



Farm-to-Restaurant: A Guide for Farmers

Cornell Cooperative Extension | Jefferson County



So you are thinking of selling to a restaurant or other food buyer...

Here's what you need to know.

WHY: Restaurants often operate on fixed menu cycles which means predictable orders and reliable quantities. This can be invaluable to planning out your season and with some foresight, can ensure a market for your products. As we will discuss later in this guide, when you sell to a restaurant, you aren't just selling to the chef. You have the opportunity to sell to everyone involved in the restaurant, from service staff to diners. This marketing exposure can help expand your customer base in direct sales, whether you operate at a farm stand, CSA, farmers market or with other local retailers.

WHAT: Restaurants interested in sourcing locally are likely interested because of the promise of increased quality and consistency, and therefore have high expectations. On the other hand, food buyers might look for pricing that is comparable to broadline distributors. Most restaurants have not ventured from broadline distributors because they are only looking at these aspects of product procurement. This is simply due to specific budget parameters and if their business is to be sustainable, they need to make their margins. Part of selling to restaurants is showing them all the reasons to purchase from you.

WHO: Typically, the chef, kitchen manager, or food and beverage manager will have the purchasing power for the establishment. This includes sourcing for the main menu, as well as any specialty menus the restaurant may offer such as banquets, weddings, or tasting menus. Note: Patience will serve you well, restaurants and the individuals involved are very busy and may be difficult to contact or may contact you at inconvenient times.

HOW: Be persistent, but not overbearing, in trying to make that connection work. Keep in mind that restaurants can be an important connection with the shared goal of feeding your community.

Certifications

- Chefs often have questions about the legality of buying food directly from producers, particularly meats and value-added products. When approaching restaurants, be sure to mention all certifications that your farm has obtained. Knowing that your farm is inspected and certified by various agencies or organizations can reassure buyers that they will receive quality products.
- Examples: Good Agricultural Practices (GAP), formal certification of organic practices
- *Market Gardeners*: Produce Safety Training completions, practices in place to ensure safe handling and storage
- *Livestock Farmers*: USDA-certified processing facility
- *Poultry Farmers*: USDA-certified processing facility or NYS-sanctioned slaughterhouse with "Exempt P.L. 90-492." Eggs washed and labeled
- *Value-Added & Dairy*: Relevant licenses and sanitation requirements

Processing:

- Some restaurants may ask for basic processing of produce (cubed winter squash, shelled peas); this must be prepared in a commercial kitchen.
- Baked goods must be prepared in a commercial kitchen.
- To find a commercial kitchen:
 - Contact your local Extension Office
 - Visit Cornell Food Venture Center's "Kitchens/Co-Packers" webpage



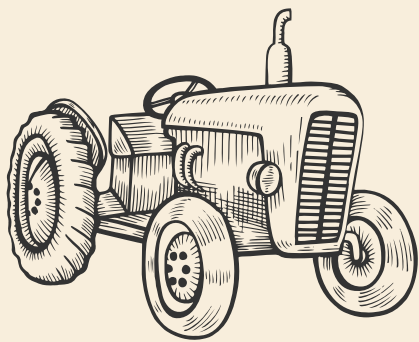
Tips for Success

Build a Solid Relationship

- Research which chefs and markets are already using local products by looking at the menus of restaurants in your area or asking around when you are out to eat.
- Determine if it is feasible for you to source to them. Consider adjusting prices to account for delivery. Cold calling a restaurant in the middle of the summer to see if they need tomatoes is not always the best route.
- Unfortunately, you might find some relationships aren't worth it based on the time and energy required of you to meet the chef's request. It is important that the relationship is a good fit for all parties involved.
- Reach out in advance, especially if you know you are going to have a large quantity or a new product the chef might be interested in.

Forecast for the Future

- Know crop quantities and a rough idea of the availability.
- If you have numerous products available at all times during the season, create a weekly "fresh sheet" with pricing to keep track of upcoming and outgoing product selections. This can be sent in a simple text or email weekly to keep your buyers in the loop.
- Estimate how long you expect a product will be available and be really honest. Before they commit to putting something on their menu, chefs want to know how long they can get it for.
- Chefs can work around products with very limited seasonality or quantity if they know in advance what to expect.
- Remind chefs that extenuating circumstances happen with availability, but assure them you will communicate supply issues promptly.



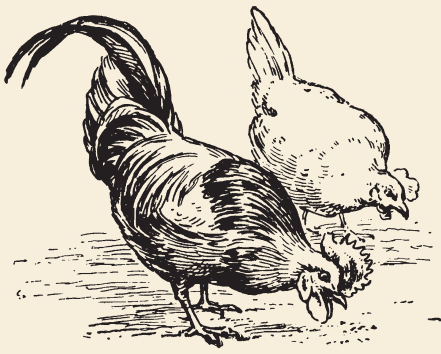
Market Yourself



- Storytelling helps chefs, diners, and customers connect with your farm and experience. If you can help customers experience an emotional connection to your food and where it comes from, they are more likely remember your farm for future purchases.
- Provide detail about your product that larger distributors are unable to, like variety, when it was harvested, and location. Chefs often like to highlight these details on their menu in the description of the dish. They may go as far as to even list your farm in a section on the menu that tells the consumer where they sourced their products.
- Patrons love to know they are supporting their community through doing something they enjoy, like eating out.
- Physical aides are also a great way to market your farm. Bring the chef you would like to market to a sample of the product and leave it with them to experiment with or create a dish with. This allows them to see the value of your product full circle and can be an enticing sales tactic.
- Use the space below to brainstorm some of the key elements of your farm's story. These can be used in marketing materials and to help you develop an elevator pitch for your farm.

