



Thinking about sourcing locally? What you need to know.

by Mary Lou Santovec

Are your customers searching your menu for locally sourced food? If they aren't now, they likely will be.

Food safety, something consumers once took for granted, is one of the key drivers behind the current interest in eating locally. Salmonella and E. coli tainted peanut butter and spinach cause people to wonder where the food they're eating comes from and just how safe it is. Each time contamination is discovered in another product, confidence in the safety of all food plummets.

Due to increasing consumer interest, more restaurants and foodservice operations are looking into buying locally grown produce.

The trend in sourcing local foods brings both a new opportunity and an elevated risk and responsibility for Wisconsin's restaurateurs. "It's important for operators to take advantage of opportunities to use local or regional products," said Susan Quam, executive director of the WRA Education Foundation and WRA's specialist on food safety. "Locally produced foods are very popular with customers and it boosts the local economy." But by buying local, restaurants assume more liability for food safety.

Emphasizing good agricultural practices

Restaurateurs know that what comes in the back door is their responsibility. "When you buy from a regional or national vendor, they've already asked the right questions," said Quam.

Large vendors are putting auditors in the fields and warehouses to verify if the product was grown with good agricultural practices (GAPs), how it was cleaned and the way it was processed. "When you cut out the middle person, the restaurant needs to ask those questions," she added.

Beef, pork and lamb must be processed at a state-inspected facility. But the rules differ for produce. "Produce is not as regulated as other foods," said Quam.

Why the discrepancy? Check out the numbers. The USDA, which inspects meat, poultry and some egg products, has some 7,800 field inspectors. But the FDA has only

1,307 staff to inspect fruit, leafy greens and vegetables.

A recent *New York Times* article outlined the steps that large food processors are taking in an attempt to eliminate, or at least, reduce the number of outbreaks that have cost them hundreds of millions of dollars. Giant producers, including Dole and Fresh Express, have banded together to pay for their own inspectors to look for food safety problems. Some producers are reducing the number of suppliers they work with, eliminating those from abroad. Chipotle and Campbell's Soup are contracting with local farms to grow product specifically for them.

Many producers, both large and small, have signed on to GAPs, agreeing to work with these industry developed voluntary guidelines. GAPs target water usage, worker hygiene, proximity to livestock and use of manure for on-farm and post-production processes. To get certified, an inspector must visit the grower at least once a year per crop.

The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture works with producers reminding them of their responsibility for ensuring their food is safe up to the point the food changes hands. But if a restaurant is serious about buying from a local farmer (either from the farm or at a farmer's market), they must know what questions to ask and be willing to ask them. "You need to be assured that

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Food Safety Practices for Buying Locally

Looking to add locally sourced products to your menu? Asking potential producers the following questions and/or observing these practices in person can go a long way in reducing the restaurant's risk of introducing food-borne pathogens into the kitchen.

Farm and production practices:

- Is water tested annually and are test records on file?
- Is potable water used for food and food contact surfaces?
- Are wells and other water sources protected from contamination from manure, livestock, chemicals or pets?
- Are food contact surfaces in the packing area clean and sanitary?
- Are packing materials kept clean and free of contamination?
- Are food products kept at appropriate temperatures?
- Are food products cleaned?
- Is a pest control program in place?
- Is the food product packing facility enclosed?

Worker health and hygiene:

- Are workers trained about proper sanitation and hygiene practices?
- Are hand washing facilities available to workers?
- Do workers wash hands at appropriate times such as before packing and after using the toilet, smoking or eating? (Those harvesting food items should be considered food handlers.)
- Do workers limit bare hand contact with foods after harvest?
- Are workers excluded from handling food products if they are ill or have a fever, diarrhea or vomiting?
- Do workers put on clean aprons after harvesting wash and pack products?
- Are different gloves worn for harvesting and packing?

Source: *What Retail Foodservices Should Know When Purchasing Local Produce Directly From Farmers*, written by Dr. Catherine Strohbehn, et al, Iowa State University, <https://www.extension.iastate.edu/store/ItemDetail.aspx?ProductID-12938>

the product has been handled correctly," said Quam.

"Buyers who feel more confident about how pathogens travel can be more confident in asking the questions," said Doug Wubben, program coordinator of Wisconsin Homegrown Lunch, a joint venture between the Research, Education, Action, and Policy (REAP) on Food Group and the Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems (CIAS) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. "Buyers express more confidence in local products because one of the transmission routes is through contact with humans." The fewer times a product is handled, theoretically the safer it is.

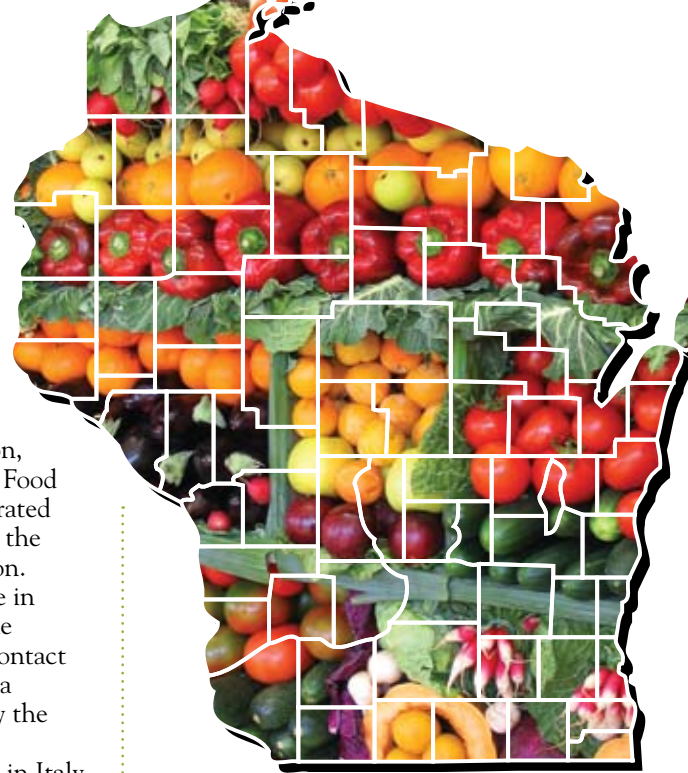
The eating local trend started in Italy some 20 years ago with slow food. The movement seeks to reconnect growers, preparers and consumers with what food is like close to the ground. "I call it putting a face, a place and a taste back to food," said Jack Kaestner, executive chef of the Oconomowoc Lake Club and an enthusiastic proponent of sourcing local foods.

