

EAT THE SEASON. EAT THE PLACE.

BUYING LOCAL

AT SCALE: Fruits & Veg

50
Tips

FOR FOODSERVICE
OPERATORS

Photo Credit: Taylor Schefstrom



www.Food-Hub.org/NWFBA

Twitter: [@NWFoodBuyers](https://twitter.com/NWFoodBuyers)

Want to buy fruits, vegetables, herbs, and nuts grown and processed right here in Oregon, but don't think you have the budget or bandwidth to buy local?

Foodservice directors at schools, hospitals, colleges and universities, assisted living centers, and corporate cafes in Oregon who are members of the Northwest Food Buyers' Alliance are making it work!

LET'S SEE HOW.



GETTING STARTED

The Top 10

1. **Start where you are.** You're probably already buying some local fruits, vegetables, herbs, or nuts, especially when they're in season. Find out what! Ask your distributor, then tell your eaters what you're already doing (*even before you've made any changes*). The momentum will help you build.
2. **Ask your distributor for "local" availability.** Most distributors now publish an availability list that highlights local produce, so all you need to do is ask for it.
3. **Fall in love with local flavor. Visit a farmers' market and immerse your senses in the sights and smells of fresh basil, crisp melons, greens of all kinds — sniff, touch, taste, and watch!** You may not buy there, but you'll gather important intel: what's in season (*and therefore abundant and most affordable*)? Which farmers are flexible, practical, and interested in wholesale? (*Hint: some farmers' markets let chefs in early!*)
4. **Not all fruit and vegetables are created equal — and that's a good thing!** Local fruits and veggies often vary in color, size, and nuance of flavor. Embrace your flexibility as a foodservice operator (*rather than grocery retailer, where every piece must be buffed and shined to "cosmetically perfect"*), and select for flavor.
5. **Celebrate all four seasons.** Make a menu for each season and give your customers a fresh take on your cuisine with each change in the weather. Roasted Brussels sprouts are comforting and sprightly mid-winter, but taste bland and out of place on a summer day.
6. **Pick the low-hanging fruit!** Oregon is the #1 supplier of hazelnuts nationwide, for example, so if you're buying them from Turkey (*or don't know where they're coming from*), ask your distributor for Northwest nuts. Other easy local choices include fresh and frozen veggies (*green beans, corn, broccoli, cauliflower, peas, beets, peppers*), berries (*blue, black, straw, marion*), greens (*spinach, kale, salad greens*), and tree fruit (*peaches, cherries, pears*).
7. **Can't change the cafeteria right away? Start a local sourcing program with your catering menu.** Costs are likely easier to recoup and smaller quantities of unique, delicious ingredients (*ever tried a Jupiter grape?*) featured at a special event or meeting can draw new eaters into your main operation.
8. **Stick to your group purchasing contracts for items that aren't going to create ah-ha! moments** based on flavor anyway (*paper goods, pantry basics, etc.*). Playing by the rules will buy you goodwill with the number-crunchers and the flexibility to get creative on the delicious veggie varieties that will wow your diners.
9. **Know the value of your decision to go local.** Local, seasonal, responsible produce may cost more at first, especially if you choose certified organic. With a value proposition firmly in mind, your menus and marketing materials can be crafted to reflect a cohesive strategy and message, resulting in buy-in and support from customers who might otherwise balk at price changes.
10. **Ask a farmer.** They will help you understand and explore which fruits and veggies are in season, what preparations work well for different varieties, what customers ask for and what they come back time and again to enjoy.





“Exploiting seasonality sometimes works to our advantage. Consumers don’t buy much watermelon after Labor Day, which leaves Eastern Oregon farmers with a crop they can’t sell. Kids love watermelon! So we buy delicious Hermiston watermelon at peak ripeness for a great price, while helping extend the season for local farmers (sometimes all the way to October). Win-win all around.”

Gitta Grether-Sweeney, Portland Public Schools

1ST COURSE

Eat the Season

11. The secret trick that savvy foodservice directors know is to exploit seasonality. The best tasting fruits and vegetables are cheapest when they're most abundant locally, and with a little practice and operational tweaking, preserving the season can make that flavor available year-round.

12. Build flexibility into your menu by listing "seasonal vegetables" as sides — "seasonal fruit" at breakfast, and "seasonal toppings" on sandwiches or pizza. *(And then make sure what you're serving really is in season!)*

13. Buy late season tomatoes, eggplant, peppers, or tomatillos in bulk and roast in olive oil, salt, and fresh herbs, then freeze and add to soups, sauces, lasagna, enchiladas, or other creative vegetarian dishes throughout the year.

14. Cook up sauces and condiments bursting with abundant peak season flavor. Great for tomato and pizza sauce, Indian and Thai curries, kimchi, sauerkraut, and pesto.



