

EAT THE SEASON. EAT THE PLACE.

BUY LOCAL

99
Tips

FOR LARGE
OPERATORS

NORTHWEST



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BUYERS**

ALLIANCE

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**VIBRANT RURAL &
URBAN COMMUNITIES**

**EQUITABLE ACCESS
TO GOOD FOOD.**

These are the ideals that drive us.



Hello Foodservice Director

Have your diners started asking where their food comes from yet? Do they want antibiotics out of their meat, pesticides out of their salads, and GMOs out of their bread? Local and sustainable food has topped the National Restaurant Association's list of trends for the last several years, so if you aren't hearing those questions yet, you likely will soon.

But my operation can't afford farmers' market prices. Our diners want things like bananas and coffee that don't grow around here. I need more product than local farmers grow, and it's difficult to manage dozens of them. I can't afford to have my staff washing, peeling and chopping all day, I need product to come in prepped.

Do those concerns sound familiar? A group of foodservice directors in the Northwest have taken on those challenges and are winning. Their diners are being served less refined sugar and highly processed foods, fewer hormones and antibiotics, and more flavorful, nutrient-dense, whole and minimally processed food grown in their region. They're also participating in their local economies and building up their regional food systems. **And they're doing it profitably.**

This collection of tips was inspired by that group of innovative chefs and managers. We've gathered their most practical advice for getting started, growing a regional program, and making good local food accessible at scale.

Head to food-hub.org/nwfbfa to find more tips or to add your own. Quarterly meetings of our networking group, the **Northwest Food Buyers' Alliance**, are open to foodservice directors and staff both in-person and by phone. Email nwfbfa@food-hub.org to get the date, location and call-in number for the next meeting.

LET'S DIVE IN.

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GETTING STARTED

The Top 10

1. **You're probably already buying some local food, especially when it's in season.** Find out what, and tell your eaters what you're already doing. The momentum will help you build.
2. **Ask your distributor for "local" availability.** Most distributors now publish an availability list that highlights local product, so all you need to do is ask for it.
3. **Visit a farmers' market and immerse your senses.** You may not buy there, but you'll gather important intel: what's in season *(and therefore abundant and most affordable)*? Which local brands are popular? Which farmers are flexible, practical and interested in wholesale? Hint: some farmers' markets let chefs in early!
4. **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 featured at a special event or meeting can draw new eaters into your main operation.
5. **Not all fruit and vegetables are created equal.** 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.
6. **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.
7. **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)*.

8. **Stick to your group purchasing contracts for items that aren't going to create ah-ha! moments based on flavor** *(paper goods, pantry basics, etc.)*.
9. **Know the value of your decision to go local.** Local, seasonal, responsible food may cost more at first. 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. **Know your farmer.** They will help you understand and explore what's in season, what customers ask for, what preparations work well for different varieties, 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 stuff is cheapest when it's 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 Sehefstrom

- 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 items** 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 food 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

Conscious Carnivores

25. Focus on less meat and better meat. In clever kitchens, meat is roaming away from the “center of the plate” and instead being used as an ingredient, or even condiment. Look to Asian cuisines for ample inspiration on how to use meat sparingly and deliciously. Purchasing high quality meat pays dividends to animal, eater, and environment.

26. Give a cluck! The most sustainable choice in chicken is whole, pastured birds. Only want pieces? Collaborate with other institutions that like different parts of the bird. For example, schools often like drumsticks, hospitals like breast meat, and soup-makers like wing tips and carcasses for stock. Buy as a group from chicken farmers and help coordinate processing and delivery.

27. 100% grassfed beef is better for eater, animal, and land, but has a different texture than conventional beef. Braises and stews are most forgiving, and incredibly delicious on rainy winter days.

28. Go whole hog (or cow) for the ultimate in sustainable meat purchasing. Buying meat in primals is least expensive for you, easiest for your rancher partners, and a great training opportunity and culinary challenge for your staff.

29. Throw yourself a bone – then make your own stock out of it. Luckily, this thrifty tip is also hip: Sipping bone broths has become the latest health and luxury trend.

