In this study, Eau Claire’s local food system is conceptualized in terms of a few theoretical concepts that give meaning to the different ways in which we can think about local food. The groundwork for this study is the idea of Eau Claire’s local food system as an Alternative Food Network (AFN). AFNs help us understand and consider local foods in the context of a larger, agri-industrial food system. AFNs are centered around a producer-consumer relationship that distributes value opposite of the bulk commodity system and participate in a new form of political association (Follett, 2008). Follett also discusses the idea of weak versus strong food networks. An example of a weak network is a corporate/organizational structure, while a strong network would be a local, alternative food business. Follett argues that strong networks have the ability to produce social and political change through the networks’ participants. In terms of Eau Claire’s alternative food network, eating food that is produced locally is participation in a strong alternative food network that can have a larger impact socially and politically for the city of Eau Claire. One way this social and political change can manifest itself is through the engagement that comes through having control over one’s own food and where it comes from. Another way to think about local food systems is in terms of civic agriculture. Civic agriculture is a more locally oriented food system that is linked to local and regional markets (Lyson & Gumpel, 2004). This type of agriculture is in opposition to commodity agriculture where the primary goal is to produce as much as possible for the least amount of cost.

The next step beyond looking at Eau Clare’s local food system as an AFN is to look at it through the lens of Actor Network Theory (ANT). ANT helps us construct the various places that create opportunities, possibilities, and obstacles for participation in an AFN. ANT is an approach that “show[s] more clearly how natural and social entities become entwined with one another in food networks” (Morgan et al. 2006). ANT says that food networks are composed of various actors that make up the network. By examining local food practices and opportunities in Eau Claire, WI, this study questions who is included in the research drawn from a fall 2010 survey of Eau Claire residents. The survey asks, “What is local food?”

The study explores the local food system in Eau Claire, Wisconsin as experienced by its citizens. More specifically, the possibilities and constraints to local food participation are studied using a theoretically-grounded framework. Three components are necessary to fully practice local food activities. These are knowledge and understanding, habits and desires, and access and availability. The focus on this study is access and availability of local foods in Eau Claire, WI.

What is Local Food?
Food. Everyday it enters into our bodies and it affects our lives in many ways. Food plays an important role in our daily lives but we rarely stop and think about where it comes from. This study explores the local food system in Eau Claire, Wisconsin as experienced by its citizens. More specifically, the possibilities and constraints to local food participation are studied using a theoretically-grounded framework. Three components are necessary to fully practice local food activities. These are knowledge and understanding, habits and desires, and access and availability. The focus on this study is access and availability of local foods in Eau Claire, WI.

How We Eat
There are four components encompassing the various ways that we eat food. One can eat locally, as discussed in this project, and also non-locally. One can also eat conscientiously or non-conscientiously. These four ways of eating create a continuum or can occur at the same time (see Figure 5). Eating local depends on how that product traveled from its point of origin to your plate. Eating conscientiously involves knowing whether those beans were picked under ethical conditions. If they were, those green beans fall into the category of local, conscientious eating. If the green beans were picked under non-ethical conditions, then eating them falls under the category of non-local, non-conscientious eating. Non-local, non-conscientious eating occurs with consumption of a placeless industrialized product like macaroni and cheese.