

Putting Local on the Menu:
*Tools and Strategies for Increasing the
Utilization of Locally Raised Food in
Restaurants and Food Service*



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[Lucky 32 Southern Kitchen](#)
[Lumière](#)
[Merchants Pub and Plate](#)
[Pachamama's Restaurant and Starbar](#)
[Rain](#)
[Telepan](#)
[The Horn](#)
[The Root Café](#)

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[Bard College](#)
[Berea College](#)
[Carleton College](#)
[Iowa State University](#)
[Luther College](#)
[Lawrence Memorial Hospital](#)
[Mary Baldwin College](#)
[Prescott College](#)
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Putting Local on the Menu:

Tools and Strategies for Increasing the Utilization of Locally Raised Food in Restaurants and Food Service

Introduction and Overview

The “local food movement” is now well established in many parts of the United States, as evidenced by the nearly five-fold increase in farmers markets over just the past two decades, the steady increase in Community Supported Agriculture, or “CSA” ventures, and the increasing availability of locally raised foods in more traditional shopping venues (USDA Agricultural Marketing Service). The nearly \$7 billion in local food sales USDA estimated took place last year means more market opportunities for farmers, and wider availability of fresh produce and nutritious meat and eggs for consumers (USDA AMS).

In addition to farmers markets and other “direct-to-consumer” outlets, many restaurants, schools and colleges, hospitals and retail outlets are purchasing from local farmers, either directly or through some type of third-party aggregator such as a [food hub](#). This trend is far stronger in some regions and communities than others, in part because the logistical challenges – ease of ordering, reliability of supply, convenient deliveries, etc – require a certain level of infrastructure and business development to resolve. However, even where the needed systems are in place one issue frequently remains: **Price** (Strohnbehn and Gregoire, 2003).

There is no doubt that millions of Americans want to buy food that is sustainably produced on farms nearby...

There are many well-known benefits to purchasing from local farmers, from the fresher produce to support for the local economy. Nonetheless, the higher prices usually (though not always) associated with local food as compared with conventionally sourced items limits the local sourcing of many food businesses. (Note: The lead author of this study is a farmer who sells to local restaurants, schools and retail outlets, and has himself often experienced this “price point challenge”: finding a price at which a small farmer can make a reasonable return, while at the same time, being sufficiently competitive for chefs, food service or others to buy significant volumes of product).

The perception of price and value, it should be noted, is complex and evolving. Just as a substantial proportion of consumers have been willing to pay more for organic foods, so too have some now shown willingness to pay more for locally sourced foods, in large part because of the perception of greater freshness (A.T. Kearney, 2014). Kearney’s recent study found a willingness to pay 20 - 30% more, particularly for meats, cheeses and fruits sourced locally, among both diners and retail shoppers. Interestingly, this willingness was greater when the price was stated in real terms rather than as a percentage increase, that is “\$4.49 vs \$3.89” rather than “about 20% more”.

Though there are real differences in pricing, in some cases it is more a matter of perception.

Farmers markets, for instance, are widely thought to be considerably more expensive than supermarkets, a belief that doesn't always hold up on closer [examination](#).

There are many elements involved in building a robust local food system and scores of communities, both urban and rural are well underway with efforts to do just that. However, this study and the accompanying calculator tool focus on the issue of price, particularly as it relates to two common partners in local food systems: restaurants and institutional dining services. The goal of the study was not to provide a comprehensive analysis of food service and restaurants nationwide, but rather to examine two fundamental questions:

1. *Some restaurants and universities are utilizing substantial amounts of local produce, meats, eggs and other items on a regular basis, considerably more than the norm. How are they making this work?*
2. *What is the true cost differential of buying locally, and what sort of tool might help chefs and food service managers calculate the changes in per plate costs?*

Given that nearly 50% of all meals are consumed away from home, restaurants and other food service providers are critical to making local eating a reality for most people.

There are of course hundreds of "farm-to-table" restaurants in the US now, and a smaller but growing group of colleges and universities also utilizing significant amounts of local farm products. Yet there remains a much larger group who, while interested in local sourcing, are not yet doing so, often because of concerns about higher costs. This study and tool is intended for these "buyers in the middle", establishments that are neither Chez Panisse nor the Olive Garden; chefs and food service directors who need a bit of help to integrate local foods into their dining in a consistent and significant way.

The study has three parts:

- **A discussion of Best Practices** that these (and other businesses surveyed) employ which enables them to purchase substantial amounts of local food yet maintain reasonable levels of both affordability and profitability.
- **Brief profiles of eight leading "buyers in the middle"**, including both restaurants and colleges and universities. Chosen from a broader pool of buyers surveyed in the study, these businesses all do a substantial proportion of local food sourcing, represent different regions of the country, and have a customer or client base that is relatively broad, rather than highly exclusive.
- **A Local Food Cost Calculator Tool**, an electronic spreadsheet that enables chefs and food buyers to quickly and easily determine the real increases in cost at the level of plates and menu items, and how they might offset some of those increases.

