

Localization: Culinology to the Rescue

Customer demands for new menu concepts and locally supplied ingredients equals new ideas and new boosts for Michigan's economy.

From Planter to Pasture to Plate: Restaurants Look to Boost Their Profits and the Economy by Using Fresh, Local Ingredients

If every household in Michigan spent only ten dollars a week on Michigan-produced food, it would keep nearly 40 million dollars within the state every week. According to the National Restaurant Association, 70 percent of adults say they are more likely to visit a restaurant that offers locally produced food items, and 76 percent want healthier menu offerings. With Michigan being the most diverse agricultural-offering state, only behind California, the local food movement sounds like a success for all involved: from the farmers and growers, to the restaurant owners and operators, down to consumers enjoying fresh and local fare.

But difficulties develop when shortening the distance of product origin. Rising costs and increasing regulations pose problems for restaurateurs. Many believe localization will cut into profits. The growing season in Michigan is shorter, and at present, demand greatly outweighs supply. Still, eateries all over Michigan are enjoying increased success and a growth in their customer base exclusively because they chose to embody the "locavore" philosophy and lifestyle.

One example is chef Brandon Johns. The entire foundation of his new venture, The Grange Kitchen and Bar, is completely centered around sustainable sources of food from local farmers, markets and any other possible planter-inventor-entrepreneur in his neighborhood. Johns started out just wanting to use the freshest ingredients possible within the peak of their season in Michigan. "It's better quality food that tastes better." But then it evolved into a feeling that he had a moral obligation to source local. "I want to keep the dollar as close to my home and business as possible," said Johns. Although the logistics can be difficult at times, he spends every Saturday morning shopping at two different farmers' markets (in addition to visits twice during the week) and spending a weekly average of over a thousand dollars on produce alone. The Grange Kitchen and Bar will open this August in Ann Arbor.

Sustainable agriculture addresses all aspects of the bottom line to improve the state's economy, environment and social well-being. Farmers and independent growers and producers are vital to the success of the local food movement. Various organizations are working towards building connections within the movement and shortening the distance between the pasture and the plate. Jennifer Fike, Executive Director of Food Systems Economic Partnership, known as FSEP, sees great interest from the restaurant industry to purchase local food. FSEP provides research, education and outreach to form urban and rural partnerships, resulting in opportunities for farm development, sustainable communities, and healthy local economies.

“The mindset is changing,” Fike says. “With the current state of our economy, more and more people in general are asking themselves how they can support local food and products in general.”

One of the greatest challenges Fike notices are the obstacles smaller farms face when they haven't yet sold to the wholesale market, however she sees a niche in the market as customer interest and demand for local food continues to increase. When restaurants call seeking advice on how to source more local, the first two questions she asks is what are they looking to procure and how would they like to procure it. The availability of requested products and produce varies greatly. All meat products require USDA federally-inspected processors, and a lack of infrastructure and increase in regulation inhibits the ability of producers to sell direct to restaurant owners and chefs. Marty Phelan, a partner with Eat Local, Eat Natural, a new distributor of local fare located in the Ann Arbor area, said, “Most of the items that we distribute are in short supply. This is either because of a limited number of farmers that produce all natural meat & dairy products, or due to the lack of local processing plants.”

But Jane Bush of the Apple Schram Orchard in Charlotte makes it work. Her forty acres raises a variety of products including apples, hogs, eggs, lamb, beef, and leafy greens. Bush takes her hogs to a processor within an hour from her farm, and she's found that pork and apples work well together. The hogs love to eat the apple pulp left over from her applesauce, butter and cider processes. In addition to supplying 3,000 dozen eggs to thirty-five retailers – seven of which are restaurants – Bush's pork products account for almost thirty to forty percent of her operation today. “I think people right now are freaked out by the economy in Michigan, and sales are down at the market. But there is a perception out there that buying local costs more, and that's not necessarily true when you buy what is freshest and available as Michigan's seasons permit,” said Bush. She is also currently serving a year-long position as a business development specialist with FSEP. In addition to keeping up the farm, Bush travels throughout Southeastern Michigan to educate other farmers on how to successfully market their products such as the Apple Schram Orchard does. “There is huge potential right now in Michigan for the agricultural industry,” Bush said, “and we have to take advantage of it.” Michigan Food and Farming Systems, a non-profit in the state linking farmers, communities and markets together, has too seen a huge increase in farmer requests to become certified so that their crop may be sold to schools, restaurants, and retailers.

Wholesalers and distributors are obviously an important part of localization too. Eat Local Eat Natural's original concept came from Phelan and founding partner Bill Taylor, “wanting to work on a project that promotes being good stewards; of our environment through sustainable farming, for ourselves and our children through making local naturally-raised foods available, and in helping ourselves through supporting our local economy – essentially taking personal responsibility.”

“As people are becoming more aware of the healthy attributes of food, they are also becoming concerned about where their food was grown and how it was processed. Freshness is a concern when a large amount of food available in Michigan comes from 1,500 or more miles away and takes several days to almost a week to get here, and then sits in regional warehouses waiting to be sold,” said Phelan.

Industry mainstay Sysco offers an exclusive brand, MIPROD, that is available to all of their current accounts. Every month a list of what is available goes out to their customers and the demand for Michigan produce and products continues to grow with their base. All asparagus Sysco sold in the state this past season was from Michigan and the company will soon offer Michigan-grown chopped romaine lettuce. Last year they distributed 56,000 cases of Michigan-grown product. According to Denis Jennish, a produce category manager with Sysco of Grand Rapids, based on an average cost per case, over one million dollars flowed through Michigan's economy because of this. "It is not always the less-expensive option, but we have customers willing to pay the difference," he said.

Restaurants willing to pay a bit more may see a boost in their profits as a result. Beezy's Café in Ypsilanti opened in November 2008, and the small establishment is already under renovation to seat more happy customers. Owner Bee Mayhew lists the benefits of food localization: the local economy, teaching staff and guests about how accessible food can be, and cultivating community relationships. And the challenges? "All of the above, in addition to time, organization, better planning and utilization," she said, adding "though a lot of that just comes from being an under managed start up run by a single mom with no drivers' license!" (She's never had one, or a car – a true locavore!) Both Mayhew and Chef Johns previously worked for the Zingerman's Community of Businesses in Ann Arbor, a long-standing leader of local fare in the area.

Executive Chef Matt Baldrige of Cliff Bell's in Detroit also uses as many local products and ingredients possible. Today, one hundred percent of the restaurant's produce is Michigan-grown. "I have really great relationships with the farmers who supply me, and overtime it's grown into a very symbiotic relationship for everyone involved," says Baldrige.

As every season in Michigan has a lot to offer (think avocado hoop/hot house in the middle of winter!) embrace the freshest taste our state has to offer. More and more symbiotic relationships such as this have potential to pop up all over our abundant state when the locavore lifestyle takes root!