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Utah Farm-Chef-Fork: Building Sustainable Local Food Connections

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Abstract

While research documenting the impacts of direct marketing locally produced foods find positive impacts across the food supply chain (i.e. producers, chefs, consumers, and the overall economy), significant barriers to efficient farm-to-chef connections remain. Lack of knowledge and communication regarding product availability and quality are primary barriers. This paper outlines the activities and impacts of the Utah Farm-Chef-Fork program, who's primary goal is to enhance community vitality and reduce food miles by connecting Utah producers and restaurants through workshops, mingles, farm and restaurant tours, and other locally-sourcing food events. In 2013-2014, the program conducted six farmer/chef workshops and six mingles statewide, with 172 farmers, 73 chefs, and 24 educators participating. Workshop materials specifically addressed common barriers and benefits experienced by farmers and chefs in local sourcing. Mingles provided producers and small food processors the opportunity to showcase their products to chefs and specialty store owners in attendance. Impact measures show significantly increased understanding and confidence among participants in establishing local-sourcing relationships, as well as plans for increased activity in the future.

Keywords: direct marketing, Extension programming, local foods, sourcing restaurants, specialty crops

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Introduction

According to the USDA's 2007 Census of Agriculture, 301,300 acres of agricultural land in Utah were developed between 1982 and 2007 (USDA-NASS 2009), a loss of over 50 acres a day. Research has shown, however, that when farmers direct market to local restaurants, it is an effective way to increase farmer income and decrease farmland loss in that it provides a greater proportion of the product's final price to the farmer (Adam, Balasubrahmanyam, and Born 1999, Govindasamy and Nayaga 1996). In addition, local food sourcing has been linked to enhanced economic development in local communities, fostering public health outcomes related to food security, addressing food safety problems linked to the spread of disease via large-scale agriculture by using shorter supply chains, fostering a better sense of community, and providing opportunities for both farmers and restaurants to advertise environmental sustainability that creates positive public perceptions and embracement (Jensen 2010). As mentioned in Martinez et al. (2010), local food sourcing not only helps sustain small-scale farms, but also supports more diverse products and a wider variety of seeds and crops as opposed to monoculture farming.

Regarding economic gain, Martinez et al. (2010) found that sourcing to restaurants provided direct benefits to farmers in allowing outlets for small-scale farmers. An enterprise also has a better probability of survival if it has a range of specialty or high-value crops to sell, grossing between \$4,000 and \$20,000 per acre (Adam, Balasubrahmanyam, and Born 1999). Farmers also have more control over production and processing methods, and learn added entrepreneurial skills (Feenstra et al. 2003, Martinez et al. 2010). This is associated with longer-term economic impacts for rural communities in that "a climate of entrepreneurship and risk-taking" is encouraged (Gale 1997, p.25).

Thus, the benefits associated with sourcing locally extend beyond the farmer to the community as a whole. This has been demonstrated through multiple studies where imported goods were replaced with locally grown goods, leading to job creation and improved local retail returns in industries throughout an entire state (Swenson 2009, 2010a, 2010b). Bachmann (2004) summarizes this well by stating "selling to local chefs is among the alternatives that will help to build a diverse, stable regional food economy and a more sustainable agriculture" (p.1). It also has been proven through weighted average source distance calculations to help the environment by reducing carbon emissions associated with grocery store food items, known as food miles (Pirog and Benjamin 2003).

Despite the documented benefits of direct marketing, including farm-to-chef connections, research has also shown that barriers exist in fostering the required relationships. For example, Curtis et al. (2008) discovered via focus groups with farmers in Nevada that nearly all agreed they would like to enter the restaurant market, but the lack of information was the biggest barrier in doing so. In a separate study with restaurants and farmers in New York, the top three barriers listed by restaurants in sourcing locally included: 1) no time to contact farmers, 2) lack of confidence regarding product consistency, 3) and a lack of confidence regarding product quality (Schmit, Lucke, and Hadcock 2010). As stated by Curtis et al. (2008) and Starr et al. (2003), restaurant chefs are not always aware of the high quality foods available locally and a need exists for farmers to actually show restaurants what they can provide, so that chefs may plan seasonal menus well in advance.

