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by Carol L. Spence

If you hang around any number of restaurants, it quickly will become apparent that the deliveries arriving at the kitchen door are all about local these days. And whether the demand originates from consumers hungry for fresh ingredients or chefs determined to support their communities, Kentucky's farmers are reaping the benefits from a renewed link between land and larder.

Consumer Demand

Tim Woods and Wuyang Hu, economists in the College of Agriculture's Department of Agricultural Economics, collect information about food purchasing and consumption through their Kentucky Food Consumer Survey, a Web-based survey of 1,000 randomly chosen Kentucky households.

"It's very clear from what we're seeing out there that there's a strong interest in just about anything local," Woods said. "People like local food. They like good quality food, and they're interested in supporting their local community, really across every level of education and income."

Top: Executive Chef John Foster (third from left), is shown here with fellow

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Sullivan University culinary school faculty members and local food enthusiasts, Chef David Walls (left) and Chef Bill Hallman. On the right is culinary student Katherine Manning.

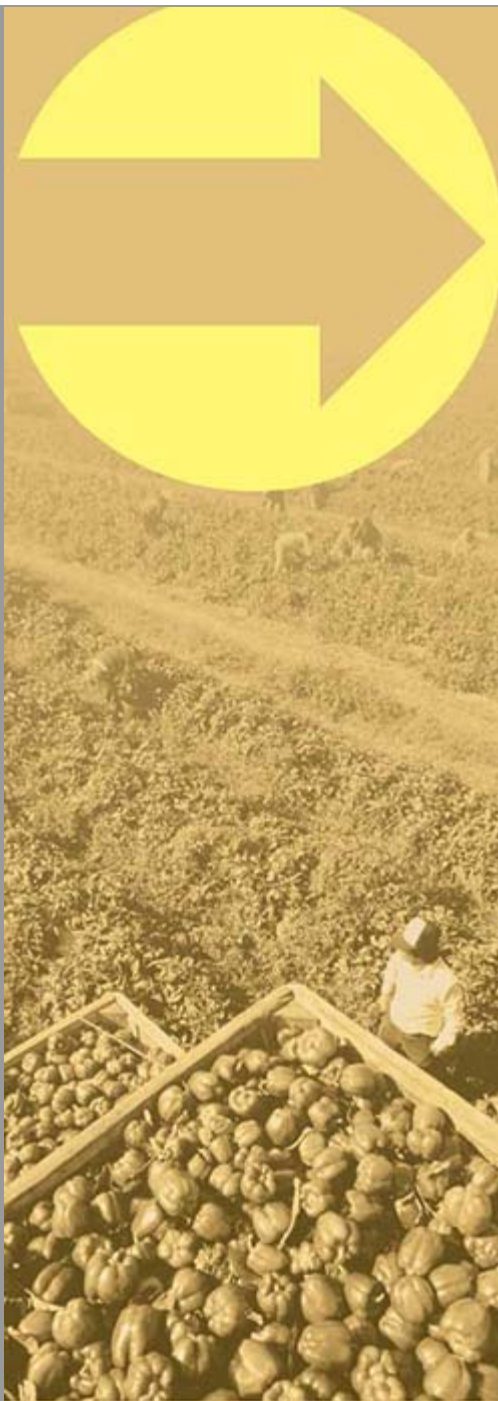
Bottom: UK Lemon Tree Chef Bob Perry (left) and Chalk Executive Chef Mark Bodenstein display some of the fresh products Bodenstein offers on his menu.

The idea isn't exactly new

John Foster, director of Sullivan University's culinary school, is a bit perturbed at how slowly things have moved in the restaurant world. He bought local produce in his first days as executive chef at Dudley's Restaurant in Lexington in the early 1990s. He clearly remembers the moment, during a public meeting in Lexington, when he recognized the importance of using local food.

"I watched these farmers get up and talk about how hard it was to make a living and how they would really love to be able to sell to restaurants and supermarkets. It just clicked," he said. "I was already doing it on a very small scale—why not expand it a little bit? I didn't realize what I was getting into at the time, simply because you have to be extremely organized to make it pay."

And there's the rub. From the chef's standpoint, some things become more difficult—like planning. Sometimes as far out as January, Foster and



a local grower would pour through seed catalogs, choosing crops he would ultimately use for his summer menu. Then, Foster points out, there's the chef's obligation to accept those items he's ordered, even though business might be slow that week. That means planning ahead and making and freezing products to be used in the dead of winter.

Even the size has to be taken into account. Jonathan Gossett, Dudley's current executive chef, said vegetables from a wholesaler are uniform in size—on purpose.

"That's very easy for portion control and tracking your costs. But that is not the way God works in a row of vegetables," he said, laughing. "They're not all the same shape or size. Some of them are going to lend themselves to a main dish, some of them end up in soup, and some of them you can serve small and whole."

As he sees it, that's not necessarily bad. "Even though you have to be more organized, I think that also gives you a little more flexibility."

What do I do with this?

It's not just produce coming into the kitchen, but locally produced meat, too. Most comes as primal cuts, and this can pose a problem for chefs who may be used to boxed meat that's already cut into steaks or chops.