There is no doubt that millions of Americans want to buy food that is sustainably produced on farms nearby, and that many of these folks hope that their food dollars support family farmers and a just and sustainable food system. Given that nearly 50% of all meals are consumed away from home, restaurants and other food service providers are critical to making this desire a reality for most people. It is hoped that this brief assessment and simple food cost calculator will help bring that about in many more communities.

Methods

In this research, we examined a diverse range of food businesses in the United States purchasing locally raised foods to identify the best methods and practices used to offset increased costs. We chose the restaurants and institutions with help from an informal advisory group that included chefs, food service leaders and local foods advocates. Because the study was small in scope, we did not attempt to develop a comprehensive, fully representative sampling of restaurants and universities. Nevertheless, SCALE research staff conducted over-the-phone interviews with 20 different food businesses representing 12 different states.

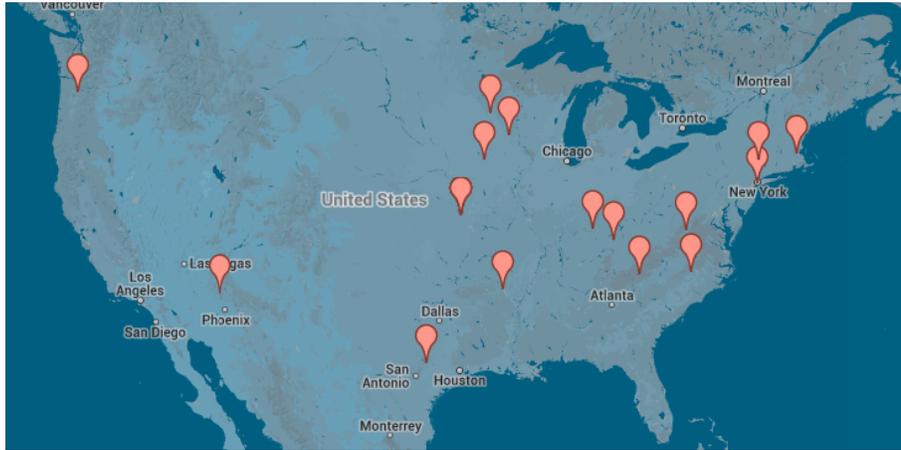


Figure 1: Map of food businesses represented

The questionnaire and survey were developed from initial research by the lead author and was revised after input from members of our advisory group. Interviews were conducted with the chefs, owners, or dining service managers. The interview guide explored themes such as: a) perceptions of initial local food costs b) purchasing arrangements on food items to be featured in the calculator c) best practices used to mitigate costs. Since the term “local” is a somewhat fluid term, we allowed each business to provide their own definition of the term to be detailed in each description of the establishment. All restaurant interviews were conducted with locally-based firms, rather than national restaurant chains, as the former have generally been far more likely to purchase locally (with some exceptions, such as Chipotle).

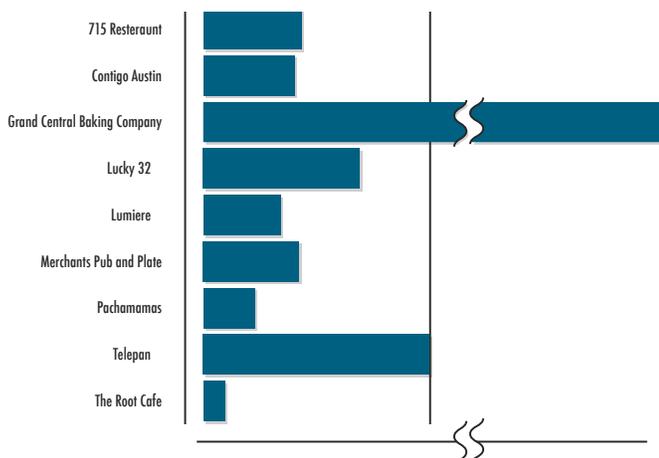


Chart 1: Size of restaurants based on annual sales

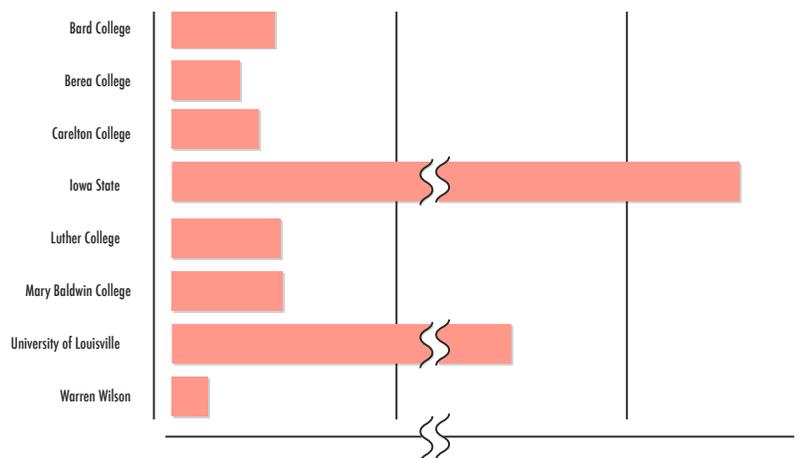


Chart 2: Size of institution based on student population

Food service providers at colleges and universities included both self-operated and contract operations (Sodexo and Bon Appetite).