Restaurants typically rate product attributes such as taste or quality as most important in their purchasing decisions (Curtis and Cowee 2009, Schmit, Lucke, and Hadcock 2010, Thilmany 2004), which is why direct marketing to restaurants is a perfect match for small-scale growers. Dependability is typically ranked a close second, which includes receiving expected quantities, quality, and consistency. Restaurants, however, commonly voice frustration in the lack of information regarding product availability, inconvenient ordering, and poor communication skills when sourcing locally (Curtis and Cowee 2009, Feenstra et al. 2003).

Despite the barriers, sourcing locally is an effective marketing tool for restaurants. As found by Schmit, Lucke, and Hadcock (2010), patrons at restaurants in New York strongly support and view positively the sourcing of local food in restaurants. The demand for local foods is rapidly growing across the U.S. as shown in the following reports.

- The National Restaurant Association's 2013 "Restaurant Industry Forecast" reported that 7 of 10 consumers were more likely to visit a restaurant offering locally produced items.
- The National Restaurant Association's 2014 "Top Ten Trends across the Nation," included locally sourced meats and seafood and locally grown produce as the top 2 trends.
- The National Grocery Association 2012 Consumer Panel found that the availability of local foods were major influences on grocery shopping decisions as 87.8% of respondents rated local food availability as "very or somewhat important," with 45.9% indicating "very important."

Why would Utah farmers be interested in sourcing directly to restaurants? Key reasons from previous studies include increased farm sales (Schmit, Lucke, and Hadcock 2010), ability to develop a unique product brand and differentiate farm products (Curtis and Cowee 2009), securing sale of products that may otherwise be lost due to excess supply in peak production season (Thilmany 2004), and providing insight into current market trends and changing consumer demands (Pepinsky and Thilmany 2004). Farm-to-restaurant sourcing has proven successful in similar programs, including New York's Columbia County Bounty (Schmit, Lucke, and Hadcock 2010), Home Grown Wisconsin (Lawless 2000), Red Tomato in the Northeast U.S. (Stevenson 2013), Practical Farmers of Iowa (Practical Farmers of Iowa 2002), and Colorado Crop to Cuisine (Thilmany 2004).

Program Overview

The Utah Farm-Chef-Fork program was initiated in 2012 through a USDA Specialty Crop Block Grant. The three primary program objectives included: 1) Train restaurant owners/chefs on effective communication and web-based/social media marketing techniques when attempting to source from local farmers; 2) train farmers regarding best practices in direct marketing, opportunities to collaborate with local restaurants, and effective communication and web-based tools in searching for and promoting to local restaurants; and 3) host mingles across the state for farmers and chefs to learn about their respective businesses and establish partnerships.

In the first two years, the program conducted six one-day farmer/chef workshops and six mingles statewide, with 172 farmers, 73 chefs, and 24 educators participating. Workshops were held in

Kaysville, Lehi, and Salt Lake City, UT in 2013 and in Salt Lake City, Moab, and Hurricane, UT in 2014. Workshop materials were developed when needed, especially related to social media and web based promotional techniques, but primarily consisted of amended materials from the many “How To” guides currently in existence regarding direct marketing farm products to restaurants (Adam, Balasubrahmanyam, and Born 1999, Kelley 2006, Pepinsky and Thilmany 2004, Strohschein et al. 2002, SARE 2008, Wright 2005).

Workshop materials, in 2013, specifically addressed common barriers and benefits experienced by farmers and chefs in direct marketing, strategies to overcome these barriers and maximize on the benefits, best practices in working with – and maintaining a relationship with – chefs, common questions asked by chefs when considering sourcing locally, creating a marketing plan, funding opportunities available, and social media marketing best practices. In 2014, workshop topics included marketing farm products to chefs, improving online visibility, making a sales pitch, maintaining relationships with chefs and other buyers, organizing and enhancing social media tools, pricing farm products for the restaurant market, food safety and good agricultural practices, winter growing techniques, as well as a chef panel discussing preferred products and preferences on communication, delivery and samples.