"When we went to boxed meat programs and meat cutting schools closed up, we lost a lot of knowledge," said Gregg Rentfrow, meat science extension specialist in the College's Department of Animal and Food Sciences.

To fill that gap, Rentfrow developed a meat cutting school at UK.

"As that school has evolved, one of the things we noticed is more and more restaurants are interested in local products. It's easier for them to buy the big wholesale cuts or the big primals and cut that in the kitchen," he said.

Rentfrow, who's held one school for chefs with more planned, believes that if he can teach chefs how to cut meat, local livestock producers who are direct marketing will have a broader clientele.

Executive Chef
Jonathan
Gossett
prepares Pike
Valley Farm
organic
chickens for the
evening's
dinner at
Dudley's
Restaurant in
Lexington.



Education and support

Mac Stone is executive director of the Office of Agricultural Marketing and Product Promotion in the [Kentucky Department of Agriculture](#). He's also a farmer, so he has a particular interest in getting the word out to chefs that local is better.

"The issues are training the chefs who don't understand seasonality, training the chefs who don't understand it's not already in the box," he said. "Training that, yes, sometimes you will be cutting some blemishes out to have some really good stuff, but without that you're not going to have heirloom tomatoes."

Stone said it's important to train growers in safe handling procedures, as well. The state has programs available to improve on-farm food safety practices. As part of that program, cost-share funding is available for investing in on-farm refrigeration.

Woods and other College of Agriculture experts want to make the process more palatable for producers and chefs. They developed Retail Ready, an educational curriculum for producers who wish to sell to restaurants, grocers, and the food service industry. Designing the curriculum, which is available on the [MarketMaker](#) Web site, involved interviewing more than 70 chefs, grocers, and other buyers about ways to improve relationships with local growers.

"I think there are still a lot of opportunities to develop that aspect of our food economy, much more than what we see now," Woods said.

Like the University, the state is also working to develop more venues for local food. The [Kentucky Proud](#) Restaurant Rewards Program offers restaurants up to a 20 percent rebate for including and promoting local foods on their menus.

Making the connection

Incentives and education are important, but connecting farmers and chefs can still be difficult. Shortly after Mark Bodenstein was named executive chef at Chalk, a Covington restaurant, he took the initiative and made the rounds of area farms, connecting with local farmers, checking on the

product he planned to buy, even helping a bit with the harvest. To Bodenstein, it was worth the extra work.

“When people set foot in my restaurant, I want them to know they can point to almost any item on my menu and I can say, ‘If you want, I can show you where my ingredients come from,’ ” he said.

But not every chef has the time or the inclination to make on-farm visits, so farmers have to take the initiative too.

When Leo Keene and his wife, Jean Pitches-Keene, began growing garlic on their Madison County farm, Blue Moon, they marketed their product through mail order. However, they saw a potential market in restaurants and started knocking on doors, peddling their garlic, baby squash, and herbs.

Farmer Leo Keene serves as a middleman to deliver locally grown products to restaurants in Central Kentucky.



“I got tired of them saying, ‘What else do you have?’ ” he said. “I had baby squash, but I only had so many of them, and the nature of the beast with them is one week you’ve got them coming out of your ears and the next week they’re dead. But if you have other stuff going on, it keeps your foot in every door that you can get your foot in.”

The Keenes knew plenty of farmers, so gradually Leo became a middleman with his foot lodged in several doors.

Bob Perry, UK project manager for sustainable agriculture, understands the difficulty farmers have in finding those elusive markets. He is involved in Agriculture of the Middle, a national initiative to establish infrastructure for producers who fall between those who direct market and those who are involved with larger, commodity-based farming ventures.

Perry, who is also chef/instructor of UK’s student-run [Lemon Tree Restaurant](#), contends that if there were a market for products from small to medium-sized farms, those producers would raise much more.

The solution? Come up with a collaborative structure between farmers, allowing them to pool their products while knowing there is a market for them.

“What we’re trying to do is come up with a benevolent middleman type of strategy,” Perry said of the national initiative.

Grasshoppers Distribution in Louisville is filling some of that need. The company originated with four farmers who wanted to find a creative way to get farmers’ products to market at a fair price. They now work with approximately 90 farmers across 27 counties.



Fresh, locally produced food is being served up in a number of Kentucky restaurants.



Jim Earley, Grasshoppers Distribution's general manager, says his company's goal is to help farmers meet or exceed the cost of production.

"We're working with farmers trying to help them meet or exceed the cost of their production. That's our goal," said Jim Earley, Grasshoppers' general manager.

"Often smaller farms don't have much money to put into labor and have harder times marketing their products. On the other side, a lot of chefs don't have time to deal with 25 individual producers. I feel like that's the service we can offer to restaurants and farmers alike," he said.

Coming full circle

As demand for local products grows, chefs are rediscovering the joy and creativity that come from working with the freshest products available, and more opportunities are opening for farmers. Bodenstein notes we are coming full circle. "I think the word 'trend' shouldn't be used anymore. I think it's just us getting back to a system we should never have left."

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