



Making a Culinary Connection

Imagine flipping open a menu and seeing your farm fare featured. Make that dream a reality by becoming a chef farmer with these tips.

Photo courtesy Rockhill Creamery

Restaurant customers appreciate knowing where their food, such as the cheeses made by Jennifer Hines, comes from. On 2 acres near the seasonal-tourist seaside town of Rehoboth Beach, Del., Bob and Barbara Russell rise to do morning chores as they've done for the last 25 years. They tend an ever-evolving assortment of specialty produce that includes French lettuces and micro greens for nearby restaurants. This is Bob and Barbara's full-time occupation. By afternoon, Barbara changes clothes and delivers the produce to a list of restaurants in their area. She and her husband are often treated as part of the business team by the restaurants. "I enjoy interacting with chefs because we have a common interest," says Bob. "That is, producing and utilizing the freshest, most flavorful vegetables and herbs to create a memorable dining experience."

On the other side of the country, on Lummi Island, Wash., farmer Adam Childs of Nettles Farm talks over the possibility of growing a new herb with a chef.

"The nice thing about my relationship with chef Craig Miller is that we're friends as well as co-workers," Childs says about the chef he works with regularly. "He doesn't give me formal requests for things; it's more that we have loose conversations about different ideas. An example of that is this year, he suggested we try growing peas just for their greens [for a garnish], mâche and Jerusalem artichoke. So far, the pea greens and mâche have been successful. I haven't figured out whether Jerusalem artichoke is going to be a viable option. Often, these loose conversations happen when he comes up to the farm once a week. We walk around the farm and talk about what will be ready for the weekend and what will be coming up for the next week."

Far from both seashores, on a rocky hillside in Richmond, Utah, Rockhill Creamery lists the names of the restaurants serving the artisan cheese produced as their full-time living from just six cows on 5.75 acres. Selling to chefs is an important part of the business for owners Pete Schropp and Jennifer Hines.

Schropp says, "Our farmstand is responsible for a very small portion of our sales—less than 3 percent. But it has proven to be worth all the effort for giving us a place to entertain visiting chefs, store staffs, et cetera. We have a great customer in Pocatello, Idaho. He has a wine bar and bistro. Just before he opened, he was out on a drive looking for local foods (Pocatello is just 70 miles north of here) and stopped by our farmstand one Saturday. He spent an hour seeing the operation, meeting the cows, sampling cheese. When he left, he told us he would call in an order soon. We thought, 'Oh yeah, sure you will.' The next week, he placed his first order and has been one of our greatest customers ever since."

Meet the
Chef Farmers

Nettles Farm
www.nettlesfarm.com

Quillisascut Cheese Company
www.quillisascutcheese.com

Rockhill Creamery
www.rockhillcheese.com These are just three examples of how the artisan and local-food movements have ignited chefs across the nation to do business with local, sustainable producers and how the farmer-chef partnership can contribute good incomes for local farmers on small parcels of land. Chefs have discovered how much better local produce can be. Plus, customers love knowing their restaurant meals support the environment, small farms, local economies and artisan traditions. The benefits for both farmer and restaurant can be significant.

The Pros, the Cons and the Differences

Childs grows for both chefs and a farmers' market. He says there are a few differences between selling to chefs and selling to the general public:

"The produce I grow for the restaurants I know will be purchased and used. [However,] the things I grow for the market ... growing it is only half the job. I still have to sell it. Also, when I go to the Saturday market, I sell more conventional vegetables like lettuce, peas and beans. Working with a chef, I get to grow things like escarole, frisee, hon tsai tai, tat soi



and broccoli raab. He uses these types of vegetables regularly, which at a market might only interest one or two customers.”

If a farmer serves a handful of established chef customers, there’s no need for continual marketing to the general public. And while trends come and go for the general public, chef crops can change even more, allowing a farmer to try growing something new and trendy more often.

Chefs can be eager customers. In the late 1980s and early 90s, it was sort of an odd concept. Today, it’s a huge selling point for restaurants to buy meat, produce and other farm-produced products from local farms and even to name the farm in their menu. But any time a farmer commits to only a few customers—such as five chefs versus the general public—there needs to be security that those few customers won’t change their minds, leaving the farmer with a perishable crop and no market.

Chef farmers may, as Childs does, get to make suggestions to the chef. “Because I’m the one who looks through the seed catalogs and orders the seeds, I’m constantly seeing vegetables that I either haven’t grown or are newly offered. It might be closely related to something we already grow, or it might be something that I just think would look really nice on a plate. The majority of the time, Craig is open to trying anything at least once, especially if it’s something rare or unusual,” Childs says.

Farming for chefs isn’t for everyone. Some farmers love growing backyard favorites and prefer less trendy items.

“Edible flowers were the rage in the 80s and 90s, and have since decreased in popularity,” Russell says. “Fortunately, micro greens have replaced them as a high-profit garnish.”

Some farmers just like to be able to pronounce the crops they grow (hon tsai tai?). And some really like working with the general public, talking with home cooks and inviting kids to the farm. Also, unlike the CSA model, in farming for chefs, the farms don’t share the risk of what nature may drop on them. If hail wipes them out—well, they’re wiped out. But chefs can be similar to CSA and farmers’ market customers in that they can be flexible. If cooler than usual weather allows a longer pea and lettuce season and a later tomato season, they can adapt. And the Russells meet with their chefs every winter to decide what they’ll grow for them the following season. They adapt their upcoming spring planting to what they know the restaurants will want, and they let chefs know as soon as possible if they’re experiencing a problem with any crops. When the farm is listed on the restaurant’s printed menus, that can be another good measure of security. It also makes the farmer accountable as well.