Addressing the locally grown vs. nutrition issue

Just because a product is locally grown, it doesn't necessarily mean it's more nutritious. Quam noted there's no credible scientific evidence to back up the nutrition claim, referencing research from Great Britain that suggests it is not. "Don't make any claims you can't back up," she cautioned, "especially that locally produced food is more nutritious or safer."

"While we generally think of processed food as being lower in nutrient quality, it's actually higher because it's been stabilized," said Dr. Barbara Ingham, University of Wisconsin Extension food scientist. "Canned carrots are actually higher in Vitamin A because canning allows the body to access the vitamin."

But the stabilizing process also introduces negative nutrients. Many processed foods are high in salt and fat. And the texture of some foods changes after processing. "Fresh, local produce shines in comparison to



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– Jack Kaestner

products that are sourced from Texas or California," she said.

Sourcing locally does have advantages in preserving nutritional value in items high in Vitamins B and C. The longer it takes to reach the plate, the larger the drop in nutrient density.

It's all about taste

Nutrients aside, for many proponents, sourcing local foods is all about the taste. "We have a grower from Port Wing who grows dynamite heirloom tomatoes," said Randy Anderson, Front of the House Manager for Wild Rice Restaurant in Bayfield. "Eating their little golden tomatoes is like eating candy."

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has taste.”

Last year, Kaestner purchased 30 percent of the food for the private club from Wisconsin growers spending \$25,000 for vegetables, \$30,000 for meat and \$5,000 for dairy and other incidentals such as honey, cheese and maple syrup. “Getting to 10 to 15 percent of local food is fairly easy,” he said. “Getting more than 15 percent, well, now you’re getting into Local Food 301 and 401.” Kaestner has gone as high as 90 percent local for special dinners where he was free to design the menu based on what products were in season.

Kaestner has been sourcing locally since 1983. He sees it as a way of not

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only getting high quality products, but of getting to know the people who produce them. “To me, a big part of it is the farmers,” he said. “Developing and maintaining that local relationship is part of it for me.”

For Anderson, local whitefish and lake trout have been on the restaurant’s menu for over three decades. “It’s a multi-faceted reason,” he said for choosing to source locally. “Some of these people are trying to make a living up here and we want to support them. There’s less carbon footprints on the food. And there’s the freshness and somewhat unique taste that comes with heirloom varieties.”

Building relationships seen as key to success

Both Kaestner and Anderson have developed relationships with local vendors that they trust. “If I find a farmer I like, and I like their growing practices, I ask for a referral to other farmers who do the same thing,” said Kaestner.

“We’re dealing with reputable people,” said Anderson. “We check out the backgrounds of the people to make sure that their practices are up to our standards and healthy. We want a product we can stand behind.”

Dr. Stephen Ingham, administrator of the Division of Food Safety at the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, noted that ideally the farm should be either GAP certified or follow GAP’s basic principles. “This may mean the restaurant owner must visit the farm,” he said.

CIAS’s Wubben noted that many of the schools he works with have added an extra layer of processing to all the food that they receive no matter where it came from. “Every fresh produce item that comes in is assumed to be filled with pathogens,” he said. “There are additional food safety protocols in place once it hits the school kitchen.”

Taking the first step

Thinking about sourcing locally? John Hendrickson, senior outreach specialist at CIAS,



works directly with farmers to promote sustainable agricultural practices. Part of his role is to teach farmers how to market their items to restaurants.

“I tell growers that they’re not just selling peas and carrots, but that they’re selling themselves and selling a story,” he said. Relationship marketing, a term more common in a sales environment than agriculture, is the key to success.

Growers who want to plant for a restaurant must realize that they will be supplying food for only part of the year so communication about what and how much to plant is critical. “Growers should develop a close tie with the customer to better serve their needs,” said Hendrickson. “They should know what foods they’re serving and who the restaurant’s customers are.”

Kaestner meets with his growers in late winter to go over invoices from the previous year. Reviewing what he spent with commodity vendors, Kaestner asks his growers if they can produce the same or a similar item in the appropriate quantities. “I try not to be more than 25 percent of the farm’s business,” he said.

Local organizations such as REAP have done substantial legwork in identifying producers willing to work with restaurants. Under the group’s “Buy Fresh Buy Local” campaign, REAP has helped connect 25 restaurant partners with local growers.

While the trend toward local sourcing is catching on, it’s imperative that restaurateurs weigh the food safety risks against the marketing benefits before jumping in. “If a food-borne illness happens in a restaurant, it won’t make a difference if it’s a large or small producer that it’s traced back to,” Quam said. “Your restaurant and the producer will be potential targets for lawsuits.” A restaurateur must ensure that protocols and processes for food safety are in place and consistently executed to protect their business. **WR**