



Farmers And Chefs Team Up

Result: Great Food For Customers!

By Yvona Fast

Small farmers are always looking for new markets and profitable niches. Local restaurants provide one such niche, with farmers supplying the needs of specific eateries.

Relationships between local restaurant chefs and area farmers can be beneficial to both, offering fresh quality food to the restaurant's customers and creating a market for local farm products. Working together and eliminating middlemen can keep costs down while ensuring that produce is always fresh. Restaurant patrons benefit, because the fare is tastier and more nutritious.

In a day of tainted peanut butter and pet food laced with rat poison, consumers are beginning to ask where their food comes from – who grew the lettuce and who raised the meat. Locally grown organic food is the best defense against bio-hazards like e-coli, pesticide residues, biological warfare agents and genetically modified foods.

Locally grown, seasonal products are making a comeback as people realize the true value of food is in taste and nutrition – not length of storage.

Kevin McCarthy is Executive Chef at The Point, an exclusive resort on Upper Saranac Lake in northern New York State that boasts it offers some of the best cuisine in the world served “en famille”.

He is well aware of the difference in flavor when produce comes direct from the farmer, rather than traveling for a couple weeks from somewhere like Chile. He wants to pass that quality on to his customers. To accomplish this, he has teamed up with local farms.

The Tucker family farm has been operating in Gabriels for more than 100 years. A century ago, they provided vegetables for wilderness guides and their guests at the famous Paul Smiths Hotel. Later, they grew mostly potatoes, because the climate, soil and pure mountain air is conducive to that crop.

Today, they have diversified again, and in addition to potatoes, they grow grains like rye, buckwheat, oats and winter wheat, strawberries, and a large assortment of vegetables from arugula to zucchini.

Because the growing season in northern New York lasts about 100 days, with frosts possible in every month of the year (two years ago they lost most of their pick-your-own strawberry crop to a June freeze), the Tuckers realize they cannot compete with California farmers who grow crops all year on fields irrigated partly through your tax dollars.

A half century ago, most folks ate fruits and vegetables produced close to home. However, long-distance shipping with refrigerated trucks, advances in food processing and long-term storage, the construction of interstate highways and cheap gas have changed that. Today most of our vegetables are grown in California – and increasingly, in South America and China. Moreover, the average bite of food travels 1500 miles from farmer to consumer – losing both flavor and nutrition along the route.

So how can farmers like the Tuckers compete and stay in business? One way is by supplying produce to fancy restaurants and five-star resorts like The Point, whose customers are willing to pay for fresh greens and somewhat unusual produce – like blue potatoes or multi-colored beets.

Steve began selling to The Point several years ago, when Kevin bought some potatoes from him. When Kevin asked what else Steve could grow and the relationship was born. Each spring, they pore through seed catalogs together, seeking vegetable varieties that boast of excellence in flavor, and decide what Steve will be able to supply to Kevin.

This year, the Tuckers will grow 88 items specifically for the Point. Among the 300 acres of fields will be just one section of seasonal vegetables custom-grown for The Point and the six other restaurants the Tuckers serve.

Once a week, Steve will call “his” chefs, telling them what vegetables will be ready, so they can begin planning dishes for the week’s menus. The vegetables will be harvested in the morning, delivered by noon, and the produce will be served later that night. You can’t get much fresher than that!

“It takes time and effort to develop and nurture your relationship, but it’s well worth it,” says Kevin. “Relationships rely on faith and trust. You have to understand what the farm

is capable of, and you have to make sure they know your needs. It is incredibly important to pay them on a timely manner – they need their money when they bring the product. And relationships grow. One farm can turn you to other farms and their products. You have to look hard to find the good stuff.”

Bernadette Logozar, Co-Director for New Strategies: Enhancing Profitability on North Country Farms (Cornell Cooperative Extension, Franklin County) would agree. She says “More dialogue is necessary between chefs and farmers, so they can understand each others’ industry. Both sides have to be flexible and open.”