We investigated a small sampling of both restaurants and college/university food services that have successfully integrated local food sourcing. The brief summaries describe how they've done this, particularly in regards to how they've absorbed or mitigated increased costs, as well as what if any impacts they perceive for their business. The 5 best practices summarize the key findings that were consistently significant during the interviews.

Best Practices: Practical Steps Local Food Businesses Use to Make it Work

Precisely how different chefs integrate substantial local food sourcing into their restaurants and dining halls varies, depending not only on their customer base, but also the availability, quality and pricing of local products. For example, several respondents among chefs and food service directors indicated that they generally have less waste and higher yields from locally sourced foods, helping to counter balance somewhat higher costs. Others however found that they had more waste with local produce, or that it varied with the item and the farmer. In spite of the variability, certain practices rise to the surface as both the most important and the most frequently deployed by this group of local food leaders. These “best practices” are discussed below in three groupings.

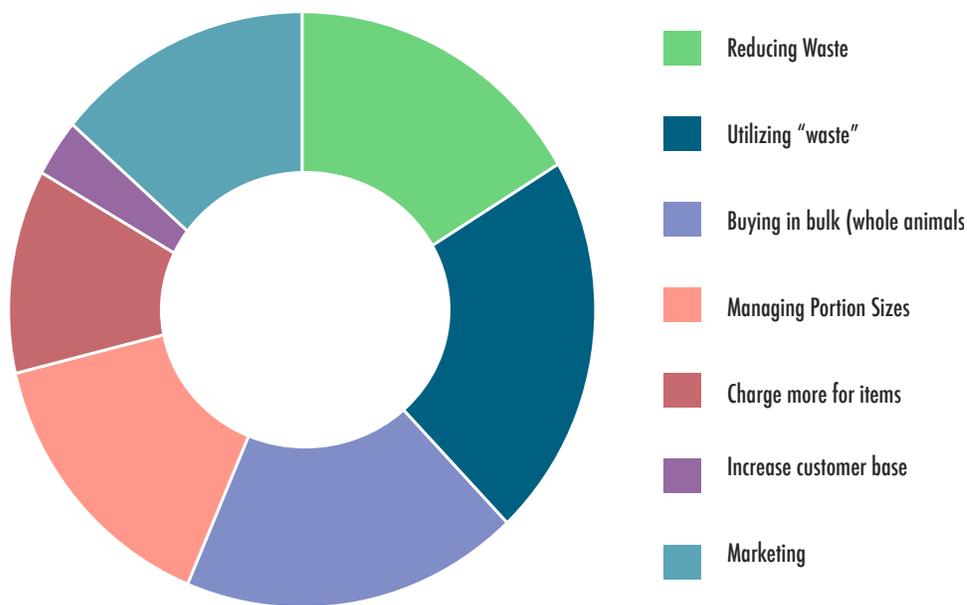


Chart 3: Frequency of Best Practices mentioned in surveys

Exercising Frugality and Creativity, without compromising quality

Best Practice 1: Reducing waste, particularly of food, but also including energy, materials and non-food waste. Virtually every business examined cited this as a critical tool, providing both cost savings and at the same time, increasing their overall sustainability (Waste reduction is often touted as one way in which these establishments are “greening” their business). Cost savings can come in two ways: Reduced expenditures on food and other inputs, and reduced fees paid for waste management.

- In college dining halls, one of the most common waste reduction tools is instituting “trayless”

meals, in which students must carry individual plates, rather than being able to “load up” trays with more food than they’re likely to eat. This step alone has helped reduced food waste by thousands of pounds per week in many instances.

- Dining halls also have begun to move away from “all you can eat” buffet dining, which tends to promote both overeating and food waste, to a more managed approach with specific a la carte items. All-you-can-eat dining is nevertheless still the norm.
- In restaurants, reducing food waste tends to come more from creative and intensive use of raw ingredients, and from portion control, both discussed below. Some businesses have also instituted food waste auditing systems to help the staff in the kitchen better understand precisely where waste is coming from, which in turn helps take steps to reduce that waste.

Best Practice 2: Make full use of all “pieces and parts”, whether of animal or vegetable origin.

More than half of those interviewed stated that they use vegetable peelings from carrots, onions, and other items, as well as animal bones and carcasses (in the case of poultry) to make stock for soups, stews and other items. These stocks are far superior in flavor - and likely, nutritional content - to commercially available stock. Though this takes more labor, most cite this as a cost saving step, while also helping to reduce their waste and make full use of more “precious” ingredients.

