

Local Farmers & Restaurants Team Up for Good Food

Local growers are a vital ingredient for restaurants' menu quality and continuity.

by Marcia Hahn

A smiling face is half the meal, according to an old Latvian proverb, but locally grown food is gaining ground.

At the Local Burger restaurant in Lawrence, Kansas, local farmers names are listed on the menu, identifying who raised the beef, pork, turkey, elk and other meat items served at the restaurant. At Rudy's Tacos in Waterloo, Iowa, a large color poster featuring the restaurant's local growers is displayed for customers to see as they wait in line to order.

Those are just two examples of the growing demand for fresh, local products on menus. Opportunities for farmers to sell their meat and produce directly to local restaurants are growing because more restaurant owners and chefs realize their customers want and appreciate high quality, fresh products and those same customers care about where their food originates. In fact, a recent National Restaurant Association survey of 1,146 chefs revealed local and organic food as two of the hottest trends for restaurants in 2007 (see story page 40).

Barry Eastman, owner of Rudy's Tacos, was one of the first restaurateurs in Northeast Iowa to introduce and promote local food when he started serving it at his restaurant



Barry Eastman, owner of Rudy's Tacos in Waterloo, Iowa, displays the names and pictures of local farmers who supply 70 percent of the food on his menu.



Hilary Brown started the Local Burger fast food restaurant in Lawrence, Kansas, to bring affordable, locally grown and organic food to a larger part of the community.

10 years ago. A neighbor told him about the free range chicken grown at Welsh Family Organic Farms in Lansing, Iowa, located about a hundred miles away.

Although the organic chicken costs about double what Eastman had been paying for conventional chicken, he says each chicken weighs seven to eight pounds with double the yield because the chicken has solid meat.

That saves on labor costs because the staff don't have to peel apart so much, he says. The guys in the kitchen like having these great ingredients here.

It just tasted great. I don't think people realize what chicken is supposed to taste like.

Eastman then looked at his menu to see what other local products he could offer. I put an ad in the paper that I wanted homegrown tomatoes, and the phone rang off the hook, he says.

In addition to free range chicken, Eastman began buying tomatoes, peppers, onions, and fresh cilantro and basil from local farmers, local pork and beef through a nearby locker, and cheese and sour cream from a creamery in Wisconsin. He now buys from about a dozen local growers and farmers, spending \$200,000 annually on local food, which makes up about 70 percent of his menu.

The cost is a little higher, but the quality makes it well worth it, Eastman says. The beef tastes better and I don't have to worry because I know it came from a few farms nearby.

PHOTO: MARCIA HAHN

The World's Most



local burgers

Local Meats Raised Using Sustainable and Humane Practices
Served On Rudy's Organic Whole Wheat Bun
All Burgers Topped With Organic Lettuce, Onion, Pickles and Tomatoes

5.50

Beef Burger* – Amy's Meats
(Lawrence)

Grass-fed only Beef Burger – Homespun Hill Farm
(Baldwin)

Grass-fed only Buffalo Burger – Sunset Ridge Bison
(Lawrence)

Grass-fed only Elk Burger – Rocky Hills Elk Ranch
(Winchester)

Pork Burger – Metsker Farms The Real 'Ham' Burger
(Lawrence)

Natural Turkey Burger – Shelton's
(Not Local But Good!)

Tofu Filet – Central Soy Foods
(Lawrence) Non GMO Organic

Veggie Burger – Local Burger Specialty
(Made Right Here!)

Kiddie Burger – 1/8lb. Burger – 2.75

Double the Burger – 3.00

The menu lists local and organic farmers who provide meat for the 1,000 burgers sold weekly at Local Burger.

Kansas restaurant relies on local meat producers

Bringing local food to a large group of people was the impetus behind Hillary Brown's decision to open the Local Burger fast food restaurant in September 2005.

I was well aware there were a lot of fancy restaurants pulling local food in, but that already reached foodies, Brown says. I wanted to bring local, healthy, organic sustainable food to the masses and people who wouldn't typically seek out that food. I thought we needed to be an alternative to the current fast food.

Brown's restaurant offers seven types of burgers elk, buffalo, beef, pork, turkey, tofu, veggie and sells about 1,000 a week. All the food is purchased locally or is organic, if purchased from outside the region.

She found virtually all of her 40 suppliers through the Downtown Lawrence Farmers Market, where she made connections with local farmers, developed relationships with them and visited their farms. Prior to opening her restaurant, Brown served an apprenticeship through the Growing Growers program in Kansas City to learn first hand what goes into farming and producing the food.

I really wanted to understand as much as possible before I took on this venture, Brown says. I learned that

sometimes the weather isn't going to be good and sometimes crops aren't going to work out, so I'm pretty understanding when things come up.

That's why I focused on the meat. I knew I could get that all year round.

Farmers deliver home grown flavor to restaurants

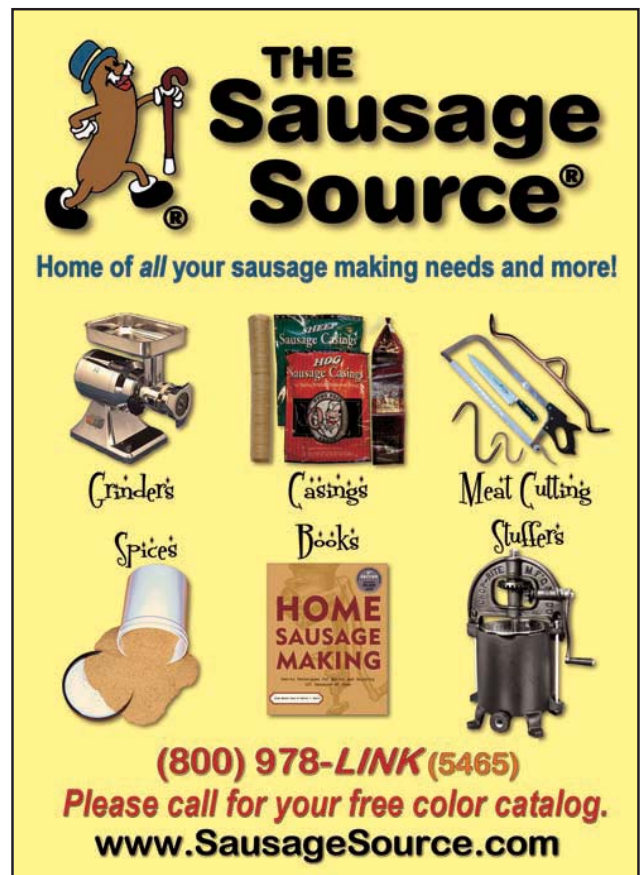
Both Brown and Eastman say they could not have made the commitment to buy local food without suppliers who were willing to deliver to their restaurants. By working together to bring fresh, flavorful food to the table, farmers gain lucrative accounts and restaurants build a reputation for high quality food.

One of Eastman's farmers, Loyd Johnson, started selling sweet bell peppers, tomatoes, onions, jalapenos, and fresh cilantro and basil to Rudy's Tacos last year. He appreciates Eastman's commitment to the value of buying local fresh food and has been inspired to expand his business.

He was a flag bearer, Johnson says of Eastman. His values were the connection, and I drew encouragement from Barry and his commitment to what I was doing.

Brown's relationship with local farmers has expanded into a weekly meat market in which farmers come to the Local Burger once a week to sell their meat directly to anyone interested. The farmers and Local Burger share the advertising costs to promote it and to expand their customer base.

One of our goals is to make local food more convenient and inexpensive, Brown says. People feel good after they eat here. ❖



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