Photo Credit: Mike Davis

15. Individually quick-freeze (IQF) berries by laying cleaned pieces out on a sheet pan in the freezer, then bag up in storage bags and drop summer brightness into a winter breakfast strata, dessert crumble, or berry compotes as an accompaniment to roast meat.

"Farmer calls me and says, 'I've got 1,000 lbs of eggplant, can you take it?' I say yes without hesitation, then I have my staff roast it all and turn it into baba ganoush. We menu it right away, but freeze most of it and use over time."

Kirk Mustain, Bon Appetit Management Company at University of Portland

2ND COURSE

FNV, the Gateway Foods

16. Accept substitutes. Luckily, massive local variety in the Northwest makes substitutions easy. *(Did you know Oregon grows 220 different varieties of food crops?)* No local spinach mid-winter? Try kale!

17. Pizza is a great vehicle for local vegetables, herbs, nuts, and greens. Thinly sliced roasted squash, fresh basil leaves, chopped hazelnuts, a drizzle of local honey — the creativity of pizza is limited only by your imagination!



Photo Credit: Taylor Schefstrom

- 18. Rescue crooked carrots!** Millions of tons of perfectly edible, wholesome fruits and vegetables get wasted every year because their size, shape, or color don't match the food industry's stringent cosmetic standards. Those ugly ducklings will still taste delicious sliced, diced, chopped, or stewed.

- 19. Take fresh tomatoes off deli sandwiches and sandwich bars mid-winter.** Imported winter tomatoes single-handedly define the stereotype of tasteless foodservice! Tomato jam or chutney made from late-harvest summer tomatoes is a great alternative on winter sandwiches. Can't make it in-house? Partner with a processor or co-packer to do it for you.

- 20. Add a "Kitchen Sink Salad" to your menu.** Toss bits and bites of a wide variety of vegetables and greens together with a delicious dressing, and voila! You've gifted yourself with the flexibility to serve what you've got.

- 21. Seek out farmers who have narrowed their crops to a few key vegetables that they grow well and consistently.**

Farmers trying to grow too many different things — especially smaller, diversified farms — will likely be unreliable for large foodservice operations.

- 22. Stabilize supply by partnering with a couple of reliable, good-sized local farmers for things you use weekly** — lettuce, onions, carrots, etc. They'll get a reliable customer and you'll get the quantity, pricing and delivery schedule that will free up your creative juices when unique ingredients come along.

- 23. Ask distributors, processors or local farmers about the fate of "seconds" or "culls"** to find out what happens to their blemished bounty. Creative problem-solvers and good negotiators can make wasted fruit and veggies into culinary treasure at a great price.

- 24. Save your scraps!** Vegetable peelings and trimmings can go into a Stock Box in the freezer for making broth. This is a great way to make sure you're not wasting all the nutritional goodness in those fresh veggies.

"We run a seasonal farm bar in our café where we showcase and highlight local farmers' stories and serve seasonal foods from our menu. This helps to draw attention to the local food we offer and provides a storyboard for our local farmers."

Scott Scales, Kaiser Permanente

3RD COURSE

Farm to Foodservice

25. No scratch kitchen? No problem!

Look for local goods through local processors — think Stahlbush Island Farms and NORPAC — who freeze and can local fruits and vegetables.

26. Use your space to enthuse and educate.

Repeat customers standing in a line for lunch are the perfect audience for telling the story of your food. Take them on a visual trip to the farm and introduce them to the people who are growing the salad greens, sweet crunchy carrots, fresh herbs, and local pumpkin seeds they're about to buy.

27. Be a collaborative storyteller.

As you build relationships, gather bios and pictures of your farmers, along with images of their land and colorful crops. Repurpose those gorgeous veggies, and the real people who grew them, on your website, through social media channels, and in other marketing materials.

28. Define what “local” means to you.

100-mile diets were popularized a few years ago, but are impractical for most large operators. Mileage varies by product category — tomatoes may grow next door, but watermelon is best from the dry eastern side of the state. The USDA considers a 400-mile radius “local”, which may be a useful guideline for your entire menu.

29. Can't find local produce? Join

FoodHub (www.food-hub.org) for free and use it to search for local goods. You can also create your own buyer profile to help producers understand your needs and peruse the Marketplace to see what sellers have season by season.

30. Want to buy fruits and vegetables from a local farmer, but prefer to make purchases through your preferred partners?

Ask your distributor to pick up your favorite farmers.

31. Localize your foodservice contracts.

Want to meet a specified benchmark for local fruit and vegetable sourcing? Write that number into your RFP or contract renewal.

32. Buy the field.

If you can commit to buying a high volume of produce from a farmer in the next growing season, you can lock in the best price and secure your supply. Your commitment will allow them to plan effectively and grow exactly what you need. Win-win!

**33. Buy a chalkboard.**

Farm-direct veggies are inherently variable, so printing farm names on menus or glossy marketing materials can spur skepticism among savvy customers. List farmers and ranchers who contributed to the day or week's selections on a chalkboard instead.



