



## Food Hub's Guide to Selling to Restaurants

As a former chef, I often get asked about what it takes to sell to a restaurant. If you've dined out recently, chances are the restaurant featured a "locally raised, heritage breed" protein or "organic, sustainably grown" produce. Restaurants and chefs are always looking to improve their bottom line, and one of those ways is to listen to their customers and serve more local food. Are you already selling to any restaurants, caterers, cafes, or corporate kitchens? Does the thought of approaching this market segment seem daunting? Developing a marketing plan can help you ease the stress and prepare for the inevitable questions that will follow. We've broken down the process for you in several steps.

### Whom do you approach?

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

**Check your local food blogs.** Often times there are some local aspiring writers who interview chefs and feature restaurants that are using local ingredients. While you are probably not going to go and knock on the back door of your local chain restaurant, you may be surprised to find a local sports bar or pizza parlor that is looking to add some seasonal, local products.

**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.

**Join Facebook Groups.** Many communities have very active Facebook groups dedicated to food. Join them and pay attention to the chatter. You can even post to get ideas and feedback. Many chefs and restaurant owners pay close attention to these groups as they often include candid feedback about their customer's dining experience.

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

**Do web searches.** You can search using Google or Yelp for "local foods" in your area. These will also give you some potential sales calls.

### About the author



Ryan Crum is LFM's Sales and Marketing Coordinator. He is a former chef and also worked as a salesperson for several broadline distributors.

***A food hub can dramatically reduce a restaurant's administrative costs by delivering all their local goods in a single delivery and providing a single invoice.***

## **What value do you offer & what do chefs expect from a food hub?**

Before you start making sales calls to chefs, you need to have a good idea on how they are currently sourcing food and get a clear understanding of the value that you offer. What do you offer these restaurants that they are currently not receiving? Many restaurants that source local food typically order all their local products directly from farms, and order other products from a broadline distributor. Ideally, you are going to be like a broadline distributor, except for all local products.

If you have friends that are chefs or restaurant managers, you know how short their time is. They work long hours keeping their doors open; working the line or front of the house, and that isn't counting the time they need to spend on their administrative duties. It can be a struggle to have time to call (and play phone tag with) their egg producer, their pork producer, and their tomato producer, plus place an order with a broadline distributor. Every order they place adds administrative hours to their already long day. A food hub can dramatically reduce their administrative costs by delivering all their local goods in a single delivery and providing a single invoice. This saves delivery fees and more importantly, time. As stated in [this study](#) by University of Nebraska, price is not typically the main barrier in working with restaurants. They understand what goes into the cost of raising and producing a product. Saving them administrative time while providing them access to desirable products is paramount.

## **Do's in Approaching Restaurants**

- Before approaching a restaurant for the first time, take the time to understand their menu and hours and anticipate their needs. *Farm to table restaurants and catering companies* with constantly changing menus will want access to unusual or hard to find products, while *cafes, 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 are buying from local producers now and how they get it. Determine if there are unmet needs or added service that you could provide.
- Explain your delivery and order schedule. It is not necessary to offer delivery every day as a broadliner might. Restaurants are excited to work with you and want you to stay in business, so don't over extend yourself by offering more than you can handle.

# Availability Calendar

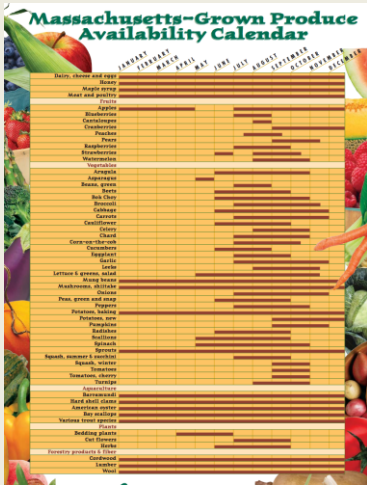
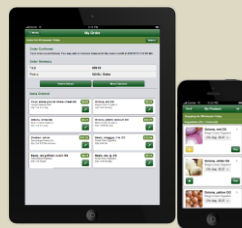


image credit: Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources

- Consider offering samples of new or unusual products. Chefs love to experiment with new ingredients.
- Estimate how long you expect to have a new product. Before they commit to putting something on their menu, they want to know how long they can get it. Remind them that extenuating circumstances happen with availability, but assure them you will be communicating supply issues as they happen.
- Expect to make 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.
- Offer to place standing orders for them for their staples. This will ensure you get regular orders and they get first dibs if there is limited availability. These give your sales some building blocks to grow from.
- Make it easy for them to order from you. 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. Do your best to accommodate their preferences.
- Find producers that can provide consistent supply and have a backup plan for key products.
- Be predictable. Send your product availability list at the same time each week. Send reminders at the same time. Deliver in the same timeframe.
- Visit them. Find out when they are 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. Communicate needs back to your producers to see if there is the possibility of getting specialized items.
- Provide promotional materials. Help them promote the products they are purchasing from you to their customers. Provide table tents or information sheets that include farm stories and profiles.

