

Distributors offer growers tips on marketing produce

Fresh, local foods appeal to wide array of chefs, buyers

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BEND, Ore. - Trucks and refrigerators may be the machines that get fresh produce to customers, but it's poetry and passion that open the doors.

When representatives of two major Northwest distributors sat down to talk with farmers in Bend in early November, both product and presentation were on their minds.

Moderator Allison Hensey, of the Oregon Environmental Council, co-sponsor of the Cultivating Our Local Food Economy Workshop, described the "romance and poetry" that has made fresh, local produce so popular. She then asked the question, "How do we get beyond 'here's my product'?"

Randy Gerig, of Sysco Food Services of Portland Inc., described his dilemma: "If you expect me to be passionate about what you do for a living, that's going to be difficult."

However, he said, the chefs he often deals with - in restaurants, hospitals, schools and nursing homes - are indeed subject to the "charm and allure of knowing who's managing your food."

"People buy what they know," Gerig said. "They stick with familiar foods. So we try to educate people on how to use different produce."

Sysco sells, markets and distributes food products and equipment through 170-plus locations across the United States and Canada.

Carolyn Cobb, of Duck Delivery, also based in Portland, said her company is the first Food Alliance-certified distributor for sustainable practices in North America.

Duck is a full-service produce delivery distributor serving customers in Oregon and Washington.

"We get lots of requests for local foods, especially from schools," she said. "So our invoices now label the state of origin for each product."

Besides looking specifically for fresh and local, Cobb said, chefs are also becoming sensitive to annual food cycles. "Seasons determine what's on the menu."

Gerig described the other side of that coin. "In the winter, the supply of local produce drops, but the demand is still there.

"Vegetables on the plate used to be just canned or frozen. Let's show how good fresh can be."

Gerig said new products also can open doors. "When Oregon Country Beef featured the flat iron steak, all of a sudden there was a demand."

Cobb acknowledged how economies of scale come into play for small producers. "A network of producers would be beneficial.

"Duck doesn't have any minimums, and we're always looking for more sources."

An unidentified grower asked about the possibility of setting up central points for delivery from farms.

Gerig said Sysco often has its trucks, which would otherwise return empty, pick up produce from farmers.

'In the back door'

"How can growers help educate chefs?" Hensey asked.

Gerig suggested that growers approach chefs the same way they approach customers in farmers' markets: Their stories, pictures, brochures and websites help set them apart.

"People - including chefs - want local because it's good, it tastes better, and it supports the local economy," Gerig said.

An unidentified grower at the workshop asked, "When and how is the best way to contact a chef?"

Gerig said most chefs don't work Sundays or Mondays, and suggested that Wednesdays or Thursdays might work best. "Go in the back door between 9 and 10 a.m. or 2 and 3 p.m. And bring your produce for a taste."

Gary Bishop, of Bishop Farms in Bend, asked about packaging and grading.

"We take care of packaging," Gerig said.

"How about the level of cleanliness and consistent sizes?" Bishop asked.

"Once a chef finds a wonderful flavor, size matters little," Gerig replied.

A woman who identified herself as a local chef described how she works directly with growers: "If I know in advance on sizes and cleanliness, I know how much preparation to expect. I work with a regular client on trimming and packaging. And as long as I know, it's not an issue."

Other sponsors of the daylong workshop were the Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council, the Oregon State University Extension Service and the Central Oregon Environmental Center.

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