30. Avoid antibiotics whenever possible. Conventional meat production typically relies on antibiotics delivered in feed to keep animals healthy in close quarters. Such use risks rendering antibiotics useless in treating human disease, so the push is on to persuade industrial meat producers to limit regular use of antibiotics important to human health. Ask for meat “raised without antibiotics” in your procurement policies and contracts and you’ll be part of the solution. Don’t forget to tell your customers that you’re paying attention!



31. Partner with ranchers to get creative. Asking what cuts they’re long on will help you identify what they need to move, open up the potential for culinary creativity, and get the ball rolling to negotiate a lean price.



“I buy whole animals raised really well, and have trained my staff to break them down. It’s by far the best pricing, and we get to use every part of the animal, including the bones and fat. Our food tastes darn good as a result!”

Andre Uribe, Bon Appetit Management Company

4TH COURSE

Sustainable Seafood

- 32. **There are lots of fish in the sea. Lucky for you that means you can create a menu that goes beyond shrimp, tuna, and salmon.** The Pacific Northwest abounds with seafood that may be more affordable—think cod, rockfish, and halibut.

- 33. **Don't throw out the bones and shells;** they make great broth!

- 34. **Heard of CSAs** (*community supported agriculture*)? **There are also CSFs** (*community supported fisheries*). This is a great way to start a relationship and begin bringing a variety of seafood into your kitchen.

- 35. **Chow-dah down. Just like land-based protein options, there's more to a fish than meets the eye.** Ask your monger or your fisherman to recommend ways you can go beyond the fillet. Some of the best and most flavorful fish gets tossed away as scraps that can be used in stews, on a sandwich or flaked onto a salad.



- 36. **Know your fisherman.** Buying sustainable seafood means buying from community fishermen, preferably small boats that use hook and line gear (*rather than trawling the ocean bottom or using huge nets to scoop up everything in their path*). Working directly with a consortium of small boats is a great way to meet your volume needs, but avoid overfishing.

5TH COURSE

Goodness Graininess

- 37. **Buy in bulk!** Stock up on grains like barley or oats that farmers grow to build soil health.

- 38. **Variety is the spice of life.** Why not try a rotating hot morning cereal – oatmeal one day, farina the next.

- 39. **Wheat berries are a delicious salad bar topping** that boost fiber content and impart a toothsome nuttiness that will surprise and delight. They are also an important cover crop for organic vegetable farmers.

- 40. **Ask your contract baker where they source their grains** – Oregon and Washington farmers on both sides of the mountains are growing whole grains that can't be beat.

- 41. **Think the whole world has gone gluten-free?** Fresh baked goods made with whole grains are often more palatable to gluten-sensitive eaters who may actually be reacting to the preservatives and softeners used in many commercial bakeries.

6TH COURSE

Farm to Foodservice

42. 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.

43. 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 what they're about to buy.



Photo Credit: Jason Houston

44. Buy a chalkboard. Farm-direct ingredients 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.

45. Be a collaborative storyteller. As you build relationships, gather bios and pictures of your farmers, fishermen and ranchers along with images of their boat, land, crops, animals, etc. Repurpose them on your website, through social media channels, and in other marketing materials.

46. 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 – berries may grow nearby, but rockfish is only coming from the coast, for example. The USDA considers a 400-mile radius "local", which may be a useful guideline for your entire menu. Eaters are usually most excited to support farmers that are nearby.

47. Can't find local producers? Join FoodHub – 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.

48. Want to buy from a local farmer but prefer to make purchases through your preferred partners? Ask your distributor to pick up your favorite farmers.

49. Set ambitious goals. Many Northwest Food Buyers' Alliance member institutions have been able to reach 35% local by making very reasonable trade-offs that customers are happy to support with a little education.

"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 coordinate deliveries to multiple drops in our network of facilities to make working with us more manageable for individual growers."

