



# Marketing Fresh Produce to Restaurants

Matt Ernst<sup>1</sup> and Tim Woods<sup>2</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Sourcing and serving fresh produce from local farms remains a trend in the U.S. foodservice industry. The practice of sourcing locally grown fresh produce, first featured by niche and high-end restaurants, moved into mainstream foodservice distribution channels in the early 2000s. A focus on local food appears to be persisting into the 2020s. The National Restaurant Association's 2018 Culinary Forecast, based on surveys of nearly 700 chefs, identified hyper-local sourcing as the top restaurant concept trend, with local produce also among the Top 10 concept trends.<sup>1</sup>

Marketing fresh produce to standalone restaurants and small chains, which may be willing to pay price premiums for quality, has helped beginning farmers develop small-scale wholesale produce channels. Larger growers have found demand for regionally grown produce from wholesalers and brokers. Surveys and interviews of Kentucky restaurateurs in 2006 showed substantial interest from restaurants across the state in purchasing typical local products such as tomatoes, bell peppers, greens and melons.<sup>2</sup> Chefs are also interested in sourcing less common crops, such as shiitake mushrooms, asparagus, herbs, berries and table grapes.

Three general reasons for purchasing locally grown produce commonly given by chefs include:<sup>3</sup>

- Locally grown foods are fresher and have a higher or better quality
- Customers have requested local products, especially after the restaurant has previously carried local foods for a period of time
- Unique or specialty products are available locally



Chefs interviewed for a producer training curriculum for restaurant marketing frequently cite a greater trust for produce that is grown locally. Chefs may also value relationships with growers willing to develop a personal relationship with the restaurant, and are enthusiastic about delivering local food to consumers. Producers marketing to restaurants should be sure to practice standard food safety measures, and some restaurants may require third-party food safety audits or documentation of a farm food safety plan. Always discuss packing, delivery, and food safety requirements with buyers well in advance.

Produce growers wanting to explore the restaurant market will need to:

- Develop relationships with chefs
- Understand effects of pricing on their financial returns
- Manage potential risks from a new or developing market channel
- Prove their reliability by offering consistent product quality and superior service to chefs and restaurants



<sup>1</sup>Matt Ernst is an independent contractor with the Center for Crop Diversification.

<sup>2</sup>Tim Woods is an extension professor in the UK Department of Agricultural Economics.

## RELATIONSHIPS

A key for marketing produce at any level is developing a good relationship with your customer. When selling to a local restaurant, it is critical that you get to know the person who will be buying and using your products. This is most often the restaurant's chef, but it might also be the business manager, kitchen manager, owner, or even a pastry chef.

You may already know a restaurant's chef or personnel from your local community. If you are approaching a restaurant with which you are unfamiliar, always remember that you are a salesman for your farm's products. Strategies that help begin a sales relationship with a restaurant include:

- Dressing professionally and portraying your farm accurately
- Limiting appointments to times preferred by chefs
- Finding out as much as possible about the restaurant before you visit — signature dishes, target clientele, awards won, chef's background and education, etc.
- Developing a neat and professional handout or brochure about your farm/market garden that describes you and your products
- Bringing samples of your produce for the chef to taste or prepare
- Making sure the chef knows when and how to contact you
- Asking the chef or restaurant manager what the best ways are to contact him or her in the future
- Providing additional information about your farm, production practices, and/or products through communication channels requested by the chefs. Common methods used for communication are farm websites, email, web-based social networks, mobile phones/voicemail, and direct emailed price lists.

## RETURNS

Local producers can sometimes demand a premium above the wholesale prices that restaurants are used to paying for produce. These premiums commonly range from 5% to 25% (and sometimes more) above

wholesale market prices. Specialty or hard-to-find items may be grown locally at a lower cost and that savings may be passed on to wholesale customers. In general, chefs are often willing to pay a little more than wholesale for high-quality, reliable local produce.



Producers should realize, however, that selling to restaurants is a wholesale market; retail prices (such as those received at a farmers market) are usually unrealistic to expect from restaurants. It is important to understand the wholesale prices that restaurants are accustomed to paying for produce. Kentucky growers can find links to various internet sites containing price information at the USDA Fruit and Vegetable Market News

website. Pay particular attention to the terminal market price reports available at <https://www.marketnews.usda.gov/mnp/fv-nav-byType?navType=term>.

Producers should also realize that volumes demanded by restaurants are typically low compared to other market outlets (e.g., farmers markets, local stores, CSAs). There can also be a lack of consistency of demanded volumes, which will affect returns.