The challenges include the small quantities a restaurant such as The Point can use: just eight bunches of beets, or 30 zucchini blossoms, or 6 pounds of mesclun salad greens. Steve Tucker grows a large enough variety that he can have small quantities.

Other snags include timely delivery, since both farmer and chef are quite busy, and finding enough cold storage space for root crops like parsnips, carrots, potatoes and salsify in winter. Prime cuts of meat are popular in restaurants, but using minor or tougher parts if buying an entire cow or pig from a farmer can present a challenge. One solution could be for culinary schools to teach chefs how to utilize these parts of meat to create signature dishes.

For smaller, not-so-luxurious restaurants, the price of fresh locally grown food can be a challenge, says Cathy Hohmeyer of Lake Clear Lodge, because you have to be able to pass the cost on to your customers, and fresh produce is often more expensive than vegetables that have traveled for two weeks across the country in Sysco trucks.

Steve agrees: “Higher end restaurants can pay our price because they start with higher quality food, while smaller restaurants are barely breaking even and can’t afford to pay more.” Steve has to charge enough so that he makes money.

In Vermont, the Farmers’ Diner has risen to the challenge. Tod Murphy, himself a farmer, started the diner with the goal of relying on local ingredients. The key to his success is a hub or commissary that includes four or five diners and a central food processing plant supplied by local farms.

The benefits are that farmers know in advance who their customers are and what they will need, so they can plan and plant specifically for them. That means they are able to grow and market knowing customers will pay for quality and freshness they cannot get anywhere else. It is important to keep the produce on the vine as long as possible, and get it to the restaurant right after harvest.

Farmers need to be familiar with the needs of local restaurants. For example,

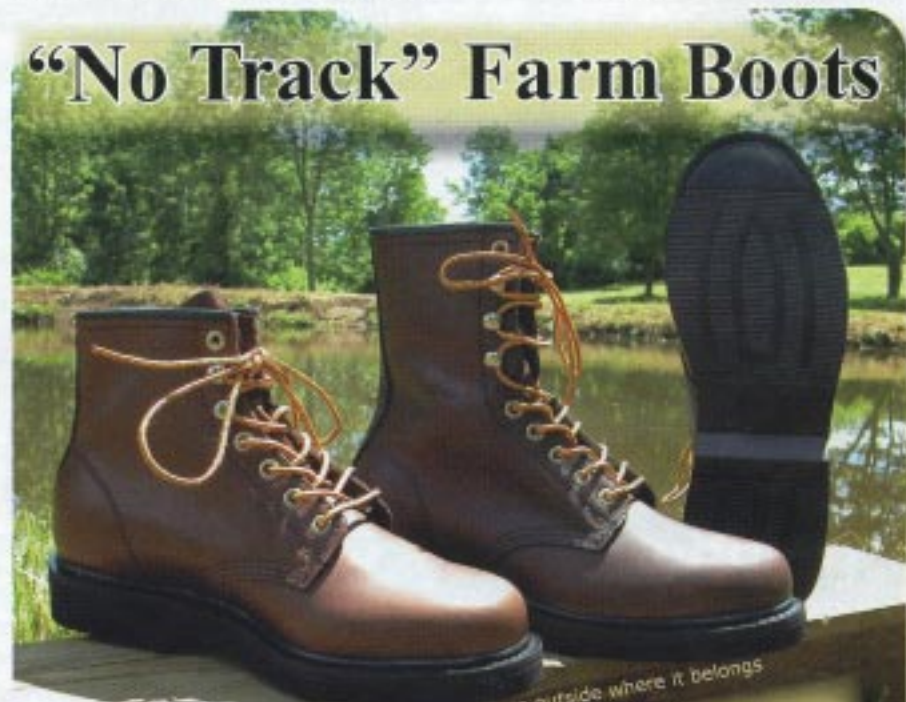
one Lake Placid chef hails from Tennessee and was looking for fresh collard greens – ‘so the Tuckers began to grow these.

This follows the first rule of marketing: listen to your customers.



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