Lisa Vincent, Beaverton School District

- 50. Localize your foodservice contracts.** Want to meet a specified benchmark for local sourcing? Write that number into your RFP or contract renewal.
-
- 51. Be a good partner to farmers** - take what they've got, pay quickly, be ready to grab the good stuff when it's ripe.
-

- 52. Buy the field.** If you can commit to buying a high volume of product 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!
-

7TH COURSE

Costing

- 53. Evolve to whole-menu costing,** which allows you to manage to a bottom line, rather than comparing the cost of each item to its local or sustainable counterpart.
-
- 54. Love your foodservice contractor, but wish they were more on-board with local? Discuss local sourcing practices and costs with them ahead of contract renewal periods.** Starting the conversations early will help you build a shared vision on what local means to you, establish a commitment to a minimum percentage of local sourcing, or establish standards for use of items produced with antibiotics, hormones, pesticides, GMOs, colorings or other additives, or for treatment of animals.
-
- 55. Meet with your producers and distributors on a regular basis** to discuss needs and commitments in your contracts. *(And hold their feet to the fire if commitments aren't being met!)*
-



- 56. Test your way into costing for new recipes,** items or producers through your catering operation first. The smaller scale will leave room to learn before growing your program.
-

“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



“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

8TH COURSE

Staffing

57. Local 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.

58. 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.



59. Leadership and management set the tone for the staff as well as customers. Local sourcing success is easier to attain when leaders are able to embrace change and model creative problem-solving.

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

61. Storytelling and marketing don't stop with diners. Use the same stories to educate and inspire staff. Hold pre-shift huddles to announce what's on the menu today, where it comes from, and who grew, raised, or caught it.

62. Don't be afraid to make mistakes – create space for staff to innovate, practice, fail, and ultimately win on both flavor and budget.

63. 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 fields and time spent leaning against the truck with someone who works the land for a living.

“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

9TH COURSE

Equipment

64. Invest in freezer storage. If you're going to develop a strong local program, you'll benefit from all the frozen storage you can accommodate.

65. Building a local 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.

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

10TH COURSE

Farm to School



Photo Credit: Ecotrust

67. An apple a day... Purchasing items that can be used in their whole form is easiest. Small apples are perfect for children, and farmers like to sell small apples to schools since they often don't have good markets for small apples otherwise. Frozen whole berries, sweet peas, baking potatoes, and pears are other great items easily served whole.

68. Find growers capable of and interested in serving schools at www.oregonharvestforschools.com (free membership required).

69. Market your fruits and vegetables the way companies market soda and candy! For inspiration, check out www.oregonharvestforschools.com and the Oregon Harvest for Schools campaign, which includes promotional materials for 36 different fruits and veggies.

70. Try featuring one local product per month so that you can channel energy from across the school – for procurement, student and parent marketing, classroom or garden education, tastings, recipe development, and finally, enjoying the item at lunch – for one key local item at a time.

- 71. It can take 30 tries of a new food for kids to decide they like it!** Provide lots of low risk opportunities to try new things without creating lots of waste. Tasting tables are a great way – offer bite-sized samples of a new recipe, or cut up pieces of different varieties of the same fruit so they can start to

develop their sense of taste (it's the first step to good eating!).

- 72. If they grow it, they'll eat it.** Cultivate a school garden and work with the cafeteria to incorporate the student harvest in meals.

11TH COURSE

Farm to Hospital

- 73. How does the food served in your dining facilities embody your mission?** It can be a powerful employee motivator to connect the dots between your dining services and your overall mission of health in your community.

- 74. Nutrient-dense, seasonal foods can enliven and energize what may be a difficult time for visitors.** Featuring local fresh berries in summer, apple dishes in fall, hearty winter greens, and fresh spring asparagus can nourish and strengthen.

- 75. Interested in organic? Think outside the box** and explore purchasing directly from farmers undergoing the three-year process to transition their land to certified organic. You can get product grown in organic methods, but at a more affordable price, by helping farmers through that challenging phase.