- Use of pre-consumer “leftovers” is another practice that both reduces input costs and waste. Several examples were provided, such as utilizing hamburgers to make “Sloppy Joes”, use of leftover pork, beef or chicken in tacos, burritos; use of leftover or lower grade cuts for barbecue or pulled pork sandwiches, etc.

Best Practice 3: Manage portion size better, including in some cases slight reductions in portion size for more expensive local ingredients.

This most commonly relates to meat items, where portions of locally sourced items might be reduced by 1 – 2 oz, depending upon the dish and the cost. Because portion sizes have grown so much in recent years, this “reduction” in portion size is in most respects a return to the more reasonable size portions that were once the norm. According to the chefs and dining service leaders surveyed, most patrons did not notice these reductions, and in some cases were pleased not to have to waste excess food.

- Managing portion size is also employed more broadly, that is, some find that more modest sizes for most all menu items – not just those utilizing local ingredients – helps control costs and improve overall satisfaction. It also puts portions more in-line with nutritional recommendations. On the other hand, one chef noted what might be a slightly higher number of desserts ordered in his restaurant as diners still have a bit of room at the end of the meal. Desserts generally have better margins for the restaurants.

Buying in bulk, using “seconds”

Best practice 4: Purchasing whole animals to significantly reduce per pound cost and increase flexibility.

This applies not only to chickens and poultry, but also to larger animals including hogs, lamb and beef cattle. Both restaurant chefs and dining service managers cited this as an important cost savings, particularly because of their interest in full utilization of all parts of the animal carcass (bones for stock or for helping to season a dish, etc).

- There is a small percentage of “primal” cuts on any one animal, ie steaks, tenderloin, etc. Some chefs spoke of menu pricing that gave them much more narrow margins on these most expensive cuts of meat, combined with much better margins on dishes made from the lower cuts of meat, which had effectively been “elevated” by using them in creative,

mid-priced dishes such as fajitas, burritos, barbecue and many other items.

- Buying in bulk also included in two instances, examples of contract growing with farmers for more commodity items – onions, potatoes, sweet potatoes, etc – combined again with more creative use of these items that allowed them to become a more important part of the plate, and therefore, command a better price.

Purchasing produce “seconds” from farmers, that is, produce of good quality that is less than aesthetically perfect. This helps restaurants and colleges increase their local sourcing while simultaneously providing an outlet for local farmers who might otherwise take a loss on these items. It is important to establish a standard for these items with farmers so that they know what is acceptable.

Communicating and marketing “local” to customers

Best practice 5: Increase customer base and/or enable slightly higher pricing on menu items by effectively and consistently communicating the story of local farmers to customers. This was done in a wide range of ways, from menu inserts to signage and farmer profiles (the latter more common in university food service). Virtually all of those surveyed engaged in some form of marketing of their commitments to local food use, though to varying degrees.

- Building the local ‘brand’ helped build their customer base and enabled them to charge slightly more than they would otherwise be able to do. Most stressed, however, that they could only increase prices slightly and still maintain their customer base, as many people say they want to support local farmers but don’t want to pay significantly more for that. Even a small increase, however, could help offset a substantial amount of the increased costs of purchasing locally.
- Campaigns for students such as marketing on napkins, cups, posters reminding students to “Take a little” “Eat with your stomach, not your eyes” This is where design, marketing, and creativity come into play.
- Featuring local items as specials both steers customers - be they students or diners - to local items and generally creates the opportunity for a small price premium on that item.



Marketing doesn't have to break the bank. Often a simple chalkboard will get the message across, such as this one at Berea College. Many school campuses also invite farmers to a “meet and greet” dinner so that the students can put a face, or family, to a name.

Leaders from the Middle: Profiles of Eight Food Service Establishments Who are Making it Work

Restaurants

Lucky 32 Restaurant, Durham, NC

Jay Pierce, Chef

In business for 28 years

Seats 180 people

Average Price: Lunch - \$12, Dinner - \$21



In business now for nearly three decades, Lucky 32 has built an eclectic customer base. Lunch caters primarily to professionals in the Raleigh Durham area, with fast service and good quality expected, while the supper crowd includes students and faculty from nearby colleges, families and many others.

Lucky 32 currently purchases approximately 28% of its total food ingredients from about 30 local farmers, with a higher percentage in the summer months. This includes produce, meat, eggs and other food ingredients. Chef Pierce's commitment to buying locally is both pragmatic and values-driven, as Mr Pierce believes in supporting local farmers, keeping money in the community and paying a little more to his workers. Practically speaking, he uses that commitment to build his customer base, accentuating their local ingredients and the farms from which they came. "We tell our story by telling their story", says chef Pierce.