“Staff support is critical in our mission to serve local, seasonal foods. We use a train-the-trainer model to help educate staff and build skill sets. Good stories helps us engage staff and customers. We hope our folks can always answer the question ‘where’s this from?’.”

Fernando Divina, Oregon Health and Sciences University

4TH COURSE

Costing

34. Evolve to whole-menu costing, which allows you to manage to a bottom line, rather than comparing the cost of each produce item to its local or sustainable counterpart.

35. Love your foodservice contractor, but wish they were more on-board with local produce? Discuss local sourcing practices and costs with them ahead of contract renewal periods. Starting the conversations early will help you build a shared vision of what local means to you, and establish a commitment to a minimum percentage of local sourcing.

36. Meet with your producers and distributors on a regular basis to discuss needs and commitments in your produce contracts. *(And hold their feet to the fire if commitments aren't being met!)*



37. Test your way into costing for new recipes, veggie varieties, or producers through your catering operation first. The smaller scale will leave room to learn before growing your program.

5TH COURSE

Staffing

38. Local produce sourcing takes teamwork. Build alignment between producer, supplier, chef, kitchen, and service staff so that everyone is on the same page about both the big vision and the niggly details.

39. Education is king in a local kitchen. Provide opportunities for staff to gain training and skills they'll need to select produce, prepare whole products, or understand the characteristics of seasonal ingredients.

40. Hire for desire. Kitchen staff with a passion for local fruits and vegetables often demonstrate the necessary flexibility and curiosity to make it work.

41. Storytelling and marketing doesn't stop with diners. Use the same stories to educate and inspire staff. Hold pre-shift huddles to announce which local fruits and vegetables are on the menu today, where they came from, and who grew them.

“Our management team, all the way to the top, believes in local food first and foremost because it tastes better. With that shared value, we can be flexible and creative to make it work.”

Andrew Roybal, University of Oregon

- 42. Don't be afraid to make mistakes — create space for staff to innovate, practice, fail, and ultimately win on both flavor and budget.** Produce is a great place to start because the risk is relatively low and the potential for creative solutions is high.

- 43. Really want to get the message across?** Invest in staff field trips to visit partner farms. Farmers offer a wealth of knowledge. Nothing will inspire your team like a trip through the field rows and hoop houses and time spent leaning against the truck with someone who works the land for a living.

6TH COURSE

Equipment



Photo Credit: Working Hands Farm

- 44. Building a local fruit and veg program means working with the seasons,** so you'll need tools for canning, freezing, and fermenting. Preserving is the best way to access favorite flavors in the off-season.

- 45. Invest in freezer storage.** If you're going to develop a strong local fruit and veggie supply, you'll benefit from all the frozen storage you can accommodate.

- 46. Did we mention dehydrators?** Your house-made granola will sparkle with dried local fruit beyond the friendly and familiar cranberries.

“We use a variety of strategies to source local foods, including asking our distributors to identify local options, setting bid specifications for local products, and helping to co-ordinate deliveries to multiple drops in our network of facilities to make working with us more manageable for individual growers.”

Lisa Vincent, Beaverton School District

7TH COURSE

Pro-Tips

- 47. Two words: nimble menus.** Develop seasonal guidelines and a bank of successful dishes, but shift toward planning the specifics only 8-10 days out so you can capitalize on veggies that are fresh and abundant.

- 48. Add value for farmers that deliver direct by hosting a drop-off location for their vegetable CSA** (*community supported agriculture*) at your site. Bonus: it reinforces your brand and reputation for being committed to fresh, local food, and helps reinforce fresh, seasonal eating among your diners.



“Food is a vital part of health, wellness, patient recovery and staff productivity, so it makes sense for us, as a health care facility, to support food production and distribution in a way that promotes human and environmental health. Our purchasing dollars bolster patient and staff health, feed local agriculture, circulate money in our community, and help build a local food system that reflects our commitment to holistic health and wellness.”

Eecole Copen, Oregon Health and Sciences University

49. How many things can your team do with an apple? What are you doing with stems and stalks? Invest in culinary knowledge and skill. To make the most of local purchasing, you've got to be able to use everything you're getting.

50. If you work with several farmers who grow the same veggies, coordinate their seasons so each focuses on a smaller set of complementary products. Everyone will make more money, be more reliable, and more streamlined. Less overlap will reduce transaction costs for you, too.

"The most important piece for us is working with our foodservice contractor and their distributors to get data. You need more information to make better decisions."

Jenny McNamara, Portland State University



BONUS TIP!

51. Relationships matter. At its best, local sourcing feels very different from conventional ordering. As you develop relationships with farmers (*even if delivery is done through your distributor*), it will start to feel like you are in partnership to deliver delicious, healthful, and affordable fruits and vegetables to your eaters.



JOIN US!

www.food-hub.org/nwfba

THANKS



Oregon
Department
of Agriculture



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