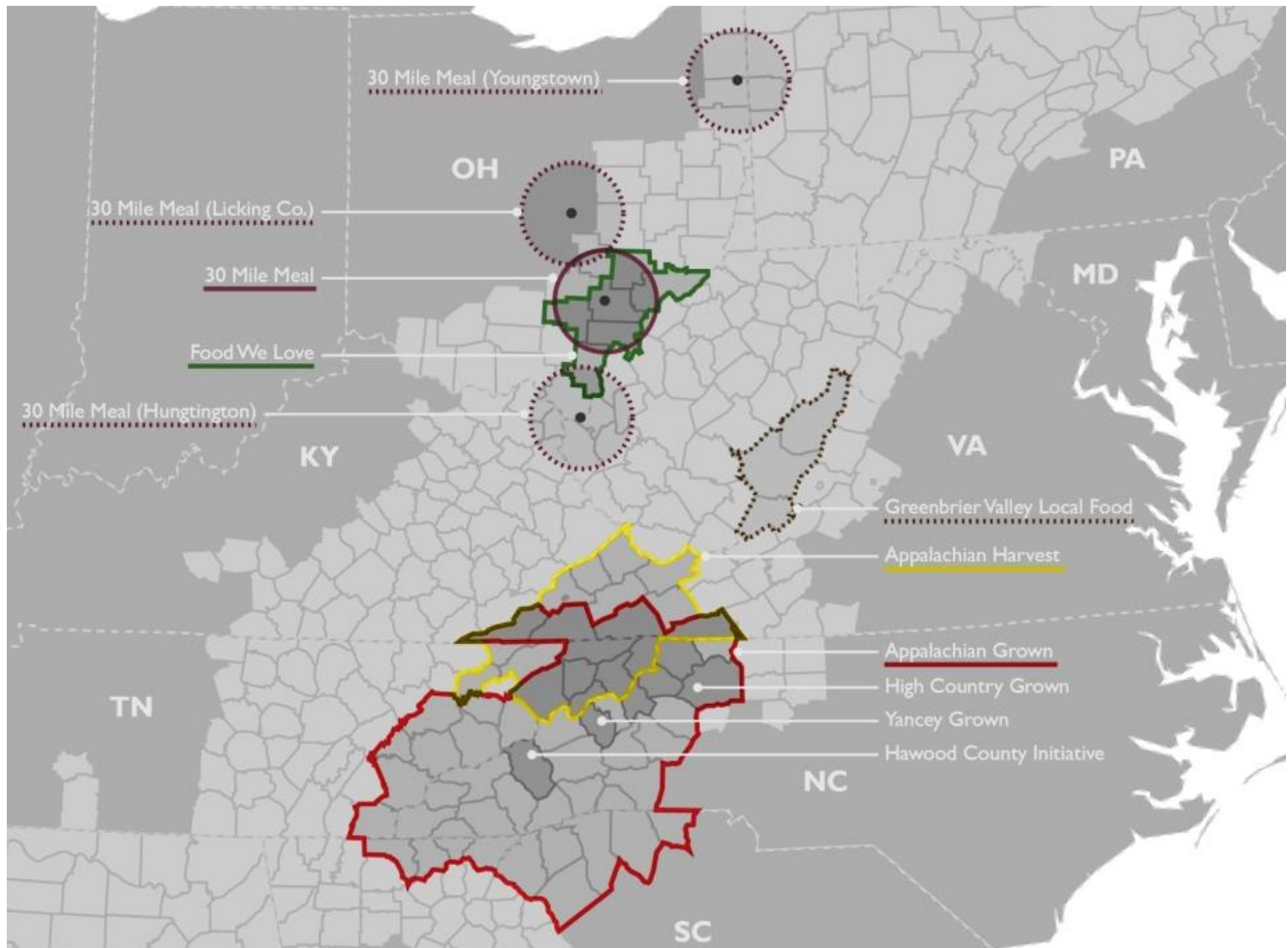
The image below shows the relationship between the different elements of a branding strategy program.



\* The reality of the brand program is that each of these branding components support one another. The strategy dictates the design of the architecture, brand identity, and brand building program; the brand building program materializes the brand identity; and the brand identity achieves the agenda of the brand strategy.

# Current Appalachian Brands

Several CAN members and partners have been pursuing local food branding as an economic development strategy for some time. The research selected 5 existing and emerging Appalachian food brands to profile and extract best practices from. The map below shows the source region (not distribution area) of each of the case study brands.