Chef Pierce of course faces challenges in buying from local farmers, including increased prep time for some local ingredients, as they are not pre-cut, nor as uniform as what he can get from mainline distributors. Over the years, however, he has turned many of the challenges of local sourcing into assets for the restaurant. For example the lack of uniform availability of local produce items for long periods of time has become an opportunity to build a diverse and changing menu that keeps customers interested and in tune with locally available foods.

The combination of better, distinct flavors and the restaurant's commitment to telling the story allows Lucky 32 to "decommoditize" their food, ultimately helping them to build their customer base and enabling them to charge slightly more overall.

Other key strategies Chef Pierce employs to integrate local foods include:

- Prominently feature local ingredients and the farmers who produced them. The superior taste and quality of local items comes through to customers and builds both the demand for local foods and the loyalty of his clientele.
- "Decommoditize your food". The combination of better, distinct flavors and the restaurant's commitment to telling the story makes this possible, ultimately helping them to build their customer base and enabling them to charge slightly more overall.
- Be frugal, focused on both minimizing waste and maximizing the use of every ingredient, whether produce or protein.
- Control portion size, using "creativity on the plate" to make an excellent presentation that is visually appealing and satisfying to customers.
- Coordinate your menus with the availability and purchase of local products to ensure you can fully utilize the raw ingredients.

Grand Central Baking, Portland, OR and Seattle, WA

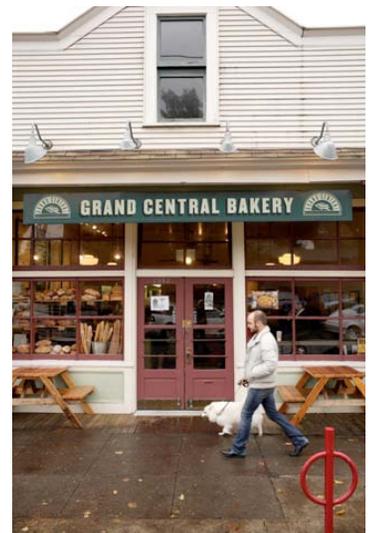
Piper Davis, Culinary Director/Owner

In business for 25 years

10 cafes plus wholesale business

Average Price: Lunch - \$8

Grand Central Baking is a family of 10 neighborhood bakeries in Portland and Seattle. The company sells at 2 farmers markets, and its products are also available in grocery stores and markets in the Greater Portland and Seattle area. Half of their sales are wholesale and the remaining half are sold to individual consumers. Their cafes, serving breakfast, lunch, and bakery goods, are located in neighborhoods and they cater to a diverse group of middle and upper middle class consumers, typically families. "Our things aren't precious they are ample and filling," says Culinary Director, Piper Davis.



Ms Davis grew up in a rural area where they were closely connected to farms and food. Because of this, she constantly strives to improve her business, including the source and quality of the food ingredients they utilize. A recent analysis indicated that about 30% of their vendors are local, that is, based in the Northwest "foodshed". She buys wheat solely from Camas Country in the Willamette Valley and Shepherds Grain in The Palouse, which is a rich grain growing region in eastern Washington. Her meat, fish, and eggs come from Northwest farms and fisheries whose production practices are transparent. Ms Davis started purchasing locally for better flavor. Over time, her reasons grew to include improving the local economy and preserving farmland. "It's good for people to know where they are getting their food from. Practices that come out of it are better and the connection to source is very powerful culturally."

Unique among the restaurants profiled in this study, Grand Central Baking has its own food distribution hub that eases the logistical challenges of dealing with multiple vendors. "We're not the kind of place where a forager can knock on the back door. It's all strategic and prearranged." Most producers provide availability lists on a weekly basis and then Piper tells them how much they will need.

Perhaps the biggest challenge they face, beyond the logistics of local sourcing, is to set realistic expectations for return on investment. Grand Central Baking is a successful, profitable enterprise. Nevertheless, Ms Davis believes that it is unrealistic to expect sustainable food systems to deliver the same financial returns as conventional food businesses that may give lower priority to environmental and social returns.

Ms Davis recommends the following strategies to enable substantial use of local foods:

- If you can do so efficiently, consider bringing as many functions as possible "in-house", including laundry, equipment repair and other routine maintenance. This has saved Grand Central money while helping to keep people fully employed.
- Adjust your pricing to balance affordability and profitability, selling high volume items at lower margins, with higher margins on specialty items.
- Reduce waste in every aspect of the business. According to Ms Davis, a mainstream

bakery wastes 30% of what they make, because “No one buys day old bread”. They’ve been able to achieve much lower waste levels by closely balancing maximum sales to minimum waste.

- Build your restaurant’s reputation for quality and sustainability, and then charge a bit more for your items to help cover the additional costs.

Merchants Pub and Plate, Lawrence, KS

TK Peterson, Chef/Owner

In business for 1 year

Seats 226 people

Average price: Lunch - \$9, Dinner - \$19

Just opened in September 2013, Merchants Pub and Plate is a gastropub with a wide selection of microbrews on tap and a very diverse menu. The restaurant attracts a broad base of customers from college students and young professionals to the middle-upper class crowd.



