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GROW IT LOCALLY, BUY IT LOCALLY, EAT IT LOCALLY— A CULINARY COMPETITION TO PROMOTE LOCAL PRODUCE

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Abstract. **Within the five-county area around St. Lucie County, there are at least 25 local farmers with organic conventional, greenhouse or field production of vegetable crops. A number of these growers have approached Cooperative Extension personnel to assist with direct marketing especially to area restaurants. The same area supports numerous restaurants, all potential outlets for local produce. As a result of the growers' requests, meetings were conducted with area chefs and with local growers to discuss direct marketing opportunities for local produce. In order for this process to become successful, both the chefs and the growers agreed that the local consumer must be brought into the equation. This was accomplished through a culinary competition mimicking the popular "Iron Chef" television show. The competition was held at a local Farmers' Market, and spotlighted area chefs cooking culinary delights prepared with locally grown produce. The success of this event provides suggestions for others interested in promoting direct marketing of local produce through a culinary competition to attract consumers.**

Both consumers and chefs are interested in purchasing locally grown vegetable crops due to their freshness and high quality. Consumers purchase local produce because of freshness, taste and the support of local farmers (Food Processing Center, 2001). The factor cited as most likely to increase purchases of local produce was increased availability in the area (63%). In this survey of consumers in Nebraska, Iowa, Wisconsin and Missouri, approximately 70% of respondents reported that it was very or extremely important to them to purchase food that is locally produced and; in particular, 55% were interested in being able to purchase locally grown food in restaurants. As the proportion of meals consumed away from home increases, this becomes a larger and larger market for locally produced vegetable crops. A survey carried out by the Mid-Atlantic Produce Project found that, while only 11% of surveyed restaurants and caterers currently purchased local produce, 89% indicated that they were interested in buying from local growers (Hanson and Rada, 1992). Freshness and quality were the primary attractions, as well as the possibility of purchasing products difficult to find from other sources.

The Agricultural Marketing Service of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) reported a trend in direct marketing (marketing of a product directly to the end-user) of agricultural products. This is especially true for small farmers, because of their difficulty in participating in wholesale marketing and their interest in higher returns per unit area (Bills et al., 2000). While much of the increase in direct marketing is through farmers' markets and roadside stands, direct marketing to restaurants can be a profitable association for both parties.

Restaurants and caterers are considered mid-volume markets which combine the advantages of small to medium production volumes with moderate to high prices (Adam et al., 1999). Local producers may be able to provide chefs with specialty products that are unavailable through other sources, or work with them to meet specifications of size, type and quality. Growers working with chefs can also better anticipate consumer trends in food choices.

In a focus group of producers, marketers and marketing facilitators (Bills et al., 2000), at least 75% of respondents suggested that information, networking and producer marketing skills were problems for producers wanting to participate in direct marketing. Nearly 80% of respondents suggested that networking and contacts were very important sources of information on direct marketing. While much of the direct marketing literature suggests that growers use other growers as their information source, a direct relationship between growers and chefs is more likely to provide the specific information necessary to meet production and culinary requirements. Chefs need to know what products are available in which seasons and growers need to know what specialty products are needed and in what form. Both groups need to understand the underlying forces that control the other industry. In addition, the groups can work together to develop marketing/advertising plans to benefit from the consumer desire for local produce. As a result of these trends, a program to "Grow locally, buy locally, eat locally" was initiated

Creating interest. The initial step for promoting the "grow locally, buy locally, eat locally" campaign was to determine if there was interest among area chefs. In order to determine this, we attended a meeting of the Treasure Coast Chefs Association. This association encompasses a four county area and includes chefs, apprentices and restaurant related industry personnel. At this meeting explanations of the "grow locally, buy locally, eat locally" campaign were presented to the crowd. From this initial gathering it was determined that there was overall interest among the meeting participants.

The second step was to invite local growers to a "grow locally, buy locally, eat locally" work shop. A data base of local growers was created and invitations were mailed out to them. The purpose of this work shop was to determine if there was interest among local produce growers and what commodities the growers were currently growing. At this meeting, an organic grower from Indian River County and the chef/owner of a Vero Beach restaurant provided the audience with detailed information on their process for growing and purchasing local produce and the marketing obstacles they encountered from field to kitchen. Some of the problems included delivery times, dates and seasonal product availability.

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The grower also emphasized the need for open and honest communication between grower and chef. This meeting was also used to convey to the growers the interest generated from the Treasure Coast Chefs Association meeting. The growers were pleased with the response from the Treasure Coast Chefs Association and eager to get the program established.

Planning. Once it was determined that there was interest from both parties, plans were made for a local culinary competition fashioned after the popular television show "Iron Chef". In order to spark gourmet participation, chefs from throughout the area were personally visited and invited to participate in the competition. These informal visits also provided an opportunity to gather additional information on what kinds of local produce the chefs would be interested in purchasing. A total of 10 chefs were visited.

It was rationalized that in order for the consumer side of the marketing triangle to be successfully introduced into the "grow locally, buy locally, eat locally" concept, a well established central location such as the Downtown Fort Pierce Farmers' Market must be utilized. With this in mind, an alliance with the Downtown Fort Pierce Farmers' Market was formed. The Downtown Fort Pierce Farmers' Market Association provides a venue for vendors to sell their products in a centralized area. The market is held on Saturday mornings and is patronized by over 800 people each week. In addition, the Farmers' Market Association also provided local advertising for several weeks in advance of the date and provided a videographer to record the event.

