



Selling To Restaurants:
A Farmer's Guide





Introduction

Connecting with chefs and restaurants can be intimidating, and it can be hard to figure out where to start. Restaurants can become some of your most reliable customers, placing predictable orders on a regular basis which can help you plan your season and give you a solid base to grow from. Beyond this, restaurants can introduce your farm to a wide audience who may be interested in direct sales as well, either via CSA shares, farmers markets, or through local retailers.

Anyone who's tried to work with restaurants knows that it can be a tricky process – chefs can be difficult to get in touch with, or they might try and get in touch with you at really inconvenient times (like when you're waist deep in work!). They can have extremely high expectations when it comes to quality and consistency, and may expect pricing that's more in line with the largest produce wholesalers. However, with the right approach and the right infrastructure in place, restaurants can become true partners who support the work you do producing food for your community.

This guide covers some of the major challenges you may face with when selling to restaurants, and includes perspectives from both farmers and restaurant insiders. If you have additional questions, don't hesitate to reach out to us at Local Food Marketplace – after all, our mission is to power resilient local food systems through technology.

CONNECTING WITH RESTAURANTS

With Tips from Jeffrey Orkin of Greener Roots Farms

Before you can start selling to restaurants, you have to establish relationships and put yourself out there. Of course, every once in a while a chef might call you up out of the blue or show up at your booth at the market, but if you're really looking to build up your sales to restaurants, you'll have to do some outreach on your own.

Who Should You Approach?

Are you a foodie? Do you follow the local culinary trends and know what sous chef has left one restaurant to start their own place? If you aren't a local restaurant insider, you'll need to do some research.

When you walk by restaurants, take a moment to glance at their menus – do they feature farms which they buy from? These days, it's not uncommon for the descriptions of dishes at farm-to-table restaurants to name drop whoever grew the produce. Another good indicator that a restaurant might be a potential customer is if they call out heirloom varieties on their menu – it means they're paying closer attention to what they're buying and serving.

“Do your research, and don't just think you have a great idea and jump into the market like you're the only person doing it. Get a good feel for the landscape of what the local food scene is, and who's doing what, and make some friendships, and be sure that you don't start trying to do something someone else has been doing for 30 years.”

Check The Web

Often times you can find some local writers who interview chefs and feature restaurants that are using local ingredients. You can also search using Google or Yelp for “local foods” in your area. It's not just fine-dining restaurants in big cities that are getting more discerning about where they get their products from. While you're probably not going to go and knock on the back door of a chain restaurant (they often buy through national or regional contracts with huge suppliers), you may be surprised to find a local sports bar or pizza parlor that is looking to add some seasonal, local products.

“It can be very intimidating just trying to figure out who to connect with, and not knowing who's already selling to them, and what they're selling. Part of my process was to spend the time looking at the website, looking at the menus, and figure out what I had to offer”

Connect with Organizations Supporting Local Food

Many communities have non-profits dedicated to connecting consumers with local food providers. Check with your local extension office as well. They may be able to connect you with restaurants that are looking to source local food.

Follow chefs on social media. Many communities have very active Facebook groups dedicated to food, and you can become part of the conversation. Many chefs and restaurant owners pay close attention to these groups as they often include candid feedback about their customer's dining experience.

Instagram has become one of the most valuable networking and marketing tools for both chefs and farmers. Its focus on visual storytelling (think beautifully plated, colorful dishes or fresh heirloom produce piled high) connects powerfully with audiences, and relationships are often made easily.

The most Instagram-savvy farmers are able to advertise what's available and fresh as soon as it's harvested, and a great photo can whet a chef's appetite for great products. If you're not on Instagram, don't worry - it's easy to get started. Great photos of produce can draw quite the audience online if you style them right and use a few smart hashtags. Don't just follow restaurants - see if they tag their kitchen staff in photos and try to connect with them directly.

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“I think that part of being successful in restaurant sales is being sure you're not bringing a product to market that every other person has, because you want to differentiate yourself as the go to for certain things.”