Mingles were held in Moab, Hurricane, Lehi, Park City, Logan, and Salt Lake City, UT in 2013. Mingles were jointly sponsored and promoted by Slow Food Utah groups across Utah and provided farmers, ranchers, and small food processors the opportunity to showcase their products to chefs and specialty store owners in attendance.

Program Results

The program impact assessment plan included pre and post-assessments, and nine-month follow-up assessments for each workshop, as well as retrospective and nine-month follow-up assessments for the mingles. Following the 2013 farmer/rancher workshops, paired-sample t-tests indicated that the overall posttest scores on participants’ confidence in performing a series of marketing activities was significantly higher ($M = 3.68$, $SE = 0.11$) than the overall confidence score on the pretest ($M = 2.50$, $SE = 0.18$). Table 1 reports changes in farmers/rancher activity performance confidence levels.

Following the 2013 chef workshops, paired-sample t-tests indicated that the overall posttest scores on chefs’ confidence in working with producers to locally source their restaurants was significantly higher ($M = 3.77$, $SE = 0.20$) than the overall confidence score on the pretest ($M = 2.42$, $SE = 0.19$). Table 2 reports score changes on chef activity confidence measures. Also, Table 3 indicates chefs’ intentions to perform a variety of tasks, as a result of attending the 2013 workshops.

Table 1. Change in Confidence for Farmer/Rancher Activities

Activity	Pretest		Posttest		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				
Knowing the best time of day to call on a new chef contact	2.55	1.35	4.21	0.70	7.71	32	0.00	1.57
Knowing which restaurants in my area want to source locally	2.29	1.19	3.76	0.99	7.94	33	0.00	1.36
Knowing what chefs need to know about my farm/business	2.35	1.23	4.03	0.72	8.72	33	0.00	1.69
Understanding the nature of restaurant business	2.79	1.32	3.76	0.70	5.35	33	0.00	1.99
Understanding the needs of restaurant business	2.73	1.26	3.73	0.80	5.93	32	0.00	1.80
Understanding the quantities chefs will purchase	2.33	1.11	3.18	0.95	6.13	32	0.00	1.28
Ability to meet the quantities chefs will require	2.12	1.14	3.03	1.10	5.51	32	0.00	0.84
Understanding the delivery methods preferred by chefs	2.28	1.22	3.28	1.09	5.25	31	0.00	0.91
Understanding the variety of produce required by chefs	2.58	1.18	3.45	1.09	5.07	30	0.00	0.76
Ability to meet consistency required by chefs	2.39	1.14	3.36	1.05	6.07	32	0.00	0.88
Understanding the level of commitment needed to supply chefs	2.69	1.18	4.03	0.97	6.60	31	0.00	1.29
Understanding how to price my products when selling to chefs	2.15	1.25	3.88	0.70	9.55	32	0.00	1.73
Understanding the billing process of restaurants	2.33	1.29	3.85	0.83	6.95	32	0.00	1.42
Understanding the best medium for communicating with chefs	2.24	1.15	3.88	0.70	2.04	32	0.00	1.75
Understanding the information chefs need on an on-going basis	2.33	1.19	3.88	0.74	8.35	32	0.00	1.59
Understanding of the specialty items chefs will require	2.31	1.28	3.28	1.02	5.16	31	0.00	0.85
Knowing the expectation of the restaurant's customers	2.44	1.29	3.47	0.98	5.66	31	0.00	0.91

Note. Confidence was measured on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5: 1 (*not at all confident*), 2 (*slightly confident*), 3 (*neutral*), 4 (*very confident*) and 5 (*completely confident*).

Table 2. Change in Confidence for Chef Activities

Activity	Pretest		Posttest		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>				
Contacting a local farm for the first time	2.64	0.93	4.00	0.68	6.82	13	0.00	1.73
Knowing the best time of day to make a new contact	2.47	0.99	3.53	1.06	4.00	13	.001	1.07
Knowing which farms in my area sell locally	2.43	1.15	3.71	0.91	5.83	13	.000	1.28
Understanding what farmers need to know about my restaurant/customers	2.27	0.80	3.80	0.78	7.12	14	0.00	2.00
Understanding the seasonal production capabilities/ growing condition in Utah	2.80	1.08	3.60	1.06	4.58	14	0.00	0.77
Understanding the needs of local farmers	2.13	0.74	3.60	0.63	8.88	14	0.00	2.21

Note. Confidence was measured on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5: 1 (*not at all confident*), 2 (*slightly confident*), 3 (*neutral*), 4 (*very confident*) and 5 (*completely confident*).

