

Distributor vs. Direct: Farmers, Chefs, and Distributors in the Local Farm to Restaurant Supply Chain

Graham Givens^a and Rebecca Dunning[ⓑ]

^a*MBA Candidate, Poole College of Management, North Carolina State University,
2806 Hillsborough Street, Raleigh, NC 27695*

^b*Research Assistant Professor, Center for Environmental Farming Systems, Department of Horticultural Science,
North Carolina State University, 256 Kilgore Hall, Campus Box 7609, Raleigh, NC 27695
Email: rebecca_dunning@ncsu.edu*

Abstract

For the past ten years, the National Restaurant Association's "What's Hot" Culinary Forecasts have placed local and hyper-local produce, meat, and seafood near the top of the list. As a result, serving "local food" has become a necessity for many restaurants. The two major supply chain channels from local farms to chefs are direct connections, with a farm delivering to a restaurant or chefs shopping at a local farmers market, and through distributors.

This research compares fresh produce supply chain relationships, efficiency, and value to chain members when local farm products travel from farms directly to chefs or via produce distributors. Existing research on the farm-to-restaurant supply chain has been confined to understanding chefs' perceptions (Murphy and Smith 2009), but the entire supply chain and the value for chain members derived from intra-chain information exchange and collaboration must be considered (Dunning 2016; Kwon and Suh, 2004). Our research consists of first-person interviews with chefs, farmers, and a collaborating food service distributor as well as observations of meetings between these three groups of actors over a one-year time period. Additionally, we collect the post-harvest costs and returns to farmers for each distribution channel. The aims of the research are to understand what factors influence chefs in selecting direct versus intermediated local products and under what circumstances direct versus intermediated supply chains most benefit small and mid-scale producers.

Keywords: collaboration, farm to table, food system, restaurants, supply chain, value chain

[ⓑ]Corresponding author.

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