Ask

When you're out at a restaurant, ask what local products they currently source and how they get them. Try to get a general sense of whether their needs are being met and what opportunities you might have. Don't be afraid to let them know you're trying to help connect them with local farmers – it will be a welcome change from the constant barrage of broadline distributor sales calls.

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“You might want to ask chefs, ‘what can I grow for you that no one else is growing?’ But, sometimes the chefs don't know what they don't have.”

Use Your Judgement

While connecting with a local restaurant is always exciting and can be a great platform for spreading the word about your farm to a wider audience, keep in mind that your business needs to stay profitable. Carefully consider what it is a chef is asking for when deciding if setting up a direct relationship is going to make sense. After all, you don't want to offer preferred prices or waste time driving out to make deliveries if all a restaurant wants to buy is \$20 worth of microgreens every other week.

Restaurants who don't have a lot of experience buying directly from farms might not realize that things which are easy for broadline distributors can be burdensome to farmers. You don't need to turn away any business, but consider options like adjusting your prices to account for things like delivery.

TIPS FOR APPROACHING RESTAURANTS

Before approaching a restaurant for the first time, take the time to understand their menu and hours and anticipate their needs and expectations. Farm-to-table restaurants and catering companies with constantly changing menus may want access to unusual or hard to find products, while cafés, coffee shops, and sports bars often feature fairly consistent menus with specials that change from week to week.

Ask questions before making your pitch. Get to know what they're buying from local producers now and how they get it. Determine if there are unmet needs or added services that you could provide, and whether it makes sense to do business with them.

Find out when they're most flexible and make the effort to visit them. Discuss what they like, what they wish they could get, and suggest products that might be a good fit. Consider offering samples of new or unusual products; chefs love to experiment with new ingredients. Be cautious about sampling things you'll be unable to supply, though, because great products will create demand that you'll need to be able to meet.

Promotional Materials

Think about your brand, and what value that will offer to the restaurant. For example, even if customers can't taste the difference between your carrots and those from a broadline distributor after they've been stewed with spices for two hours, their perceptions will be impacted by how the carrots are presented to them. Are you growing Jaune du Doubs or Red Cored Chantenay? Believe it or not, details about variety can be extremely valuable to restaurants when they're writing menus.

Chefs and diners connect deeply with stories, and will remember a good one long after a meal is over – so it's important to tell a good one about yourself. It might seem silly, but taking the time to write down a little bit about yourself, your farm, and why you do what you do can be a really worthwhile activity. Things like what made you want to start growing food for your local community or the story behind your farm's name can be great details to include in your promotional materials. Another important benefit of telling your own story is that it means restaurants can pass it along to their diners while getting all the details right.



COMMON MISTAKES WHEN APPROACHING RESTAURANTS

- Don't show up in the middle of a lunch or dinner rush. Make sure that there are no special events before approaching them. You will leave a sour taste in their mouth if you appear to not respect their time and schedule.

“You need to get there as early in the day as you're capable of getting there, walking into a restaurant. I will not walk into a restaurant after about 3:30 or 4:00 in the afternoon. If people need your stuff for service that day, and you're showing up at 4:00, and they open at 5:00, it really does put them in a bind.”

-Jeffrey Orkin

- Don't take on too many new customers at once. One customer that orders (and pays) regularly is better than three that order infrequently.
- Don't minimize the value you bring to the table. You are not just another broadline distributor – you're an important part of their brand.
- Don't keep things informal indefinitely. Clear agreements are crucial to nurturing strong business relationships. This is especially important if your connection with a restaurant grows from them picking up some special ingredients from you at a farmer's market to you making regular deliveries to their backdoor. Keeping things loose can help get the relationship started, but once things get serious it's important to make sure expectations are clear. After all, it's a business arrangement. Even if you're friendly with the chef, they won't always be the one responsible for paying your invoices.



Is Selling Direct Right For You?

A Checklist Compiled with Help From Oliver Gubenko of Harvest Drop

Harvest Drop is an amazing local food distributor in New Jersey that connects farmers with restaurants. Oliver has seen it all when it comes to getting great food into restaurant kitchens, and he's shared a little wisdom with us around making sure that selling directly to restaurants is a good sales channel for you.