Owner, TK Peterson has been working intimately with farmers for 12 years while he held the position of Executive Chef at the Oread Hotel, enabling him to purchase about 50% of his food from local farmers on average throughout the year. Mr. Peterson considers local foods to be within a 200 mile radius, with the exception of his rabbit farmer who lives 300 miles from the restaurant. He acknowledges the benefit in supporting his local economy and cutting his carbon footprint but his driving reason for purchasing from local farms is the superior quality of the food.

Buying seconds also cuts down on costs. You don’t need a perfect looking tomato when making sauces or jams. “You have to get over the idea that produce always must look amazing.”

What Peterson values most is the collaborative environment he has created with his farmers, the sense of connection to them and their food, which he in turn sells to his customers.

In addition to shopping at the Lawrence farmers market every Saturday, Peterson has teamed up with nearby restaurants to streamline deliveries: a farmer can deliver all his goods to one restaurant, then the chefs from nearby restaurants will come pick them up from that location. In this way, he and other local chefs have been able to address one of their biggest challenges, reducing the time and logistical difficulties that often come with local sourcing.

Regarding the strategies he utilizes to consistently reach a 50% local sourcing level, Peterson recommends the following:

- When local food is abundant and farmers have excess, preserve it for the off-season, using flash freezing, pickling and other methods. This allows you to keep a diverse range of local foods on the menu for twelve months.
- Buy seconds to cut down on costs and provide an outlet for farmers, because you don’t need a perfect looking tomato to make a great sauce. As Peterson says, “You have to get over the idea that produce always must look amazing.”
- Purchase all or most of your meats as whole animals. He does this with his lambs, goats,

- pigs and poultry, and he fully utilizes the carcass, including making stock from the bones.
- While Peterson certainly uses his local sourcing to market and promote the restaurant, he suggests that the deeper relationships with farmers have paid dividends in other ways: His friendships with local producers has helped sustain him personally, and from a practical point of view, helped ensure that farmers give his needs a high priority. “Take the time to have a glass of wine with one of your farmers. Creating those relationships keeps you going, and it also means they’re more likely to hold some produce for you.”

The Root Café, Little Rock, Arkansas

Jack and Corri Sundell, Owners, Chef

In business for 3 years

Seats 60 people

Average Price: Breakfast - \$7.5, Lunch - \$9

The Root Café opened its doors in June 2011, but actually began building its farm-to-table foundation in 2008. Founders and owners, Jack and Corri Sundell set forth a clear yet ambitious mission: To build community through local food. The husband and wife team used the next three years to build relationships with farmers, to reach out to the community through food-based educational events, and to enable ordinary people to invest in the restaurant by purchasing “shares” redeemable for meals. Undoubtedly, this groundwork helped the restaurant build a racially and economically diverse customer base early on, and to consistently attract both business people and neighborhood folks.



The proportion of local purchasing has grown steadily over their first three years, now having reached 75% of their food dollars. The Root purchases from about a dozen core farmers, including produce growers, meat and eggs, and some value added producers such as bakers. Because Little Rock is in the middle of Arkansas, Jack and Corri define “local” as grown or produced in Arkansas, by independent farmers and businesses. They seek organic and sustainably grown wherever possible, and for meats, buy only from farmers using pasture-based, humane practices.

Finding kitchen workers willing to learn to cook everything from scratch has been one of the challenges they’ve faced thus far, though Jack notes that they do have a core group of excellent, committed staff. Another challenge, given their very strong commitment to local farms, is what to do when key items are out of season, like tomatoes or free-range chicken. “We struggled over this”, says Jack “because most people want a slice of tomato on their sandwich. And because our chicken salad, made from local, free range birds, is one of our most popular items, but one we run out of in the early spring, leaving a small gap until the first slaughter in April. So we decided to use these as opportunities to educate people about farms and seasonality, and encourage them to try something different. We’ve found that most customers understand.”

Although some of the local items they purchase are at or below the cost of mainline products, generally the local items cost more, particularly the meats. A number of strategies enable them to purchase such a high percentage of local foods, including:

- Working with farmers to produce core items – onions, carrots, tomatoes, etc – in larger

quantities at prices that are well above traditional wholesale, but less than the farmers market price. Though they don't use contracts, the informal agreements they reach help farmers plan while improving the reliability of supply for the restaurant.