Table 3. Chef Intentions of Completing Activities in the Future

Activity	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Investigate competitors' local sourcing activities	16	3.81	1.11
Highlight locally sourced products and farmers on table tents of restaurant windows	16	3.75	1.18
Develop food safety, insurance, and/or production method (organic, grass-fed, etc.) requirements	16	3.75	1.13
Develop an instruction sheet for local farmers regarding contact needs (samples, prices, etc.)	16	3.56	1.15
Develop delivery procedures	16	3.56	1.03
Develop a payment plan	16	3.50	1.10
Develop chef/restaurant contact procedures (time, format (email, phone) etc.)	16	3.50	1.03
Develop local product ordering plan	16	3.50	0.97
Prepare a list of products you locally source now	16	3.44	1.37
Prepare listing of local farms you currently source from	16	3.44	1.03
Design a "for farmers/local sourcing" tab	15	3.40	1.12
Prepare a list of products and quantities you would like to source locally	16	3.38	1.20
Train service staff on locally sourced products	16	3.37	1.26
Provide and update menus on website	16	3.25	1.44
Incorporate sourcing of local foods into business plan	16	3.25	1.29
Develop "commitment to sourcing local" statement	16	3.25	1.13
Highlight locally sourced products and farmers on menus	16	3.19	1.17
Approach local farmers to initiate purchases	16	3.19	1.17
Research/visit farms I plan to approach	16	3.13	1.02
Develop a social media site	16	2.94	1.77
Develop a restaurant website	16	2.94	1.73
Make a list of farms I want to approach	15	2.87	1.19

Note. Intention was measured on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5: 1 (*already doing it*), 2 (*done in 3 months*), 3 (*done in 6 months*), 4 (*done in 12 months*) and 5 (*will not implement*).

The majority of the chef attendees indicated they performed these activities within six months of the training. Chefs indicated the percentage of restaurant ingredients they would source locally, ranging from 11-20% (16.7%), 21-40% (16.7%), 41-71% (33.3%), 61-80% (16.7%), or 81-100% (16.7%). To summarize, 71.4% indicated that they would increase the percentage of restaurant ingredients sourced locally as a result of the workshop, while 28.6% did not plan to make any significant changes. The overall impact of the Utah Farm-Chef-Fork program is perhaps best demonstrated by the following farmer and chef attendee quotes:

“The most critical hurdle to overcome in our effort towards building a sustainable infrastructure between local producers/artisans and chefs has, in my experience, been communication. As we at Heirloom Restaurant Group have labored to make those connections on our own it has become apparent to our team that we needed more help. Someone who has a vested interest in strengthening the fabric of our food community, but isn't directly involved with the day-to-day operations of running a farm or restaurant. How lucky we now are to have the Farm-Chef-Fork program and those at Utah State University who are concerned about the same issues we are and are willing to help find solutions to the problems we are facing. I was honored to represent Heirloom Restaurant Group this past week in sharing our experiences buying locally, supporting those in our community and the benefits that our company has seen as a result of this effort. I have no doubt that the Farm-Chef-Fork program can go on to play a crucial role in bringing our community together thereby allowing all of us to benefit from the shared efforts of each other. I look forward to Heirloom Restaurant Group's continued support of this program and the positive outcome I know it can bring.”

–Heirloom Restaurant Group

“We were able to make connections and leads with Island Market that may lead to selling eggs through their store. Additionally it was great to meet other producers and make additional connections for our network.”

–Appenzell Farms

“I thought it was a great experience overall. As for how it has changed my business, I feel like I have a better idea of how to approach restaurants in our area and what the restaurant owners/ chefs' expectations are.”

–Living Traditions Farm

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