Local food connections: From farms to restaurants

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Local food connections: From farms to restaurants

Abstract
A new resource manual and an existing food brokering project were supported by this grant to enhance Iowa's local food systems.

Keywords
Community-based food systems, Market research and feasibility studies

Disciplines
Agricultural Education | Environmental Education

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Local food connections: From farms to restaurant

Abstract: A new resource manual and an existing food brokering project were supported by this grant to enhance Iowa's local food systems.

Question & Answer

**Q:** How can we encourage local food sales?

**A:** Interested producers can increase their capacity to serve local markets through the informative manual developed by Practical Farmers of Iowa.

Approach and methods

The “Putting Your Farm on the Menu” resource manual was developed and delivered to 128 Iowa farmers who were interested in direct marketing their products to restaurants and similar institutions. The project investigators worked with farmers, chefs, agency and university advisors to determine the theme and most important topics and content for the manual.

While so-called “white tablecloth” restaurants are leading the way throughout the nation in the purchase of local foods, perhaps the largest potential markets in Iowa are the locally-owned, family-style restaurants, as well as rural nursing homes, hospitals and schools. In addition, food service buyers for these institutions are likely to have an appreciation for homegrown and fresh foods they remember from their farming and gardening experiences. These groups were a special focus of the manual organizers.

There was little existing detailed “how-to” information related to marketing local farm products to these groups. Organizers were able to collect project reports, media articles, book chapters, and several extension publications that dealt with various aspects of direct marketing projects. Iowa local food marketing projects that had been successful were showcased. (Many of the projects and publications featured in the manual were supported by Leopold Center funding and staff input.)

The three-ring binder format allowed producers to customize the material to suit their needs, and they could easily

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<th>Principal Investigator:</th>
<th>Co-Investigators:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Robert Karp</td>
<td>Rick Hartmann</td>
<td>$8,091 for year one</td>
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<td>Gary Huber</td>
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add or subtract material. The manual sections are:

- Success Stories: Iowa Farmers, Chefs, and Food Service Professionals Who Are Putting Farms on Menus
- Assessing Restaurant and Food Service Markets
- Making Contacts and Working with Restaurants and Food Service
- Vegetables: Pricing, Post-Harvest Handling, Labeling, Packaging and Delivery
- Meats: Processing, Labeling, Regulations, and Marketing
- Legal Issues
- Materials for Education and Strengthening Local Food Systems
- Resources

A portion of the grant funds were directed to support the PFI All-Iowa Meal Growers’ Network and toward exploring ways to make this effort more sustainable. While demand for All-Iowa meals expanded, the capacity of PFI to serve them as a broker became strained due to lack of grant resources. Local food events offered farmers a marketplace and provided a great opportunity for public education, so existing services were maintained while PFI looked for ways to continue the service in another format.

The first strategy (which was moderately successful) was to encourage more direct market relationships between farmers and buyers. The second strategy consisted of contacting all members of the Growers Network about the possibility of converting the existing network into a farmer-organized brokering service for local food marketing. While the producers saw the value in such a brokering service, none of them were willing to step forward in a leadership role to make it happen, even with PFI assistance. The third strategy was to encourage and provide support for a private brokering business, aligned with farmers, to service the “local food meals” trade. With some USDA funding and PFI coaching, an independent company called “Eat Iowa” was started and brokered sales of about $20,000 worth of food products in central Iowa during its first year. (Practical Farmers of Iowa has available a report written by Rick Hartman on all the activities of the “Eat Iowa” project.)

Results and discussion
The manuals were provided to participants at three “Putting Your Farm on the Menu” workshops in 2003. (The Leopold Center did not provide support for the workshops.) The first workshop was a session at the Practical Farmers of Iowa winter meeting in January. Two additional events were held in Cedar Rapids and Des Moines in February.

After distributing the manual at the three farmer workshops, users were asked to evaluate the content, organization, clarity, ease of use, and timeliness. The in-class evaluations yielded ratings between the top marks of A and B for all categories.

Twenty-two manuals remained after the workshops and will be marketed for state and national distribution. The PFI staff plan to transfer some of the manual contents to a CD that will be marketed nationally. In addition, some of the material collected for the manuals was used in another project—Iowa CAFÉ II.

Conclusions
More Iowans are beginning to appreciate the economic, nutritional, environmental, and community benefits of local food production and marketing to restaurants, schools, and institutions. The number of farmers, chefs, and consumers eager to produce and use local foods is approaching a critical mass.

The “Putting Your Farm on the Menu” manual offers a wide variety of examples and support information for producers who may be thinking about initiating or expanding local food connections in their areas. Given the recent growth in farm to restaurant/institution marketing in Iowa, producers may benefit from the timing of this collection of success stories and guidelines.

The project identified a need to create similar manuals (with concrete “how-to” educational and connection-building opportunities) and workshops targeted to food buyers. There also need to be opportunities for farmers and buyers to meet and identify ways to promote local food systems. A great deal of work remains to be done to create the products, systems, and relationships unique to these markets.

Impact of results
Through the use of resources available in the “Putting Your Farm on the Menu” manual and through the local food brokering work, participating farmers are now more knowledgeable, skilled, connected, and empowered to take greater advantage of emerging opportunities in
“farm to restaurant/institution” direct marketing. As a result, the momentum of local food system efforts across the state has been furthered and strengthened.

**Education and outreach**
Press releases publicizing the “Putting Your Farm on the Menu” manual resulted in more than 10 articles and two radio broadcasts that highlighted the manual and affiliated workshops. Most of the articles appeared in rural newspapers and therefore were more likely to reach farmers.

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