

# Marketing to Restaurants

Written by [Debbie Roos](#), Agricultural Extension Agent.

Contributors: Ben Barker, Chef and Owner, Magnolia Grill, Durham; Bill Dow, Farmer, Ayrshire Farm; Stefan Hartmann, Farmer, Black River Organic Farm; Gwen Higgins, Executive Chef, Aurora's, Chapel Hill; Alex Hitt, Farmer, Peregrine Farm; Bret Jennings, Chef Proprietor, Elaine's on Franklin, Chapel Hill; Devon Mills, Chef and Owner, Babette's, Durham; Sam Poley, Executive Chef, The Weathervane Café at Southern Seasons, Durham

## Crop and Variety Selection

- Don't try and offer something that the buyer already gets locally, unless you are offering it at a time when local supply is low (see below). Carve out a niche for yourself by being the first to offer a new product. Some farmers find it helpful to have a lead product that buyers will know you by - later on you can add products.
- New farmers should look at where and when they can break into the market. Try and provide crops when no one else has them, like at the very beginning or very end of the season, or during the winter. These are times when farmers' markets are closed and most established farmers take a well-needed break. Instead of trying to compete during the busy spring and summer, look at what you are able to produce during the much less crowded off-season. There are huge opportunities for seasonal cold weather product.
- Look at market demand and supply to identify opportunities and determine what you can produce that's not currently being grown locally. Everyone is growing tomatoes and squash - try to provide a product that no one else has. Think outside the box. Ask chefs what they need. You can definitely charge more if the chef can't get it anywhere else.
- Flavor, not yield, should be the primary consideration in determining what variety to grow for restaurants.
- Some crops in high demand and short supply locally include baby squash, baby leeks, beets, fava beans, heirloom varieties, blueberries, blackberries, raspberries, strawberries, figs, field peas, lima beans, purple-hull peas, sweet corn (especially heirloom varieties). Again, communication is important. Talk to each chef to determine their individual needs.
- Crop diversity is important. If you are growing something successfully, resist the impulse to overproduce it. For example, if you are growing 1/4 acre of broccoli and selling it to a restaurant, instead of doubling your broccoli acreage and trying to figure out where to market it, grow 1/4 acre of cauliflower in addition to the broccoli because there's a good chance the restaurant you already sell to will want it, saving you the effort of finding another buyer for the extra supply.

## Harvest and Post-Harvest Handling

- The easiest way to remove the field heat from produce is to not have it there in the first place! Pick early in the morning, and take advantage of whatever shade you have. Store product in the shade while you are working in the field. Store in the cooler if it won't be delivered until the next day.
- Many farmers grow an excellent product but they kill it before they deliver it through improper post-harvest handling and storage. Quality starts in the field and can only decrease after harvest. One of the most common mistakes is over-handling. As one experienced farmer said, "they need to quit messing with the product!" Streamline procedures to decrease handling time. Bunch and pack directly in the field.
- Beginner farmers or any farmer growing a new crop often don't have a good understanding of "units". If the buyer asks for 20 bunches of basil, you need to know what a bunch is, and how they want it bunched. Again, communication is extremely important. Work this out in advance with the buyer.
- Communicate with the buyer about packaging requirements and expectations. Ask for their preferences. Make it as convenient as you can for the buyer. Label bags or boxes of produce with the name of the crop and the date of delivery.
- Harvest vegetables at the appropriate stage. Overly mature vegetables will be rejected. There's a difference between "baby" and "young". Some chefs don't like baby vegetables - they look cute on the plate but have no taste. However, all chefs appreciate young vegetables. The vegetable should be mature enough to have developed a nice flavor, but young enough to have snap and not be woody or fibrous.
- Harvest and pack intelligently. What you do to your produce after harvest has a big impact on its shelf-life. Follow proper post-harvest handling and storage procedures to ensure a long shelf-life for your crops. Chefs won't buy from growers who don't know how to handle their product. It may look great coming in the door but if it wasn't handled properly, it will lose quality fast. Don't bring tomatoes in still hot from the sun unless you literally just picked them!
- Trim inedible parts off anything you are selling by the pound. Chefs don't want to pay for something they can't use.
- Get the product as clean and bug-free as possible, with no bruising. Most chefs prefer that products are not pre-washed since this handling shortens their shelf-life and increases spoilage. Discuss this with the chef in advance.
- Pack the produce in a user-friendly, environmentally friendly manner. Recycle containers if possible and label your product as to what it is and when it was delivered. The cooks at a restaurant might not recognize a bag if they are used to another form of packaging.

- If you aren't sure how to pack your product, ask the chef what their expectations are. Use reusable/recyclable packing containers when possible.
- Keep the chef's needs in mind: provide trimmed, clean produce that is convenient as possible to the chef. This may include value-added products such as mesclun mix with micro-greens, cleaned and ready to go.