There may be additional costs affiliated with marketing to restaurants. Growers that are spending extra time preparing a product specifically to a chef's specifications should set a price that accounts for their extra production time. Another "hidden cost" can include the expenses of time and fuel required in delivering the produce to the restaurant. A properly prepared production budget will help a grower determine if additional profits from selling to restaurants cover the additional costs of delivery. In less common instances, smaller restaurants may be willing to pick up produce, such as when a grower is in town at a farmers market. Discussing these circumstances with the restaurant up front will allow both parties to assess the feasibility of the relationship.

There can be non-financial returns for growers selling to local restaurants. Some establishments, including Kentucky's state park resort restaurants, may feature

the name of the farm or grower who supplied certain items on their menu, thus providing free advertising. Producers who establish good relationships with chefs may find that they are able to generate additional sales. For example, the chef may be willing to purchase lower-grade produce for soups, sauces, salsas and other processed foods.

Some restaurants may demand highly perishable specialty crops. High-end restaurants are sometimes willing to pay whatever it takes for a producer to deliver hard-to-find specialty produce. A producer may find that offering a product a restaurant cannot get anywhere else is a good way to build new markets. Providing crops at the beginning or end of the season, or during the winter, when they aren't readily available locally, offers significant opportunities for growers. Research market demand and supply in your area and determine what you can grow that is not being produced locally.<sup>4</sup> Talking with chefs or purchasing managers may be a good way to identify these hard-to-source items. Growers marketing to restaurants may need to adapt their production system and products to supply exactly what the chefs are looking for.

Squash blossoms and other edible flowers, pawpaws, specialty peppers, organically grown vegetables, raspberries, shiitake mushrooms, and heirloom tomatoes are examples of specialty crops that Kentucky producers have successfully marketed to restaurants.

## RISKS

The most significant risk when marketing to local restaurants is losing the customer by repeatedly failing to deliver on time or delivering poor quality product. A grower simply cannot deliver an inferior product to the chef, who is often purchasing the product for its quality. Also talk with the restaurant about the quantity of product they need and how often they need it. Assess whether you will be able



to consistently meet that need with a quality product. Conversely, if a restaurant is only interested in purchasing small quantities on an infrequent basis, it may not be profitable for you to sell to them. If you do decide to work with restaurants, realize that chefs are depending on you to deliver products when you say you will. Failure to communicate with chefs about delays in delivery can result in the loss of a customer.

All farmers face production risks, and fortunately many chefs understand the risks of producing high quality produce. Chefs may understand if a producer encounters disease, bad weather, or other production problems; it is just critical that you take the initiative to notify the restaurant as soon as you are aware of a problem.

Another risk for producers is slow customer payment. Some restaurants will pay monthly; others pay on delivery. Producers may reduce the risk of slow or default payments by having a well-organized invoicing system and keeping all accounts current. Both the seller and the buyer should have a clear understanding at the start of the season regarding how payments will be handled. In some cases, a simple contract or written agreement may prove an effective tool for both the restaurant and the grower.



Certain customers may require a grower to carry product liability insurance (PLI). Others may presume the grower is insured for product liability. PLI, which usually costs a few hundred dollars annually for \$1 million to \$2 million in liability protection, is one of the most comprehensive means available for protecting yourself from potential product liability when selling to foodservice institutions.

## RELIABILITY

### Selling Your Produce

Selling to restaurants can be both personally and financially rewarding for growers. Marketing to local restaurants also offers growers the opportunity to develop their direct marketing skills, perhaps leading to other market opportunities. To emphasize our previous points, the two most important factors for successful produce sales to restaurants are growing high-quality, tasty crops and growing good relationships with chefs.



readily available to producers. Restaurants are used to paying wholesale vendors monthly, so it is realistic to expect a restaurant client to pay you that frequently.

### *Suggestions for New Products*

Once you have established sound relationships with your customers, they will be more likely to consider purchasing new products or services from you. For example, showing a restaurant that you can deliver consistently fresh tomatoes may make them open to trying a higher-priced heirloom variety. Providing samples of other products allow restaurants to see

the variety of options you offer.

### Servicing Your Product

“Servicing” your product can be as simple as keeping in regular contact with the chef, or whoever makes the purchasing decisions. In addition to their scheduled delivery time, most growers who successfully market to restaurants are in contact with the chef at least once more per week. Other ways that growers can “service” produce they have grown include:

#### *Provide Product and Seasonal Updates*

Restaurants may not only purchase your product because of its superior quality, but also because offering locally grown products is attractive to customers. Providing news about how the produce is grown and how the season is going can provide the restaurant with information useful in marketing its food. It can also help you keep a good marketing relationship going in the face of extraordinary weather or pest problems that might interrupt your planned harvest schedule.

