

THE FRESH CONNECTION KEEPS FARMERS AND CHEFS IN TOUCH

by Bonita Oehlke

The Massachusetts Department of Food and Agriculture developed The Fresh Connection newsletter to encourage chefs to buy direct from farmers.

The "Fresh Connection" newsletter is part of a new direct marketing promotional program at the Massachusetts Department of Food and Agriculture in Boston. The program is designed to help local growers find markets, and improve the communication between local producers and restaurant chefs.

"We are finding more and more growers who want to reach the restaurant market," says Janet Christensen, public information officer and editor of the newsletter.

Both growers and restaurants are featured in the newsletter, which is published six times each year. The Fresh Connection features products and the producers who are determined to start selling products or increase their sales to restaurants. Restaurants that feature regional cuisine and those wanting to contract or work with local growers are also highlighted in the newsletter.

The "What's Available Now" section of the newsletter lists producers with their products and provides contact information. A survey to identify producers interested in working with restaurants

and their crops was included in the initial newsletter last June. Brochures describing cider mills, farmstead cheese producers, egg producers, orchards and specialty gifts have also been included in newsletter mailings.

Of the newsletter's nearly 950 circulation, about 50% are producers and growers, 45% are chefs and about 5% are in media or education.

Besides the newsletter, the Fresh Connection program has helped coordinate food commodity representatives at state and national food shows for the restaurant and food service industry. The program also helped plan and staff special events to showcase Massachusetts food products. Participation in these events is funded by the department's bureau of markets.

"Restaurant chefs and food buyers are saying, 'find us the farmers,'" says August Schumacher, Jr., Massachusetts Commissioner of Agriculture. "Quality and freshness are very important to de-

Photos: Diane Baedeker



The Massachusetts Department of Food and Agriculture's Fresh Connection newsletter is edited by Janet Christensen (standing), who is also a department public information officer. Bonita Oehlke is a writer and project coordinator for the newsletter.



Diane Baedeker is the Fresh Connection's graphic artist. This four-page newsletter is primarily sent to growers and restaurant operators. It mainly features stories on Massachusetts growers and also lists the growers' products and addresses.

veloping a working relationship with restaurants. By contracting ahead, growers may increase sales of traditional crops and diversify into specialty crops that command a premium price."

Restaurant Food Sales

Schumacher says food consumption patterns and the marketing environment have changed dramatically in recent years. "Today, up to 40% of all meals are eaten away from home," he says. "Many of our farmers are looking for new markets and want to serve the restaurant segment. And the chefs want quality, fresh products."

Pursuing the restaurant food dollar is worthwhile for growers in Massachusetts, considering the revenue this industry produces. Based on sales tax information for 1986, more than \$5 billion was generated in sales, according to Ray Murgia, president of the Massachusetts Restaurant Association.

"While growers tend to concentrate on the market with which they're most familiar, we hope that many of the traditional

roadside stand operators and growers, as well as smaller farmers, will see the potential sales value of the restaurant market," says Schumacher.

"There is no question that restaurants are willing to buy locally grown products. The only problem is that most of our fresh produce isn't available all year round. Although some of the nearly 1,000 roadside farmstands in Massachusetts are open year round, most supplement their own farm products during the winter with items from other states."

The idea for the Fresh Connection program occurred to Schumacher during a conversation with Walter Zuromski, local executive chef of The Charles Hotel in Cambridge.

This challenge, along with the chef's interest in using fresh, local products, prompted the selection of The Charles Hotel to hold a dinner in February 1986, featuring the state's outstanding foods.

The publicity generated from this event prompted several inquiries from other chefs who were searching for sources of local, fresh foods. At a subsequent meeting in

March, a few growers and chefs discussed ways to get together.

"We have great hopes that the Fresh Connection program will really expand and stimulate the exchange between growers and restaurants chefs," says Christensen. "It's the first time that we've aimed a major direct marketing promotional program towards restaurants."

Taft Farms, Inc.

A good example of selling products to restaurants can be found at Taft Farms, Inc., which is located near Great Barrington, Massachusetts. This roadside farm stand, which is open year round, was featured in the February 1986 issue of the Fresh Connection newsletter.

"Two years ago, about five to ten percent of my revenue came from sales to restaurants," says Danny Tawznsky, of Taft Farms, Inc. "Now, it's up to about forty to fifty percent."

His farm stand is 72 by 40 feet, including the prepping area. He farms 240 acres, producing mostly sweet corn, potatoes and green beans. He also raises strawberries and about 15 to 20 acres of "gourmet vegetables."

"I've always had a few restaurants buying from the farm stand," he says. He would sell a half or whole case lot at the wholesale rate, and retail quantities would be sold at the retail value minus a 10 to 12% discount.

At first, it was difficult for Tawznsky to sell retail to regular customers and wholesale to restaurants. "It seemed that the restaurant representatives would show up at my busiest time and require a lot of attention," he says.

Delivering the product helped solve that problem, although he says there are a few chefs who insist on stopping to pick out their products. "My wholesale business hinges on the delivery service," Tawznsky says. "If I stopped offering deliveries, my business would be cut by at least half."

Setting ground rules has made the deliveries run smoothly. "An order must be in by 10 a.m. for an early delivery so the routes can be established and organized," he says.

Tawznsky supplies 60 local restaurants. Some are open seasonally. "In the summer, the crowds are substantial," he says. "A few three- and four-star restaurants are included among his customers."

Tawznsky offers the following advice for working with the restaurant trade. "Restaurant chefs are really interested in quality," he says. "If you don't have it, forget it. Deliveries need to be on time, and you need an intimate knowledge of your product. If consistency in supply isn't possible, you need to have a knowledge of adequate substitutes."

Linking restaurants to producers, roadside farm stand and farmers markets will continue to be a priority of the Fresh Connection program. Eventually, the program will expand by working with restaurants, hotels and institutions which buy food products in large volumes.

Presently, the Massachusetts Department of Food and Agriculture is planning a seminar that would link growers with professors and students of culinary schools in the state. The newsletter will also contain a section featuring a local chef with recipes and menu ideas that feature the state's foods.

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