

## Restaurants Create Demand for New Crops with Locally Grown Menus

By Tanya Ishikawa

As chefs and customers increasingly demand more locally grown produce in their menus, growers can take advantage of the culinary trend by earning new profit streams from steady sales of vegetables, fruits and herbs. Local greenhouses, which can produce fresh, flavorful food products, are gaining restaurants and food distributors as loyal customers.

“The demand is definitely increasing. One out of three chefs is demanding locally grown produce,” said Brian Freeman, an owner of Grower’s Organic who was formerly with Wild Oats Markets. “Nine times out of ten, they’re willing to pay more.”

Grower’s Organic, based in Denver, is Colorado’s only farmer-owned, 100-percent organic produce distribution company. They pick up from a variety of local farmers, but Freeman said using a distributor makes the most sense for growers doing \$50,000 to \$60,000 of business each year. Otherwise, growers can find smaller distributors or market and deliver to restaurants directly.

“If someone is producing only a few acres a week, they don’t really have the need for me,” he said. “If they are producing 10,000 pounds of onions or two acres of lettuce, then a distributor can help.”

Freeman said heirloom tomatoes and peppers are in short supply but are items that would be especially popular from local growers. Bryan Reed, the general manager of Osage Gardens in New Castle, agreed.

Osage Gardens has 26 acres of certified organic land and two acres of greenhouses, with only about 5 percent of its business devoted to supplying restaurants with a wide range of vegetables and herbs. The grower works directly with three to six restaurants on the Western Slope, depending on the season. One restaurant owner likes to visit them and pick up the produce himself.

Osage’s main crops for restaurants are basil, chives, dill, rosemary, thyme, tomatoes, cucumbers, lettuce, chard, kale, and winter squash. They have grown a special heirloom potato that was popular with restaurants and got a lot of publicity around the area.

To work successfully with restaurants, Reed said, “We let them know what we have consistently, and that’s the key. A lot of folks want to put items on a menu that will stay there consistently.”

### **What Restaurant Owners and Chefs are saying...**

*We gathered opinions and advice about locally grown produce from three restaurant owners, who are also the chefs: Steve Anderson of Sun Rose Café in Longmont, Ben*

*Kaplan of Shazz Cafe and Bar in Denver, and Lisa Ruoff of Eco-Goddess Edibles in Carbondale. All three work with a combination of distributors and restaurant owners.*

***How much of your menu is made from locally grown products? Which ones***

**Sun Rose:** About 30 percent of our products are from local sources. We use eggs, milk, cheeses, sodas, various juice beverages, crackers, peanut butter, breads, pastries and some produce. Many items not purchased locally are import only. About 90 percent of our produce will be from a local source during the growing season through a new partnership.

**Shazz:** Our food service is 60 percent local in winter and 90 percent in summer. We would increase the amount if we could get more winter produce.

**Eco-Goddess:** During the growing season, 60 percent or more is local. It is my number one priority, so as much of our produce as possible is local, as well as eggs, goat cheese, bread, honey, coffee, tea, seafood, and alcohol. It's just not possible to be all local with soy milk, lemonade, hummus, etc. I could use more local arugula and spinach.

***How should growers approach/market to restaurants to offer produce?***

**Sun Rose:** Growers need to keep prices in line with larger purveyors. They can help educate the public of the economic benefits of purchasing locally and the potential long term benefits that exist

**Shazz:** Growers should directly contact restaurants that they know buy local. Once existing customers are established, they can be a great resource in finding others.

**Eco-Goddess:** Growers should check with restaurants to find where their need is. If I can tell growers what I need, they can plan for their crops and I can be sure to get what I need for my menu.

***Does produce have to be organic?***

**Sun Rose:** I believe produce should be grown from sources free from all chemical treatment, though not necessarily from an organic source. We are comfortable with our suppliers because we invest time in learning about them and they take the time to educate us about their practices.

**Shazz:** I am personally prone towards buying organic. However, if a small farm follows organic standards but doesn't have the certification, I will still buy from them. That's the advantage of working with small farms.

**Eco-Goddess:** Organic is my number two priority, and 90 percent of everything we do is organic.