Advertising also played an important role in the success of the competition. The competition was publicized in a newspaper editorial that mentioned producers, chefs, and the long standing relationship that the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences has nurtured in St. Lucie County. The event was also announced through public service announcements and local event calendars.

Local producers were contacted for donations for the competition. Items and quantities were the donors' choice. In addition to vegetables and herbs, fresh shrimp and smoked turkey, sauces and honey were donated by local producers and market vendors. We coordinated pickup and transport of donations to the event.

Prior to the cooking competition, rules for chefs and judges were developed in conjunction with the Indian River Community College (IRCC) Culinary Arts Program. Chefs were told when interviewed, that they would be expected to prepare two entree plates with protein, starch and vegetable portions. The chefs were also told what products would be provided for them such as rice, pasta, shrimp and smoked turkey, a variety of produce and herbs, china, and two butane burners. Chefs were allowed to bring seasonings, sauces, and other equipment. Chefs were asked to arrive at 10 am to receive their instructions and inspect the available produce. They were then given 1 h to create their culinary delights. Chefs were told they would be interacting with the audience and that the food prepared was for demonstration rather than sampling by the audience. Specifications for judging included plate presentation, taste, use of donated products, chefs' appearance and cleanliness.

Judges for the event included a food writer from a regional newspaper, a local restaurateur, and an instructor from the Culinary Arts program at the Indian River Community College (IRCC). A pre-competition meeting was held to acquaint judges with the expectations and rules. A Master of Ceremonies (MC) is a very important part of a public competition, and integral to the "Iron Chef" model. A local newspaper celebrity was chosen as MC, which also resulted in additional media coverage of the event.

Certain equipment and setup materials were provided. Chefs from local restaurants and IRCC donated portable cooking stoves, white table cloths, fine china and silverware to add an air of sophistication to the affair. Tents, tables and a public address (PA) system were provided by the Farmers' Market Association.

The Competition. Three chefs participated in the competition, due to equipment limitations. Nine local companies donated products, including five produce growers. Approximately 300 people watched the chefs create, in 1 h, their entrée plates. The celebrity MC kept up an entertaining dialogue; interviewing chefs, judges and audience members. While the chefs worked, the judges debated, and participating restaurants handed out their dinner menus. Extension personnel explained the concept of "grow local, buy local, eat local" and introduced the donors. At the end of the hour long competition, the judges gathered and graded the final preparations.

Anecdotal measures of the success of the event included a follow up article in the newspaper, comments by audience members that they had eaten at the participating restaurants, and the showing of the video tape on the local access channel for the following month. Spin-off competitions were held at the Fort Pierce Grapefruit Festival and the Palm Beach Gardens Farmers' Market, and a cook-off among previous winning chefs was held at the Downtown Fort Pierce Farmers' Market.

Lessons learned. A successful culinary competition can be accomplished with good planning. Taking the steps to meet before the event with chefs and growers will assure buy-in from both those entities. You can expect to have some hesitation among local chefs you have asked to compete in the culinary competition. However, when contacting individual chefs to participate in the competition, it may initially be best to recruit chefs with ample kitchen staff. With a larger staff a chef will be more willing to participate in the competition, because food preparation activities can still be maintained in his or her absence. The choice of which chefs to interview may be based on the clientele expected at the event, the type of restaurant or products showcased, or reasons specific to the event. For example, downtown Fort Pierce restaurants were encouraged to participate as one of the missions of the Downtown Fort Pierce Farmers' Market is to support downtown Fort Pierce businesses. Upon completing the contest you will have generated enough excitement about the "grow locally, buy locally, eat locally" concept to make finding chefs easier for following competitions. When speaking with a chef who was invited to participate in the competition and declined, he asked when he could challenge the "Iron Chef" to defend his title.

We allowed donors to determine the type and amount of products donated. However, depending on the type of competition, it may be necessary to ask for specific products. In some cases, there may be a combination of specified and unspecified donations. If the competition were held at an event like the Grapefruit Festival, specific donations of grapefruit would be needed, but other ingredients could be left up to the donors.

Associations with local organizations or events can also provide increased benefits. In the case of the Downtown Fort Pierce Farmers' Market, the association provided a central-

ized location, an automatic audience, name recognition and advertising. It is also beneficial if other associations can be nurtured through choice of judges or participation. These can include media, restaurateurs and local culinary schools. If a farmers' market is not available as a venue, alternative options may include local cooking demonstrations, cooking shows, or festivals.

Development of rules for the competition should be generated with the guidance of local chefs and educational entities to preserve legitimacy. The format of the event can include mystery ingredients, advance notice of all ingredients, or allowing the chefs to choose their own ingredients from the market. The rules will reflect the format chosen. Training of chefs and judges in the rules is also essential. In our competition, the winner prepared an award winning presentation with ingredients that were not a part of the original donations. A second chef prepared a dish entirely from the products that were available to him, only to take third place. A clearer explanation of the rules to both groups would have avoided that problem. The format of the event may also affect timing. We found it advantageous to have chefs survey the donated products and then have time to return to their restaurants to pick up any seasonings or equipment they might need.

Set-up logistics can affect the success of the event. Making sure that there is cover, tables, electricity, a PA system, etc. is fairly obvious but you should check local regulations and liability on cooking and/or serving food at your venue.

Culinary capstone. The "grow locally, buy locally, eat locally" concept is an excellent means of tying the direct marketing aspect of locally grown produce to local restaurants and consumers. A culinary competition can bring these three populations together. For the event to be successful, a concerted effort among growers, chefs and local entities is necessary.

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