## Food We Love

**Managed by:** [ACEnet](#) (Appalachian Center for Economic Networks – CAN Member)

**Food product:** Value added processed food products (specialty foods)

**Intended market:** Direct markets for local consumption and wholesale markets for regional/national consumption (primarily retail grocery stores and commercial marketplaces)

**Epicenter of local food economy:** Athens, Ohio

**Key take-aways:** Strong relationships with commercial buyers and a strong consumer base that builds on Athens area's local food tradition.

## 30 Mile Meal

**Managed by:** [Real Food Real Local Institute](#) (CAN affiliated)

**Food product:** Both raw produce and value-added processed food products

**Intended market:** Direct and retail markets for local consumers (local farmer's markets, restaurants, and food retail locations)

**Epicenter of local food economy:** Athens, Ohio

**Key take-aways:** Hyper-local approach that focusses on a producers and businesses within a small geographical area; replicable model.

## Appalachian Harvest

**Managed by:** [ASD](#) (Appalachian Sustainable Development – CAN Member)

**Food product:** Certified organic fresh produce and free-range eggs; starting to brand conventional fresh produce as well

**Intended market:** Wholesale markets (via distribution centers and food brokers) for predominantly organic + some conventional food products; some direct market sales for organic food products

**Epicenter of local food economy:** Abingdon, Virginia

**Key take-aways:** More of a food hub than a branding program; focus on processing, aggregation, and distribution of small farmers' produce to regional retailers.

## Appalachian Grown

**Managed by:** [ASAP](#)

**Food product:** All food products

**Intended market:** Direct markets for local consumers (via local farmer's markets, restaurants, and food retail locations); some wholesale markets beyond the designated "local" region

**Epicenter of local food economy:** Asheville, North Carolina

**Key take-aways:** Certification brand based on a strict supply area allows for data management and precise definition of the term "local".

## Greenbrier Valley Grown

**Managed by:** [Greenbrier Valley EDC Local Foods Initiative](#) (CAN affiliated)

**Food product:** Grassfed beef, other livestock (pork, turkey, lamb, chicken), and fresh produce

**Intended market:** Direct and wholesale markets for local consumers (via local farmer's markets, restaurants, and food retail locations)

**Epicenter of local food economy:** Greenbrier Valley, West Virginia (Monroe County, Greenbrier County, and Pocahontas County, West Virginia)

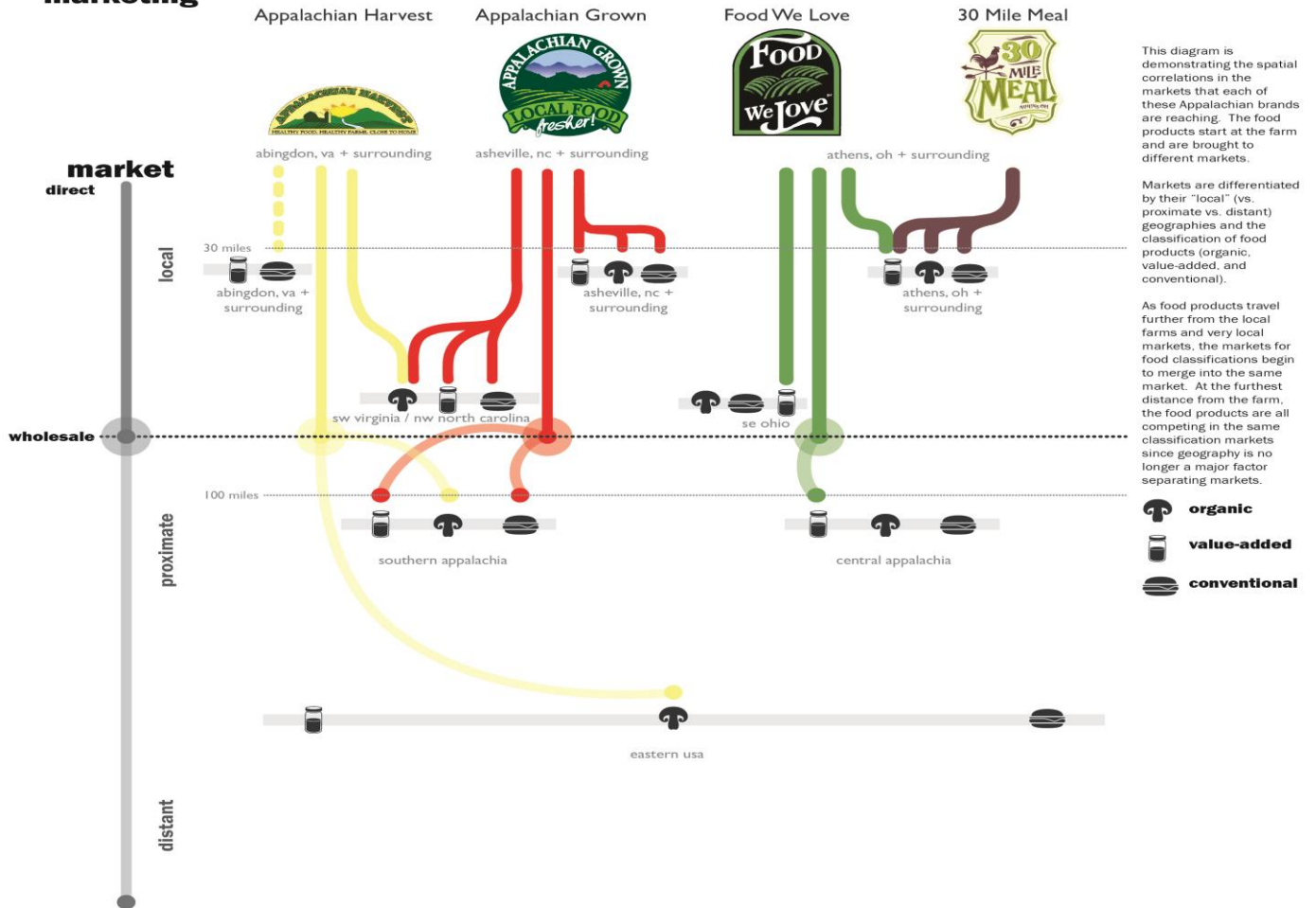
**Key take-aways:** Emerging brand aims to capitalize on extensive pastured beef industry; primary vehicles are certification, consumer education, and aggregation and distribution