#### *Good Business Practices*

Restaurants will appreciate your providing a simple method of billing. Use consistent, straightforward invoices. If the restaurant has the option to pay you by direct deposit by electronic fund transfer, this will save them the expense of delivering you the check — and could result in quicker payment for you. Some restaurants may also be interested in using third-party payment services (such as PayPal) that are

#### *Producer Networking*

You may know other producers that offer crops you do not. Suggesting these suppliers to a restaurateur may help them serve up even more local options. Be sure to recommend growers that you are confident will not try to undercut you or sell produce you are supplying. If there is the opportunity for you to coordinate the transport of these products in a consolidated delivery or at single time, investigate those options. Chefs and restaurants tend to be more favorable to receiving more products in fewer deliveries. Some producers have even added profit to their existing restaurant marketing by charging other growers a reasonable fee for delivering their produce to restaurant clients at the same time as their produce.

### MarketReady Training

Producers who are considering or developing a market to restaurants can obtain valuable instruction through the University of Kentucky Food Systems Innovation Center’s MarketReady Training Program. Those already selling product to restaurants will have an opportunity to explore ways to improve and expand their business. The unit on restaurant sales includes a panel of chefs and restaurant buyers. MarketReady addresses issues such as food safety, insurance, pricing, invoicing, storage, product quality, and traceability for a variety of markets. For more information about the program, as well as training locations and dates, visit MarketReady online at <http://www.uky.edu/marketready/>.

## Selected Resources

- Food Systems Innovation Center (University of Kentucky) <http://www.uky.edu/fsic/index.php>
- Kentucky MarketMaker  
<https://ky.foodmarketmaker.com>
- Kentucky Proud (Kentucky Department of Agriculture) <http://www.kyproud.com/>
- Kentucky Restaurant Produce Buyer Survey (University of Kentucky, 2006)  
<http://www.uky.edu/hort/sites/www.uky.edu.hort/files/documents/restaurantsurvey.pdf>
- MarketReady (University of Kentucky)  
<http://www.uky.edu/marketready/>
- ABCs of Marketing to Restaurants (Rodale Institute) <http://newfarm.rodaleinstitute.org/features/0802/restaurant.shtml>
- Approaching Foodservice Establishments With Locally Grown Products (University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2003) <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=fpcreports>
- Direct Marketing (ATTRA, 2016)  
<http://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/directmkt.html>
- Fruit and Vegetable Market News (USDA Agricultural Marketing Service) <https://www.ams.usda.gov/market-news/fruits-vegetables>
- Local Food Connections From Farms to Restaurants (Iowa State University, 2008)  
<https://store.extension.iastate.edu/product/Local-Food-Connections-From-Farms-to-Restaurants>
- Selling Directly to Restaurants (University of Wisconsin, 2005) <https://learningstore.uwex.edu/Assets/pdfs/A3811-05.pdf>
- Selling Directly to Restaurants and Retailers (University of California SARE, 2003)  
<http://asi.ucdavis.edu/programs/sarep/publications/food-and-society/sellingdirectly-2003.pdf>

- Selling to Restaurants (ATTRA, 2004)  
<http://www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/sellingtorestaurants.html>

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<sup>1</sup>National Restaurant Association What's Hot 2018 Culinary Forecast. [http://www.restaurant.org/Restaurant/media/Restaurant/SiteImages/News\\_and\\_Research/Whats\\_Hot/Whats\\_Hot\\_Culinary\\_Forecast\\_2018.pdf](http://www.restaurant.org/Restaurant/media/Restaurant/SiteImages/News_and_Research/Whats_Hot/Whats_Hot_Culinary_Forecast_2018.pdf)

<sup>2</sup>Tim Woods, Matt Ernst, and Jeffrey Herrington. "2006 Kentucky Restaurant Produce Buyer Survey." <http://www.uky.edu/hort/sites/www.uky.edu.hort/files/documents/restaurantsurvey.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>Brad Zumwalt, "Approaching Foodservice Establishments With Locally Grown Products." Food Processing Center, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, University of Nebraska-Lincoln. June 2003, p. 4.  
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=fpcreports>

<sup>4</sup>Debbie Roos, "Marketing to Restaurants." N.C. State Extension, Growing Small Farms, 2010. <https://growingsmallfarms.ces.ncsu.edu/growingsmallfarms-marketingrestaurants/>

### Suggested Citation:

Ernst, M., and T. Woods. (2018). *Marketing Fresh Produce to Restaurants*. CCD-MP-21. Lexington, KY: Center for Crop Diversification, University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, Food and Environment. Available: <http://www.uky.edu/ccd/sites/www.uky.edu.ccd/files/restaurants.pdf>

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*Reviewed by Margarita Velandia, Associate Professor, Agricultural and Resource Economics, University of Tennessee, and Brett Wolff, UK Center for Crop Diversification*

*Photos courtesy of Pixabay.com (Pages 1,3 and 4) and Matt Barton, UK Agricultural Communications Services (Page 2)*

**January 2018**

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