**Convenience is key to working with restaurants. LFM provides you all the tools you need to serve chefs – online ordering, an e-commerce custom mobile app, and salesperson entry.**



Product Name	Unit	Price	Stock	Status	SKU
Apples	10 lbs	\$12.00	100	Available	APP001
Strawberries	10 lbs	\$15.00	50	Available	STR001
Leafy Greens	10 lbs	\$8.00	200	Available	LEA001

*One customer that orders and pays regularly is better than three that order and pay infrequently.*

## Don'ts in 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.
- Don't take on too many new customers at once. One customer that orders (and pays) regularly from you is better than 3 that order infrequently.
- Don't compete with your producers. Chances are some of your producers already have restaurant customers. Assess your producer's goals and whether they would be interested in having you market, deliver, and provide customer service on their behalf. Be willing to have some price flexibility for a period of time in recognition of their pre-existing relationship. It is especially critical with this scenario though to clearly indicate the full value you offer.
- Don't minimize the value you bring to the table. You are not just a delivery service. You are dramatically improving efficiency and exposure for both producers and customers. Make sure you are compensated accordingly.

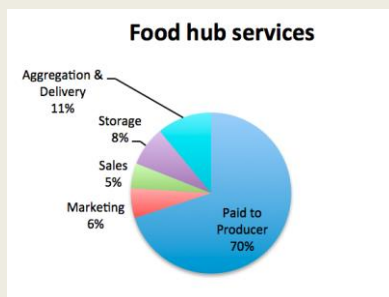
## Plan for Growth

Once you are successfully working with a handful of restaurants, how do you keep that relationship strong and growing? Anyone can go out and get one sale, one time, but you need to grow that relationship to a mutually beneficial result. These relationships will take some work to maintain, but can be a huge benefit in helping your food hub, producers, and customers grow.

- **Clear agreements are vital in nurturing strong business relationships.** It is vital that you nurture strong relationships between your food hub, your customers, and your producers. Be sure to discuss this relationship with customers and producers so that there is mutual understanding about the value you bring to the table and how you will deal with conflicts.

We often hear food hubs complain about producers and customers buying and selling around the food hub after the food hub establishes the relationship. Educating and reminding customers and producers about your value are critical in avoiding this type of conflict. A simple infographic (see left) explaining your pricing structure to producers, along with the costs you help them save, can go a long way. Ultimately though, if a producer doesn't see the value in your services and is willing to compromise the relationship, you should consider finding alternative

## Educate Producers and Customers on the Value You Provide



## Other valuable resources on selling local food to restaurants

[Approaching Foodservice Establishments with Locally Grown Products](#), by University of Nebraska Lincoln

[Selling to Restaurants](#), by ATTRA

sources of their products. Remember that each situation you have sets a precedent for future challenges. Your position on this type of conflict and how you will handle it should be included in your standard agreements with customers and producers, along with how you will deal with product quality issues, non-payment, etc.

- **Work with your producers on production planning throughout the off- season, and have a plan in place as your growing season ramps up.** Restaurants want to know that if they add certain local items to their menu, they can get those throughout the season. Steady supply and communication are key elements for maintaining a strong relationship. LFM's Production Planning module will help in planning, executing, and identifying potential gaps during the season. You will need to spend time working with customers and producers to ensure a fair price and minimize risk to all parties. Start your planning efforts with one or two restaurants and a handful of products to work out the kinks before going full scale.
- **Encourage customers to buy products that support the whole farm.** Many restaurants feature local products that are high profile and easy to promote – like asparagus, strawberries, and farro. In order to grow these crops consistently at the superior level of quality a chef expects, producers must do crop rotations and take up valuable land for cover crops that improve the soil fertility. These cover crops, which are often fed to animals or tilled under, can be used by chefs in innovative ways. Dan Barber, chef at Blue Hill restaurant in NY and a huge supporter of local foods, wrote “The Third Plate: Field Notes on the Future of Food”, a great book about his own evolution in supporting the whole farm.
- **Get to know staff and owners at each restaurant.** Restaurants are known for their staff turnover. Chances are the chef you are working with this year won't be the chef next year, which makes it vital to establish relationships with others at each restaurant. 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 the house managers also influence purchasing decisions and can provide a vital connection to a new chef.
- **Promote your customers.** Restaurants need diners to thrive. If you can promote their work on your website, social media, and other fronts, it will make everyone's business more profitable. You want to help create a brand for your producers, a name for the restaurants, and yourself for being the go to service for anyone looking for local products. Word of mouth travels fast in the restaurant world.