# Appalachian Brand Markets

The diagram below shows the market destination for products of four of the brands profiled above.

## marketing



# National Case Studies

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For the scan of national case studies, the focus was on addressing the greatest possible range of brand characteristics. The brands that were selected are Vermont Food Products, Florida Citrus, Napa Valley, and Buy Fresh Buy Local. These four brands vary widely in categories such as funding source and sector, product type, geographic scale, and core strategies. These characteristics are summarized in the table below, along with the key takeaways and lessons that each case offers for a potential Appalachian umbrella brand.

| Brand/Case                       | Vermont Food Products  | Florida Citrus  | Napa Valley  | Buy Fresh Buy Local   |
|----------------------------------|--|---|--|---|
| Funding source                   | State-funded, various government initiatives                                       | State agency funded by industry tax   | Non-profit tourism and trade associations                                | Non-profit-based network of chapters  |
| Product                          | Multiple food products   | Single product (citrus)   | Multiple industries (wine and tourism)                                   | Multiple food products  |
| Geographic scale                 | State-wide   | State-wide  | County   | Various: state, county, city/town   |
| Core strategies                  | Sector-based promotion, exploration of an umbrella “Made in Vermont” brand         | Marketing, advocacy, information, and research to support citrus industry                               | Promote Napa Valley as a tourism destination and wine region             | Provide branding materials to support consumer education and local foods promotion  |
| Lessons for an Appalachian Brand | Importance of a place’s popular image; challenge of maintaining brand requirements | Combination of marketing, advocacy, and informational resources; Self-governance ensures responsiveness | Emphasis on the place of origin; combining tourism and product promotion | Universal recognition and adaptability of branding materials; Represent Appalachian qualities in adaptable umbrella brand |

# Conclusions and Recommendations

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The report also offered some general conclusions on what makes effective place-based branding, as well as recommendations for Appalachian branding efforts moving forward. They include the following:

- **Learn from what is working:** each case study brand provides an effective model and important lessons for existing and future branding efforts
- **Voluntary participation is key:** growers, food producers, and market partners have to choose to be part of a brand
- **Know your market:** each brand needs to understand consumer demand and make sure their plan will meet it
- **Reduce overlap between brands:** as more brands emerge to serve growing local markets, it will become more important to either differentiate or coordinate between brands
- **Be prepared for change:** Existing brands are working well, but expanding consumer demand will require growth and adaptation as demand for local food and value chains shifts
- **Improve regional coordination:** A regional brand could play a key coordination and information-providing role as markets for Appalachian food products continue to diversify by category and wholesale demand grows
- **Establish an umbrella brand:** CAN or a similar regional entity could provide existing and emerging brands with centralized coordination and information under a regional umbrella brand or roll-out of brand licensing programs



## Central Appalachian Network

Central Appalachian Network

For the full report: [Branding Study for Appalachian Food Economies \(PDF\)](#)

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