

Field Notes on Farmer/Chef Relationships

Making that farm-to-fork connection starts with a relationship between farmer and chef. Here's how to make it a successful one.

By Katie Ayoub

There's no denying that "local" and "seasonal" have become buzz words. Diners seek a closer connection to their food sources, and they count on chefs to provide it. But beyond the marketability and trendiness of it all is something infinitely more rewarding.

Chefs who establish direct working relationships with local purveyors boast of fresh product—and often that means pulled-from-the-earth-this-morning fresh. They're also reducing carbon footprints, an ever-increasing concern of mindful chefs. And sourcing local, varied product allows them to pull up a chair to the high-rollers table. Chefs creating with fresh, local food are at the top of their game, whipping up menus that vary depending on what the farms yield that week. Developing ever-changing menus keeps the creative juices flowing.

But challenges do exist. There's a reason that the middle man, or food distributor, is so prevalent. Besides the obvious necessity of bringing a global market to the restaurant, he or she turns the exchange into a formal business transaction. With that formality comes consistency, expedience and accountability. Cutting

out the middle man and working directly with the farmer brings local, often unique product onto menus, but it also brings a face-to-face relationship with a farmer, who isn't necessarily a businessperson.

Here, then, is a primer on how to forge that worthwhile relationship with local farmers, and keep it blossoming for years to come.

The approach

Jason Weiner, chef/owner of Almond in Bridgehampton, N.Y., works with 10 different farmers in his area. During summer months, 90% of his produce comes from within an eight- to 10-mile radius.

"We're out in the Hamptons, where there's a big farm-stand culture," says Weiner. "Often, the farmers following that retail model aren't familiar with wholesale."

On first approach, he generally calls the farmer and asks what product he or she can sell wholesale. "Typically, they can do it with produce that they have a surplus of," he says. "Once I have a relationship with them, I'll talk to them in the winter and ask them to grow extra amounts for me."



Chefs can join one of 68 chapters of Buy Fresh Buy Local, or they can start their own. The Chicago chapter grew from one restaurant to 30 and from one farmer to 25.

At Hominy Grill in Charleston, S.C., chef/owner Robert Stehling is committed to working with local farmers. "It is difficult to form relationships with farmers," he says. "They want to be understood and they want their problems understood. They're on a different cycle, and you have to understand that cycle. I find it works better if I give a little bit. I find out what's coming next week, and try to get as much as I can when it's in season. Instead of the menu dictating, I try to let the farmer dictate to me."

First contact can also be made through facilitating organizations. The Food Routes Conservancy, a nonprofit organization based in Arnot, Pa., is dedicated to the rebuilding of local, community-based food systems. Part of its mission is to serve as a conduit, connecting chefs and consumers to local farmers. "We're tapped into what's going on in their neighborhoods," says Tim Schlitzer, executive director of Food Routes.

Marco Hetterich, right, executive chef for Bon Appétit Management Company at Wheaton College, Wheaton, Ill., examines produce with Nick Nicholson, a farmer who has supplied the chef with fruit and vegetables for the last three years.

Chefs can use www.foodroutes.org as a resource for local product. They can also join one of 68 "Buy Fresh Buy Local" chapters. "Or they can start their own," Schlitzer says. "The Chicago chapter started with one restaurant [Frontera Grill] and one farmer. It now has 30 restaurants and 25 farmers."

Mary Cleaver, chef/owner of New York's The Cleaver Co. (a green catering company) and The Green Table (an organic eatery), is also a member of the voluntary board of directors of Farm to Chef, Inc., a company that markets the products of participating farmers to participating chefs in the New York area.



"Farm to Chef acts as a channel between the two," she says. "Our job is to get the product into the marketplace. Some of these small producers just can't get off the farms."

The relationship

"If one of my purveyors sends me something sub-par or gets the order wrong, I can call and curse at them," says Weiner. "It's a different ethos with farmers. You have to tread more carefully. It's a personal relationship, really, rather than a business one. And they have tremendous pride in their product."

