

Connecting Halal and Locally Grown Taqwa Eco-Food Chicago, Illinois

As the local food movement continues to grow rapidly, people from all faith backgrounds are joining in and creating new avenues to purchase food raised in accordance with the principles of their faith.

Taqwa Eco-Food, a Chicago-based food cooperative, is working to meet the needs of those wanting to purchase local meats raised and processed aligned with the principles of Islam.

History

Taqwa Eco-Food originated in 2001. It was created through a Chicago-based organization called Faith in Place, whose dedication to organizing people of all faith backgrounds to care for the earth has yielded great success. Part of Faith in Place's mission statement reads: "Faith in Place gives religious people the tools to become good stewards of the earth. We partner with religious congregations to promote clean energy and sustainable farming. Our mission is to help people of faith understand that issues of ecology and economy—of care for Creation—are at the forefront of social justice."

With this foundation, Taqwa Eco-Food was created to connect farmers to both Muslim and non-Muslim consumers. The word *Taqwa* means "God-consciousness," or being aware that doing good things pleases God (while doing bad things displeases God). The same holds true for how the earth and its inhabitants are treated, including people, plants and animals.

There are three Islamic beliefs that are followed when raising and slaughtering meat. In addition to *halal*, there is *tayyib* (wholesome food produced in a wholesome way) and *dhabihah* (the Islamic procedure for slaughter).

The motivation

Zainab Khan currently serves as President of Taqwa Eco-Food's board. Through working at Faith in Place, she says that "the more and more we learned about the importance of locally grown food, the more we realized that we should connect consumers with farmers." There was also a growing demand for halal meat, or food produced in accordance with Islamic beliefs.



Taqwa Eco-Food has a three-pronged approach to their work, starting with farmers—local, family-owned and operated farms where sustainable farming practices are used. The group believes that one cannot harm the land without harming the people on the land. Therefore, if these farm families can stay physically, mentally and financially healthy, then the rewards are passed on to the land, the animals and the consumers. "The second you set out making things better for farmers and people, you immediately make things better for animals and the land," explains Zainab. To put it simply: Be kind to people raising food, and in return, they will be kind to consumers.

The project

Membership in Taqwa Eco-Food is open to anyone, and members pay a yearly membership fee of \$25. Presently, cuts of beef, lamb and chicken are available for order. And although prices are a little higher than in the grocery store, members know that they are supporting a local family farm that in turn helps keep rural communities strong and viable. These farmers are also farming in ways that will leave the land better than when they started. Products are available for home delivery in Chicago or can be picked up at the Faith in Place office.



Customers are also made aware that the meat they are eating is better for them than the meat typically available at area grocery stores. All livestock is pasture-raised and the poultry is free-range. Some farmers finish their livestock with some grain, and all grain and pastures are free of added chemicals. No antibiotics or hormones are used. Meat raised in this fashion has been found to be healthier for consumers, as livestock fed minimal amounts of grain contains a higher amount of healthy omega-3 unsaturated fats. According to Taqwa, “For all these reasons and more, [the farmers’] products are healthy, wholesome and natural in every sense of the word. The meat is leaner with less cholesterol and calories and more protein.”

In order to bridge the gap between consumers and farmers, Taqwa Eco-Food organizes trips to participating farms. The consumers learn where their food comes from and how it is raised. Farmers receive feedback and learn about consumers’ preferences.

Taqwa Eco-Food also helps people get creative about where they shop by encouraging members and many others to become members of a CSA (community-supported agriculture) farm or to shop at local farmers markets. “We try to be an available source for people trying to eat healthy,” says Zainab. An event called “Taste of Taqwa” is held to educate people about food issues. Another unique aspect of Taqwa Eco-Food is their dedication to feeding those less fortunate. *Sadaga*, the Islamic term for giving or donating money, is used to purchase healthy meats that are delivered “to low-income families throughout the inner city.”

Lessons learned

Still in its early years, Taqwa Eco-Food faces a number of challenges. First, like any newer food cooperative, cash flow fluctuations can present headaches. But Taqwa continues to grow and will eventually become a free-standing organization.

Another challenge relates to the availability of meat products. Presently, there is more demand for local meat than there is supply. For some farmers, raising livestock in line with the principles of Islam means having to adopt new farming practices, which is not always an easy task. Significant challenges include a shortage of pasture land and high grain prices. Distance from the farms is another challenge that Taqwa Eco-Food faces. However, as more farmers join in, there may be a possibility for collectively transporting meat from the farms to the city.

As more people recognize the importance of local food and local family farms, the demand for food grown on these farms will continue to grow. As one of Taqwa Eco-Food’s goals states: “This outlook is shared by many faiths. Therefore, ‘interfaith’ is the nature of our business and co-op. While our animals are slaughtered solely by qualified Muslims, the people who support our business come from all different faiths and walks of life.”

With this worldview and sustained dedication, Taqwa Eco-Food will continue to grow and help consumers and farmers, while also caring for animals and the land.

Web resources

Taqwa Eco-Food: www.taqwaecofood.org

Faith in Place: www.faithinplace.org