- Buying whole chickens and whole steers, both to bring down the price per pound and to enable them to fully use the animals. The better cuts from the cow – brisket, tenderloin – are used for specials, commanding a slightly higher price.
- Building a menu that comes from what is available locally, rather than trying to “fit” local farm items into a pre-determined menu. This of course includes a seasonal orientation to the menu, but it also impacts the choice of the regular menu items: An excellent chicken salad, which includes many other locally available ingredients, enables them to stretch the meals they get from every \$15 - \$17 chicken, far more so than a chicken breast sandwich would.
- Canning and preserving food, both for use in cooking and increasingly, for sale to customers as a retail item they can take home. For example, they now save the bacon grease they generate, put it in a jar and sell it to customers with the farm name included. They also pressure can chicken stock made from the carcasses, for use in the restaurant and for over-the-counter sale.

Educational Institutions

Carleton College, Northfield, MN
Katie McKenna, General Manager
Bon Appetit
Student Body: 2,035w



Carleton College's dining services has been managed by Bon Appetit since the summer of 2008. Since entering into their contract with Bon Appetit in 2008, Carleton College supports Bon Appetit's decision to buy from “Farm to Fork” vendors. They have made steady progress towards increasing their percentage of local food by working with small farmers within a 150 mile radius of the college. The students at Carleton monitor this purchasing through the [Real Food Calculator](#), which helps identify not only where the food comes from, but production and labor practices involved as well. This was started by students who wanted to see what they are defining as real food in their cafes on college campuses. The student-led analysis is done twice per year, with the most recent assessment indicating 24% local foods. Most of this is purchased from a broker that aggregates local produce in the area, though some individual farmers directly deliver to the college.

According to Katie McKenna, Manager of Dining Services, Carleton purchases locally for four main reasons: To support local farmers; to make farming practices more transparent for their students and faculty; to keep revenue in their local community; and of course for better quality food.

One of the biggest challenges Ms. McKenna faces in meeting their 25% local purchasing target is sufficient availability of local food, particularly in Minnesota's long “off-season”. They

deal with this by preserving foods from the summer months and buying in-season foods from local farmers and farmers who have accomplished season extension through the use of row covers, hoop houses, and greenhouses.

In Katie McKenna's opinion, purchasing locally isn't necessarily more expensive. She says that truly depends on the relationship with your farmers and your willingness to partner with them in a way that works for both parties. The College feeds 1500 students on the meal plan by creating arrangements where the farmer sells his best stuff first, then comes back to the school with all their seconds at a better price.

The strategies McKenna uses to purchase locally while keeping costs manageable include:

- Buying in bulk quantities and providing farmers a guaranteed sale in advance. If the farmer knows that you will buy apples in bulk at an agreed upon price, they are likely to sell at a lower cost.
- Purchase seconds, both for immediate use and for processing for later use. This allows the farmers to sell their "prettiest produce" at a higher cost, while providing good quality but less-than-perfect produce to dining services at a more competitive price.
- Give the chefs a budget for their meals and encourage them to be creative in meeting that budget. For instance, if they serve a more expensive item one day, they can make a less expensive item the next day utilizing leftovers. "You can find ways to cut expenses without cutting quality", says McKenna.
- Good signage is also an important aspect of maintaining profitability; Bon Appetit labels all of the "farm to fork" items in the dining halls. Additionally, the college hosts dinner events where students can meet farmers face to face.

Berea College, Berea, Kentucky

Caitlin McClanahan, Sustainability Manager for Dining Services

Sodexo

Student Body: 1,613

In spite of having a relatively small student body of just over 1600 students, Berea College is among the best known schools in the Appalachian region. The college offers a full range of academic programs, yet maintains strong connections to the agricultural history of its area, including a working farm on campus. Together with a strong commitment from the administration and from the dining services staff, the school farm helps the college purchase over 21% of all its food from local sources, which they define as within 150 miles. According to Caitlin McClanahan, the Sustainability Manager for Dining Services at Berea, the bulk of the farms from which they purchase are actually within 50 miles.



Local items are promoted strongly in the dining halls, including profiles of the participating farmers, which helps drive students to those dining locations

In the six years that Ms McClanahan has been Sustainability Manager, the college and its food service provider, Sodexo have gradually built the local buying program. At present, they purchase local meats, cheese and produce in three ways: Directly from area farmers (a small number of somewhat larger farmers); through Papania's Produce, a local food distribution company which offers a distinct list of locally sourced items; and directly from the campus

farm. Of the total local purchasing, the college's farm accounts for about 30% of meats and 40% of produce.

The main challenge McClanahan faces is the reality that the base cost of most of the local items they produce is generally higher, though certain items are more cost competitive, such as in-season apples. Because Berea College is committed to keeping all elements of its education very affordable, the food service provider takes a smaller margin for profits, rather than raise meal costs.

Some of the steps they take to integrate substantial amounts of local foods include:

- Controlling portion sizes, especially at the "cook to order" stations in the dining halls. This reduces input costs and food waste.
- Adoption of a food waste tracking system which has reduced food waste and overall plate cost significantly.
- For most items she purchases locally, Ms McClanahan says there is considerably less waste, yielding more useable product in the kitchen.
- For meats, buy whole animals, and fully utilize all parts, including bones for stock and lesser cuts for everyday meals. This greatly reduces the cost per pound of the meats they purchase, without compromising the quality of the food. Primal cuts are either used by their catering services or sold at the on-campus farm store.
- Label locally sourced items throughout the dining hall. This labeling, combined with the better taste of the food, helps increase consumption of the local items. As an example of this, the college now uses a regionally sourced cheese for all of their pizzas, which has proven to be extremely popular with their diners.