There's more hands-on coordinating, too. "Sometimes, farmers aren't great at communicating that a certain product isn't coming in," says Stehling, a member of Chefs Collaborative. "Maybe there was a flood, or something else happened, but they might not think to let you know. That's where flexibility comes in. It's so worth it though."

Resources for sourcing local

www.chefscollaborative.org Click on "local food search" and input location and type of producers you're seeking.

www.eatwellguide.org Go here to find local, sustainable, organic food.

www.eatwild.com A source for natural grass-fed beef, lamb, goats, bison, poultry, pork, dairy and other wild edibles, click on "Find Local Grassfed Meat, Eggs & Dairy."

www.foodroutes.org Click on "Buy Fresh Buy Local" to be either directed to a local chapter, or instructed on how to create your own.

www.slowfoodusa.org Click through to the "Terra Madre" initiative, which is an international program that brings farmers, food producers and cooks together.

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“The success of the partnership depends completely on the relationship between farmer and chef,” says Schlitzer. “If the restaurateur understands issues like flooding and droughts, that’s a good thing. There needs to be give and take. The best relationships are where they become friends.”

Some local farmers make deliveries. Others rely on organizations such as Farm to Chef, which provides a central drop-off point. It then trucks the produce, meats and cheeses into Manhattan. And other farmers let the chefs come to them.

Weiner makes the rounds most mornings and picks up his produce. “Only one or two of the farms that I work with have an infrastructure for delivery,” he says. “It’s time-consuming, but therapeutic. I drive around to the different farms in the area on the way to work, and stock up.”

Cost-benefit ratio

Figuring out food cost versus time commitment and manageability versus marketing benefits makes the price of sourcing local difficult to calculate.

“It’s a little bit more expensive to deal with local farmers, but with rising fuel costs, the local farmers are going to have more of an advantage,” says Stehling.

“For me, cost is probably a wash,” says Weiner. “The product is so much better. Right now, I’m getting strawberries at \$24 a flat from my local guy. Driscoll’s are \$20. I’m not saving money, and there’s a bit of hustling with farmers, but it pays off on your menu, and customers eat it up.”

There’s also a value difficult to factor, which is tied inherently into an operation’s philosophy. For an illustration of how a connection between farmers and chefs can

work outside of an independent-restaurant model, take a look at an on-site company with more than 400 cafés in 28 states.

Bon Appétit Management Company, based in Palo Alto, Calif., stacks its business model on a foundation of socially

Bookshelf

Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life (HarperCollins, 2007), by Barbara Kingsolver

The Art of Simple Food: Notes, Lessons, and Recipes from a Delicious Revolution (Clarkson Potter, 2007), by Alice Waters

Bitter Harvest: A Chef’s Perspective on the Hidden Danger in the Foods We Eat and What You Can Do About It (Routledge, 2000), by Ann Cooper

The Farm to Table Cookbook: The Art of Eating Locally (Sasquatch Books, 2008), by Ivy Manning

The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals (Penguin, 2007), by Michael Pollan



responsible food sourcing and business practices. It empowers its chefs to source locally with its Farm to Fork program.

"Our purchasing is divided into three tiers," says Joe McGarry, corporate chef of Bon Appétit, which serves more than 80 million meals annually. "The national initiative orchestrates programs such as cage-free eggs and antibiotic-free chicken. The regional initiative helps chefs find area programs, such as no-till, direct-feed soil. And then the local initiative allows chefs to forge purchasing relationships with local farmers."

To support that value system, chefs write menus weekly, and include flexible stations, such as salad bars. "We also bring farmers markets to our clients, and then purchase whatever isn't sold and highlight it on our menu that week," says McGarry, also a member of Chefs Collaborative. "By buying directly from local farmers, the chefs get the freshest food possible, and keep profits reinvested in the local community. That's important to us."

Stehling agrees. "By sourcing local, you not only get the best stuff, but you create a sense of place on your menu," he says. "That's a core value for us here."

Katie Ayoub, an award-winning writer, is based in Keswick, Ontario, Canada. She is editor in chief of our sister publication, Sizzle.



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