- 76. Make hospitals healthy places for patients and staff.** Increasing availability of fresh, nutrient-dense produce and antibiotic-free proteins will increase consumption of clean food and contribute to both patient health and employee wellness and productivity.



- 77. Find strength in numbers.** Reach out to other hospital partners in your area to create collective demand, and more fruitful partnerships for farmers, reducing costs for all.

- 78. Leverage your credibility as the expert on health and wellness to promote regional food systems and community health.** It may not be obvious, but neighbors look to you for leadership!



“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

12TH COURSE

Farm to Campus



79. Work with administration and student government to identify good opportunities for building an on-campus garden. Engage students in creating a greener campus by building a solid volunteer base to help with maintenance and harvest.

80. Make more room in your budget for better food by cutting down on waste. In one campus dining facility, waste was cut by 65% after converting to a full retail menu from an “all you can eat” food plan.

81. From cooks to canners - take advantage of student breaks to focus on preserving, especially in summer!

82. They’re going to have to cook for themselves someday, right? Why not offer cooking classes during slow times? Use it as a real-world extra-curricular opportunity to make the connections between their decisions as eaters, the economy, the environment, and social equity.

83. Students hooked on energy drinks in cans? Try offering a housemade yerba mate tea from a drink dispenser. Packs an energy punch, but is lower sugar and they can use their refillable bottles.

13TH COURSE

P-Card & Other Payments

84. Purchasing cards (p-cards) and petty cash can be extremely useful if used wisely. Cash on delivery is a game-changer for working with small farmers or in small quantities.

85. Be blunt about the money when talking with farmers. Don’t shy away – the third leg of sustainability is financial sustainability. Profit is not a bad thing, in fact it’s vital.

86. Get a handle on the bottom line by tracking and reporting your local purchasing. Prioritizing local products is a very different procurement strategy than managing for lowest cost. However, the upside – repeat visits, increased average transaction, and customer satisfaction – can be significant.

87. You need information to make better decisions. Work with your distributor to get details on quantity, price, format, and source by product so that you can collaborate to shift purchasing closer to home.

88. Do whole-menu costing. Using better quality meat, but less of it, is one way to make local work from a cost perspective, but so is getting a great price on tomatoes when they're in season, putting them up, and not paying to have them imported in the winter. The "No

Tasteless Tomatoes" strategy can help put pennies in the bank for good meat or other more costly items.

89. Invite your facility administrators to experience a meal prepared with local and seasonal ingredients. Without buy-in from administration, it can be tough to move forward, and the quickest path to their support is via their stomachs!

14TH COURSE

Pro-Tips

90. 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 what's fresh and abundant.

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

92. Build credibility and capitalize on your team's talent at the same time by offering cooking workshops to diners. Teaching people to work with fresh, local, delicious ingredients helps them appreciate both flavor and value. Charging a small fee can offset staff costs, or build a revenue stream by creating a team-building events program.

93. Host happy hour. Work with your vendors to host special tastings of wine, beer, or other beverages that pair well with seasonal, featured bites. Vendors will be excited to promote their beverages, and you can profit from food sales.



Photo Credit: Amanda Osborne

94. Bulk beverages can be incredibly cost effective versus individual cans or bottles. House-made teas and cold-brew coffee can be served in pitchers, in decorative drink dispensers, or even on tap. (*Use the day's leftover cold-brew coffee in a sweetened, spiced version the next morning.*)

95. 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.

96. Tap your staff. Many young cooks are pursuing culinary careers and side projects – ask what they’re up to. They may be cooking up something delicious and useful on their own time. Creating avenues to leverage their experiments could pay off for your eaters and staff retention rates.

97. If you work with several farmers who grow the same products, 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.

98. Have some open land and staff who are passionate about farming? Consider building your own garden beds or even a small farm on site. Hire a part-time farm manager or use staff time to tend and harvest beds. This can be a fantastic consumer education tool and promotional tool for local food efforts.



99. 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 food to your eaters.



JOIN US!

www.food-hub.org/nwfba

THANKS



Oregon
Department
of Agriculture



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