Why are you a farmer? What makes your farm special? What is something that always surprises people about your farm? Why does farming matter?

“Chefs care about the variety and specifics of a product that they can then share with their customers. Things like why I grow a certain variety or how the flavors are affected by the environment.”



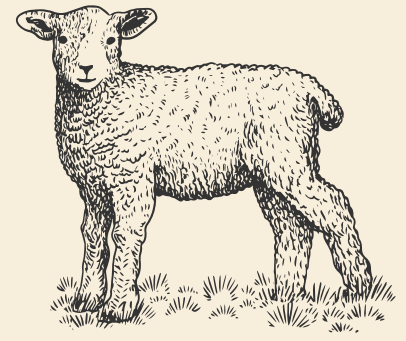
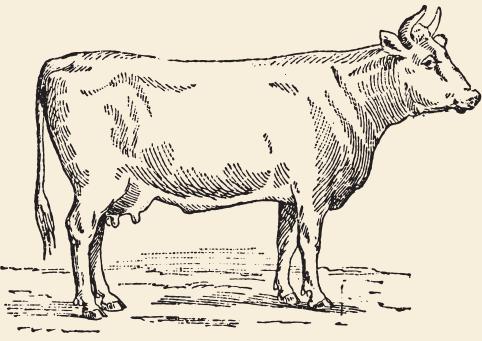
Overdeliver

- Exceed customer expectations when it comes to customer service. Meet and exceed the expectations of your contact, do not try to undercut your own quality or quantity by under promising your services and do not over promise if you are not able to make it.
- Deliver products on time, but also help, inform, and provide your restaurant customers the knowledge they seek about your goods. An example of this is introducing the restaurant to a new crop through a complementary sample with the normal delivery. Not only does your restaurant get their usual delivery, but they are introduced to a new product they could start purchasing.
- Retain your customers. This includes the customer service that you provide in person and interacting with them online. 71% of consumers have ended their relationship with a company due to poor customer service.
- If you have an online presence, cultivate that relationship online as well. Help promote their restaurant by tagging in posts and sharing how excited you are for your food to be used.

Communication

- Find the best method of communication for both yourself and the chef, whether it's texting, emailing, or a phone call.
- Check in frequently with your restaurant contact. Ask how the relationship is working for them, if there are more products you can supply, if there is anything that can be better in terms of delivery or processing. It can be intimidating to ask for feedback, but it is better to know and be able to correct than lose a customer over something that wasn't on your radar.
- Provide timely updates if there is something different than expected in your product or delivery changes are anticipated.

“Overdelivering can mean something different for each restaurant you deal with and your own commitment for your farm business.”



Stay Organized

- Even restaurants who desperately want to buy directly from farmers will need you to have a certain amount of organization and process in place.
- Ordering from you should be easy for the chef, but it should also be a system that works for you and doesn't create excess stress for you!
- Chefs all have different preferences for placing orders. Some prefer to use the computer, others want to call or email you, and some want to order from their mobile phone. Doing your best to accommodate their preferences can be a challenge, so you may want to investigate some technology solutions that could make your life easier.
- Expect to make some reminder calls/emails/texts before order deadlines, especially with chefs you have just begun working with. It will take time to become a part of their weekly process and regular calls offer you a chance to check in, get feedback, and tell them about new products.
- Standing orders ensure that your restaurant customers have what they need week after week and can also give you some building blocks to grow from and help you plan more efficiently.

Plan for Growth

- Get to know staff and owners at each restaurant, not just your point of contact.
- Restaurants frequently have new staff and chefs may move from restaurant to restaurant. Building relationships with others, such as the owner, sous chef or manager can help ensure business stability.
- Owners and front-of-house managers also influence purchasing decisions and can provide a vital connection to a new chef.



Questions to Ask Your Food Buyer

Food Buyer Name and Contact Info:

What is the best way to contact you and what days/times?

How are you planning on paying and what is the usual timeline for vendor payments? _____

What does a successful delivery look like for you?

Are you interested in limited time/quantity specialty products?

What kind of quality are you looking for in each product?

Common Mistakes



Avoid showing up in the middle of lunch or dinner. Check the restaurant's calendar to ensure there are no special events the day you plan to visit.



When making a delivery, ensure it goes as smoothly as possible by creating the invoice in advance and showing up as early in the day as possible.



Accepting too many restaurants as customers at once. This could lead to supply and delivery issues. As you begin selling to restaurants, it can be helpful to develop one strong, consistent relationship rather than several inconsistent ones.



Chefs may be hesitant to commit to a contract, so informal agreements can be important in the beginning. Once a relationship is established, it will be important to ensure expectations are clear on both sides.



Underselling your brand. As customers are increasingly aware of the importance of supporting local foods, your story as a farmer is a key part of a restaurant's marketing. Highlight your farm's story and the importance of supporting local farmers.

Resources

Local Extension Office

Your local Extension office can provide education and resources to help you expand your customer base to restaurants and beyond.

Local Foods Guide

Use the Local Foods Guide to identify restaurants that currently source local foods, they might be interested in increasing their variety!

Food Hubs

If you are interested in selling more product, but don't have time to build a relationship or conduct deliveries, working with a food hub or other local food aggregator and distributor might fit into your business model. Look for food hubs and distributors in your area!

Other Farmers

If you don't have enough product to meet a restaurant's quantity needs, you may join forces with a neighboring farmer to meet these needs. This could also help increase the diversity of product you can offer to a restaurant.





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Thank You!

We hope this guide on selling to restaurants was helpful. Please feel free to reach out with any questions!

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