

Sustaining Farming on the Urban Fringe



Monthly Highlights from Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station

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The “100 Mile Lunch” Chef & Restaurateur Survey Informs us on Wholesale Distributors’ Role in Local Food

Jack Rabin, Associate Director – Farm Programs

When Rutgers hosted the New Jersey Restaurant Association (NJRA) Board of Directors on our campus August 4, 2008 it was a veritable local food feast. The meeting concluded with an exotic yet fresh “100 Mile Lunch” prepared by Jim Weaver, Chef Proprietor of Tre Piani in Princeton and Slow Food NJ, and samples from local farm wineries.

Advocates and opinion writers weigh in daily on local food and food system issues. Goals typically include increasing farmers’ direct sales to hospitality and institutional food users and chefs’ access to fresh-from-the-farm deliveries. Despite these expressions, there is scant data directly from chefs’ on their local food delivery requirements. Our survey results offer you a glimpse of their needs.

Among the group of 64 NJRA Directors, including foodservice distributors, allied food business services providers, staff, Department of Ag Marketers, regulators, policy makers, and Rutgers University members were 26 vanguard professional chefs and restaurateurs like NJRA Chairwoman, Betsy Alger, Proprietor of the Frog and the Peach restaurant and Rutgers graduate.

We surveyed these 26 chefs and restaurateurs regarding local Jersey farm product purchase requirements and the role distributors play supporting their business providing fine dining experiences to patrons. This survey was conducted with support from the Northeast Region USDA SARE Program.

Local is not yet easy, efficient, nor convenient

96% of surveyed chefs’ menus feature some Jersey or local items, so we know this is a selective supporting group. A far lower number, 77%, design menus around local availability due to unpredictable supplies.

Among our surveyed group, 27% of responding chefs currently receive deliveries from local farmers. This group uses about 1-3 farmers per restaurant, who deliver 2-3 times weekly. A greater number of these chefs, 42%, travel to make farm pickups from 1-6 farms, 1-3 times weekly. As

Chefs offer their comments:

“Wholesale Farmers’ Markets need a coordinator who is a restaurateur to make this business concept work.”

“We are dependent on deliveries. But, if I could receive an e-mail from farmers on a single day & then place an order, I would be willing to pick up product at my closest Farmers’ Market” where they sell.”

we expected, the chefs reported it is tough getting to farmers to pick up product due to time and fuel constraints.

Chefs and restaurateurs are realistic and knowledgeable about difficulties performing local distribution. 25% agreed it should be “easy” for their distributors to incorporate local seasonal products. 75% recognize steep challenges. Of these 75% who recognize distributor difficulties, 29% agreed it is not easy for distributors to manage and slot dual (local and shipped in) perishable inventories, 17% identified restricted or inconsistent Jersey supply, quality, or pricing as challenges to increasing local farm products distribution, and 29% felt it is very challenging for distributors to slot multiple inventories of the same products and distinguish them on price lists.

Local breakout price lists needed from distributors

Restaurateur and chef foodservice customers clearly aim to increase their buying of local farm products. 100% respondents said they would order more local food if their wholesale distributors offered “Breakout Price Lists” distinguishing local products. 64% responded their distributors do not identify or breakout Jersey or local products on price lists, but do discuss availability over the phone when order-

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Left: Deborah Dowdell, Executive Director of NJRA, enjoys local foods lunch with NJRA member. Center: 100 mile lunch included New Jersey seafood, produce, breads, cheeses and meats. Right: Jim Weaver of Tre Piani prepared NJRA's local food luncheon.

ing. With regard to current Jersey or local identification or breakout price list practices, 55% of chefs indicated their distributors do identify Jersey or local and 45% do not. This is greater than I anticipated and a welcome change in practices.

When asked if local breakout price lists are not needed because chefs and distributors communicate during in season ordering and delivery, only 5% of chefs answered yes and the other 95% felt breakout price lists would improve communication and ordering.

If distributors can overcome the challenging demands of maintaining inventories and providing price sheets of local and non-local for the same perishable items in-season, a ready market awaits them among the best customers. There is also room for alternative distributors, who instead of feeling inconvenienced incorporating our local seasonality into their set 52-week full-service programs, design a business plan around local, with other regions filling in the year-round service needs of customers.

Chefs expect farmers to do more than they have been preparing for serving their chef markets with predictable fax, e-mail, or website availability lists in advance.

How far would chefs travel for local?

We asked chefs about their willingness to travel (time and distance) for purchasing smaller wholesale food and seafood lots if there were one or more regional “Wholesale Farmers Markets.” Wholesale Farmers markets exist around selected European cities (e.g., Paris, FR) and in North American (Ontario, CN). Economic Development Authorities of the NYC metropolitan region proposed a market, with analyses indicating such a market located in

Distance and time chefs are willing to travel for pick up	
Distance	Time
57% will travel up to 12 miles.	74% willing travel < 30 minutes
33% will travel up to 25 miles.	26% willing travel < 1 hour
09% will travel between 26-40 miles.	0% willing travel up to 1 1/2 hours
0% will travel > 40 miles	0% willing to travel up to 2 hours

NYC could easily do \$1 billion in annual sales. How far would our surveyed chefs travel for local perishable food items?

Six chefs reported they would not consider any traveling to pick up local products. All six responded they must depend on distributors to supply local products. Four of this group also indicated they are too consumed pleasing their patrons by providing a good dining experience to travel. Two of this small group reported they depend on farmers to make drop deliveries.

This table is instructive. It shows us that for all the rhetoric promoting local food, busy chefs, restaurant managers, and hospitality food users are under the same time management constraints as farmers or any busy professional. Since about 55% of perishable food use is eaten outside the home, prepared by hospitality or institutional providers, they need to depend on efficient distributors to source, consolidate, and deliver local products.

The bottom line? We need and depend on wholesale distributors. They have a vital role in consolidating and inventorying perishable products, making efficient multiple drops and serving customer needs in busy metropolitan areas. We also need them to not only make greater efforts at inventory slotting local products, but identifying local for their willing customers.



Our work benefiting farming sustainability and quality of life in New Jersey depends on gifts from people sharing our Rutgers NJAES vision for a vibrant, healthy, profitable urban fringe farming community. We invite you to join us. Please contact Jack Rabin at 732-932-5000 ext. 610 or rabin@njaes.rutgers.edu.