



Bill Wright

# Selling Directly to Restaurants

Be prepared to tell your farm's story, what types of crops you grow, what your farm practices are, and why your products are fresher or better.

As competition increases among restaurants, chefs at many "white linen" style restaurants are more interested in buying directly from farmers. This allows them to cook with field-ripened vegetables and tree-ripened fruits difficult to find through food brokers. In addition, by purchasing directly from growers, they can often find specialty items such as Russian fingerling potatoes, edible flowers, a variety of meat products, eggs, dairy and much more.

For farmers, there are several advantages to selling directly to restaurants. First, restaurants provide a steady market throughout the production season. If you are selling a quality product, restaurants are willing to pay top dollar, especially for those items that they cannot find elsewhere.

Another advantage of selling directly to restaurants is the personal relationships you can build with owners, managers and chefs. By working directly with them, you can gain a marketing edge by becoming acquainted with the latest ideas and trends in the restaurant industry and by tailoring your product to specifically fit their needs.

Finally, restaurants offer the opportunity for you to create brand recognition. Restaurants like to emphasize locally grown products and will often mention the name of farm suppliers on their menus.

As with every marketing niche, there are certain challenges. Most restaurants have limited cooler space and therefore may require deliveries several times per week. This can mean more time spent on driving, invoicing, paperwork and more time spent away from the farm.

Another point to consider is the restaurant's normal payment schedule. Unlike a farmers' market where you leave each day with cash in hand, you may wait anywhere from two weeks to 45 days or more before receiving payment. Product liability insurance will be another cost. Take additional costs for delivery, time, insurance, sales volume, etc. into consideration to make sure you are making a profit selling to restaurants.

## Where do I begin?

The best place to begin is to research the restaurants in your area using the yellow pages or restaurant guides. Look for restaurants that feature natural or organic foods, regional specialties, fresh salads and homemade soups. Make a list of these restaurants and then call to make an appointment to meet the head chef. Just "dropping by" the restaurant may not be viewed as professional and you may not be welcome if the staff is busy.

Spend some time preparing for your meeting with the chef. First, be prepared to tell your farm's story, where it is located, how long you have been in business, what types of crops you grow, what your farm practices are, (including what makes your operation unique such as organic, grass-fed, all-natural, antibiotic/hormone-free, etc.), and why your products are fresher or better.

If you haven't already done so, now is the time to prepare a brochure about your farm. The brochure should include all of the information mentioned previously as well as your name, address, telephone number(s) and e-mail address. If you have established a web site, be sure to include it in the brochure. Also, if the time of year is right, don't forget samples. The best way to sell a product is to let the customer feel, smell or taste it. The importance of samples cannot be overstated.

In addition to meeting the chef and providing samples and other information, you will also be on a fact-finding mission during your visit. The information that you want to gather includes:

- What is the ordering cycle?
- What are the receiving hours?
- What are the receiving days?
- What are the invoicing procedures?
- How must the product be packaged?
- What are the quality standards?
- Do they currently buy locally?
- What types of products would they be interested in purchasing?
- What are the quantities they use per week?

Having a thorough understanding of the restaurant's operating procedures will give you a greater ability to successfully serve the account and build a lasting relationship with the chef.

## Building a lasting relationship

The most important part of building any successful business relationship is to always deliver what you promise. That includes consistent quality, on-time deliveries and in the agreed-upon quantities. Always keep your customers advised of your production schedule. As farmers, we have very little control over weather and other factors, so it is extremely important to advise customers as far in advance as possible of any factors that will alter agreed-upon deliveries.

Another element in building a lasting relationship is the creation of a clear invoicing procedure. The invoices should show your complete contact information, date of delivery, products delivered, quantities delivered, unit prices and total cost.

As in any relationship, communication is the key to success. Talk to the chefs periodically to keep informed of the restaurant's needs, changes, problems and opportunities. Use these discussions to inform chefs about the same type of information regarding your business. You may also want to consider inviting the chef and restaurant staff out to your farm so they can see first-hand how your business operates. The extra effort taken to build a good relationship with your chefs will pay off in additional sales opportunities in the future.



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