You're only as strong as your supply

Restaurants need consistent product to operate; that means food that's consistent in both quality and availability.



Diversity Can Be Critical

Most restaurants are not spending five or six hundred dollars a week on tomatoes and salad, so it can be a challenge for somebody who only grows two things to get into a normal, small to medium sized restaurant. Many restaurants choose to work with distributors so they can consolidate orders and meet minimums for delivery.



Sales Takes Constant Work

Even if you work with chefs that absolutely love you, that need your food in their kitchen, you may still have to borderline harass them to submit their orders. Even with tools in place to streamline the process, if you can't see yourself or someone who works for you picking up the phone the second it rings, if you can't reply to text messages or emails fast, this may not be the right move for you.



Getting Organized Is Key

Keep track of who bought what, and who needs what. It's a lot of information, there's a lot of moving pieces, there's a lot of food flowing around, and if you don't stay organized, you're just doomed. Organization, which leads into reliability and efficiency, is really essential.

GETTING ORGANIZED

At the end of the day, even restaurants who desperately want to buy directly from farmers will need you to have a certain amount of organization and process in place. They often have a complex ecosystem of suppliers, so while you won't need to conform exactly to other vendors, it's important to get in the same ballpark.

Explain your delivery and order schedule. It's not necessary to offer delivery every day as a broadliner might – you offer quality that they can't – but predictability is critical when dealing with perishable goods and the low margins most restaurants operate on. They need to regularly run their inventory down to zero, and would often rather pull a dish from the menu before your next delivery than have to throw out product. A well-organized ordering and delivery system is crucial to building healthy relationships.

Make it easy for them to order from you, but make sure whatever system you use works for you as well. Chefs all have different preferences for placing orders – some prefer to use the computer, others want to call or email you, and some want to order from their mobile phone.

Doing your best to accommodate their preferences can be a challenge, so you may want to investigate some technology solutions that could make your life easier. Technology can also help you get more organized and streamline order fulfillment. Some platforms will allow you to easily create product availability each week that can be emailed to customers - whether the customer prefers a spreadsheet view like the broadliner lists or an online shopping portal.

Estimate how long you expect a product will be available, and be really honest. Before they commit to putting something on their menu, chefs want to know how long they can get it for. Chefs can work around products with very limited seasonality as long as they know in advance what to expect. Remind them that extenuating circumstances happen with availability, but assure them you will communicate supply issues as they happen.

Even with good infrastructure, you should expect to make some reminder calls/emails/texts before order deadlines – especially with chefs that you've just begun working with. It will take time to become a part of their weekly process, and regular calls offer you a chance to check in, get feedback, and tell them about new products.

Offering to set up standing orders for staples can be helpful for more absent-minded chefs. This will ensure you'll get regular orders, and that they'll get first dibs if there is limited availability. Missing an order can be a big headache for a restaurant kitchen, and force them to either adjust their menu or go elsewhere. Standing orders ensure that your restaurant customers have what they need week after week, and can also give you some building blocks to grow from and help you plan more efficiently.

PLANNING FOR GROWTH

Once you're successfully working with a handful of restaurants, how do you keep those relationships strong and growing? Keeping up with an increasing number of restaurants will take some work, but can be hugely beneficial to helping your farm grow.

Get to know staff and owners at each restaurant, not just your point of contact. Restaurants are known for their staff turnover. Chances are the chef you're working with this year won't be the chef next year, which makes it vital to establish relationships with others. Many a dishwasher has ended up running a kitchen in just a short period of time. Make all staff members your associates. Owners and front-of-house managers also influence purchasing decisions and can provide a vital connection to a new chef.

WRAPPING UP

Having a network of restaurant customers can help keep your business healthy year after year, and the key to growing those relationships is taking the time to make sure things start off on the right foot. Only work with restaurants that are a good fit for you, make sure to stay on top of communication, and try and put smart systems in place to keep things organized. And, most importantly, remember that you bring as much value to the relationship as they do – after all, no one's talking about broadline-to-table restaurants!

Interested in selling to restaurants but not sure where to begin? Our software platform can help get you started on the right foot. **Contact Us today.**

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or call us at (541) 579-3195