University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky

Matti Verder, Director of Dining Services

Sodexo

Student Population: 22,529

Matti Verder, Director of Dining Services at the University of Louisville, has been helping to steer the college towards healthier eating and more local purchasing for the past several years, as required by the University's mandate for a minimum of 15% local purchasing. The

University has a strong commitment to sustainability and several programs in that area, of which the local food sourcing is one priority. However, because the U of L has historically been a commuter school, most of its 22,000 students have traditionally eaten at one or another of the many franchise restaurant options available on campus.

Over the past few years, the dining service staff have been expanding the options for better eating at the six non-franchise campus eating locations. In these dining facilities, local sourcing now ranges from 22 – 28%, with local defined as a 250 mile radius. On average, these locations serve between 10,000 and 14,000 meals per week.

The U of L purchases a wide range of produce, particularly during the fall semester when it



is more available, along with beef, pork and poultry. At present, the vast majority of meat purchases are beef.

The greatest challenge they face arises from the “commuter culture” and the strong presence of fast food franchises. This perpetuates a sense among students that food should be very cheap and quick, making healthy eating - including local foods - a steep learning curve for many. Mr Verder sees the movement towards better food as a long term, gradual process.

To manage the generally higher costs of local items, Mr Verder described the following steps:

- Negotiate meal pricing with the University. Since the U of L mandates a strong local purchasing component - as more and more schools are doing - slightly higher meal costs are understood as sometimes necessary.
- Strongly promote local foods in the dining halls, including profiles of the participating farmers, which helps drive students to those dining locations (instead of the franchise restaurants on campus).
- As part of that promotion, they periodically hold “Premium nights” in which locally sourced foods are featured. These events are very popular with students and faculty, and dining services is able to charge more for the menu items because of the high quality and local dimension.
- Emphasizing frugality in all aspects of their system reduces waste and helps keep overall costs down, enabling dining services to absorb the additional costs without great impact.

Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa

Nancy Keller, Director

Self-Operating

Student Population: 33,241

Nancy Keller came to Iowa State University in 2006. Having grown up in California in a “hippie” family that gardened and composted, it’s not surprising that she designed and now manages the university’s sustainability program. This includes composting, waste reduction, local food sourcing and more.



At present, 10% of the total dining services budget is used for local purchasing. Ms Keller notes that while the quantities of locally sourced items have grown significantly over the past several years, the proportion of local sourcing has remained steady due to the substantial growth in the student body and the number of meals served.

Dining services at Iowa State includes four all-you-care-to-eat facilities, ten cafes, three restaurants in a food court and both catering and an on-site bakery. About 10,000 students are on the meal plan.

Among the challenges Ms. Keller faces, one of the greatest stems from the rising cost of a college education and the accompanying debt burden on students. Given this, her challenge is to keep student dining fees reasonable, while responding to their calls for more healthy and local food. A second challenge is in reducing pre-consumer waste, which she finds is generally higher with local produce. Working with farmers to help them better understand

picking standards and post-harvest handling should reduce this problem considerably.

As Ms. Keller builds relationships with farmers and broadens the base of those supplying Iowa State, she emphasizes the following strategies to increase local sourcing:

- Start small, working with farmers on volumes that they can manage. Typically she bids contracts with local farmers on only about half the amount of an item that she needs, in order not to “scare them off”.
- Diversify the base of farmers, to ensure you get the product you need to consistently keep local items on the menu.
- Serve less meat and increase vegetable consumption by featuring Vegetarian or Vegan options on certain days of the week.
- Eliminate plastic trays and update facilities to encourage more modest consumption. Iowa State now uses “My Plate Placemats” which display recommended USDA portion sizes. This encourages students to take somewhat smaller portions, which is better for them and helps save food costs and waste.
- Measure, monitor and reduce waste, and compost all organic materials.

Conclusion

There are many factors that both propel and enable restaurants, colleges and other food providers to shift a substantial amount of buying to local farmers. Certainly, the commitment of owners, the chef or the sustainability manager is essential. In most academic settings, so too is the level of interest and priority of the student body, as they often drive the shift or help sustain and increase its importance over time. But the commitment must go deeper and include staff members doing prep, line cooks and serving staff. Several establishments spoke of the need to retrain their staff in order to fully utilize local foods, to take advantage of the greater range of qualities, flavors and textures, while also learning to work with the increased uncertainty, seasonality and variability of locally sourced foods. And the role of servers, as well as marketing staff in promoting local farms, in truly “putting a face on the food” is critical.



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