## **Quality**

- Small growers generally can't compete with larger suppliers on price or volume, so you have to compete on quality and service. Price, quality, and service are all important, but you can't have all three - you can't provide the best price, the best quality, and the best service. If you have the lowest price, then you are most likely sacrificing quality and service. Provide excellent quality and service at a fair price, and the buyer should have no reason to look for another supplier.
- Appearance of product can be very important to chefs, who have a vision of what they want the plate to look like. Sometimes they want a particular size vegetable because that's what will look nice on the plate.
- There is more flexibility in restaurants for accepting off-grade produce since it is going to be processed. Communicate with the chef about aesthetic expectations for produce. Some items may need to be visually appealing, but for others it won't matter.

## **Communication**

- Communication is extremely important in establishing and maintaining a good relationship with the buyer. Start off on the right foot and stay on the right foot. Maintain communication during the off-season, letting buyers know what you are planting, and when and how much you expect to have. This can be done by phone. As harvest time approaches, follow-up with more phone calls to remind them of what you have, how much you have, and when it's coming in.
- If there's a problem (deer, weather, disease, etc.) and it becomes evident you won't have as much product as you predicted, give the buyer as much notice as possible. Buyers understand that risks are inherent in crop production, but it's important to keep the line of communication open - surprises are not welcome! Buyers need a chance to line up another supplier.
- During the growing season, give as much advance notice as possible of when you will have a product and when you expect to run out of a particular item. The more notice you can give, the better, generally 7-10 days. Buyers need to know in advance when your supply will come in so they can stop ordering from their larger suppliers and let their current stock run out. Likewise, they need to know ahead of time when you expect to run out so they can line up another supplier.

- Start communicating and building relationships with chefs before the growing season begins, in January and February. Tell them what you are planning to plant, ask for ideas of what they are looking for, and then follow-up with reminders as the season progresses.
- Be consistent about when you take orders and when you will bring them. A restaurant is a system that has deadlines and cut-off times for when other sources must be contacted. For example, if you normally provide lettuce and the chef hasn't heard from you by 3:00 p.m. and their large supplier has an order cut-off time of 4:00 p.m., then you may lose a sale and damage your credibility.
- Give a bit of warning as to when you expect the current crop to stop and what is coming up, especially with odd products that might take time to figure out a dish to use it for.
- Let the chef know if you can not deliver the product when you said you would.
- Treat all employees in the restaurant as you would a potential buyer. Staff turnover in restaurants is high, and if someone you know moves to a new restaurant, they may help you make a sale.
- Most chefs prefer that you call before you show up at their back door. Do not call or visit during meal rush times. It's best to contact them between 9:00-11:00 a.m. and 2:00-5:00 p.m., avoiding the 11:00-2:00 time slot if the restaurant serves lunch.

## **Service**

- Buyers expect professionalism from farmers. You must think and act like a business person. Call when you say you will, understand pricing, provide a high quality product, show up on time, and be reliable. Use a receipt book, not a scrap of paper or the corner of a box. The importance of professionalism cannot be overstated.
- Don't promise more than you can deliver. Be conservative in estimating how much product you will have.
- Offer the chef a small amount of a product that you have a hard time selling. They may be able to use it on their day off and find a new use or recipe for it.
- Consistency and quantity are important. Be able to provide an estimate of weekly quantities for the following couple of weeks. Don't promise more than you can deliver!
- Any written background information you can provide about your farm is welcome. Chefs usually spend time out in the dining room talking with customers, and the more they know about your farm, the more they can tell your story to customers.

## **Price and Payment**

- Local growers should get a higher price than California growers because local products have usually been harvested within 24 hours and so have a longer shelf-life, and therefore less "shrink". Shrink is the amount that is never sold and is thrown away. For example, a box of lettuce has 24 heads. If it was shipped from California to North Carolina, it was harvested a minimum of 4-7 days before arriving at the store or restaurant. The buyer will most likely end up throwing away 6 out of those 24 heads. Buyers may pay more per head for local lettuce but end up with less shrink.
- Some farmers will have an oversupply of something and then drop the price drastically as they scramble to dump it somewhere; you are not doing yourself any favors and you are hurting other farmers. Rarely does a buyer purchase more when you drop the price. It's better if you plan carefully to avoid oversupply.
- Use a receipt book that produces duplicate copies, and always get someone to sign it when you make a delivery.
- For restaurant sales, most farmers aim for a price somewhere between retail and wholesale, about 20% less than retail. Chefs may expect a discount for higher volumes or contracts. Know ahead of time what price you want, because most likely the chef will expect you to name your price. Chefs are willing to pay more for high quality specialty vegetables, especially when local supply is low.
- Payment schedule is something you work out with the chef. Most chefs prefer not to pay on delivery. Keep in mind that if you get paid on delivery, it can double the time you spend at the restaurant - time that could be spent on the farm or developing relationships with other buyers.