

Marketing Fresh Produce to Restaurants

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Overview

Sourcing fresh produce from local farms remains a strong trend in the U.S. foodservice industry. Initially driven by niche and high-end restaurants, local sourcing became more widespread in mainstream foodservice channels in the early 2000s and continues into the 2020s.

Interest from chefs is driven by factors such as product freshness, customer demand for local foods, and access to unique or specialty crops. Surveys of Kentucky restaurants have shown consistent demand for common crops like tomatoes, peppers, greens, and melons, as well as specialty items such as herbs, mushrooms, berries, and heirloom varieties.

Producers entering this market must focus on building relationships, understanding pricing dynamics, managing risks, and delivering consistent quality and service.



Relationships

Developing strong relationships is essential when marketing to restaurants. The primary contact is often the chef, but may also include owners or managers.

- Effective strategies for building relationships include:
- Presenting yourself and your farm professionally
- Scheduling visits at times convenient for chefs
- Researching the restaurant's menu, clientele, and preferences
- Providing a clear and professional description of your farm and products
- Bringing product samples for chefs to evaluate
- Establishing clear communication channels (email, phone, websites, price lists)

Chefs often value personal relationships with growers and may be more willing to promote local products when they understand the farm behind them.



Returns

Restaurants may pay modest premiums above wholesale prices, typically ranging from 5% to 25%, especially for high-quality or specialty products.

However, producers should recognize that:

- Restaurant sales are still wholesale transactions
- Retail pricing (e.g., farmers market pricing) is generally not feasible
- Volumes purchased by restaurants are often smaller and less consistent

Producers should carefully account for additional costs, including:

- Custom product preparation
- Delivery time and fuel
- Packaging and handling

Production budgets are essential to determine whether restaurant sales are profitable.

Non-financial benefits may include increased visibility, such as farms being named on restaurant menus, which can provide valuable marketing exposure.

Risks

The primary risk in selling to restaurants is losing customers due to inconsistent quality or unreliable delivery.

Producers must:

- Deliver high-quality products consistently
- Meet agreed-upon delivery schedules
- Communicate promptly about any production or delivery issues

Other risks include:

- Irregular or low-volume demand
- Delayed payments (some restaurants pay monthly)
- Additional costs associated with delivery and customization

Clear communication and, when appropriate, written agreements can help reduce these risks.

Product liability insurance may also be required by some buyers and is an important consideration when selling to foodservice markets.

Reliability

Successful marketing to restaurants depends on both product quality and relationship management. Producers must consistently deliver high-quality products and maintain strong communication with buyers.

Selling Your Produce

Selling to restaurants can provide both financial and personal rewards. It also helps producers develop marketing skills that may lead to additional opportunities.

The two most important success factors are:

- Producing high-quality, flavorful crops
- Building strong relationships with chefs

Servicing Your Product

Maintaining relationships requires ongoing communication beyond delivery. Successful growers often contact restaurant buyers at least once per week.

Key ways to “service” your product include:

- Providing updates on crop availability and seasonal conditions
- Sharing information that restaurants can use in marketing (e.g., production practices)
- Communicating early about weather or pest issues affecting supply

Good Business Practices

Restaurants value simple, consistent billing systems.

- Use clear and consistent invoices
- Consider electronic payment options for faster transactions
- Expect payment schedules similar to other wholesale vendors (often monthly)

Suggestions for New Products

Once relationships are established, restaurants may be open to new or higher-value products.

- Offer samples of new crops
- Introduce specialty or heirloom varieties
- Expand product offerings gradually based on buyer interest

Producer Networking

Working with other producers can expand product offerings and improve efficiency.

- Recommend other reliable growers when appropriate
- Coordinate deliveries to reduce costs and increase convenience
- In some cases, charge a fee for aggregating and delivering products for others

MarketReady Training

Producers interested in restaurant markets can benefit from MarketReady Training through the University of Kentucky. This program covers topics such as food safety, pricing, insurance, invoicing, storage, product quality, and traceability.

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