



From “Farm to Table:” Wisconsin Chefs Make Sourcing Locally Work for Their Restaurants

by Mary Lou Santovec

Local is touted as the newest trend in food. And many of your customers expect to see it on the menu. Some operators see sourcing locally as a passing fad, but others are embracing it as the new way to do business.

Witness the rise in the words “locally sourced” found on growing numbers of menus. Public Television’s show, *Wisconsin Foodie*, takes viewers to the people and places producing the state’s diverse food culture. And an innovative Wisconsin chef has refined the community-supported agriculture program into a working model for restaurants.

Some Milwaukee-area restaurants like Parkside 23, Roots Restaurant and Cellar and SURG Restaurant Group are even growing their own produce and raising livestock to set themselves apart.

In some ways, Wisconsin is well positioned to embrace local foods. Blessed with abundant natural resources, a variety of terroirs and a history of supporting agriculture, the state provides chefs with interesting products for experimentation and audiences that applaud creativity.

Looking to capitalize on the growing interest in community supported agriculture and to “build a culture of community,” Arthur Ircink, creator and executive producer of *Wisconsin Foodie*, now in its fourth season, explained the show’s philosophy.

“We spend so much time not thinking about what we eat, where we go,” he said. “We should be supporting ourselves. If we give people a good product and a place they can drive to or walk to and experience it, they will ‘get it.’”

Wisconsin Foodie, hosted by foodie personality, Kyle Cherek, is intent on making small businesses and their owners “famous.” “We’re not in it for the money,” said Ircink. “We’re in it for the experience and to create community, to promote people doing good in our neighborhoods. We want to be socially conscious without being heavy-handed.”

Although not a chef by vocation, Cherek came to food through his mother, a Hungarian immigrant. He



Chefs shared their insights on sourcing locally in a Chef Symposium at the 2011 Expo. From left: Moderator Kyle Cherek and participants Dan Van Rite, Peter Sandroni, Dave Swanson, Jan Kelly, Adam Lucks and Jason Gorman.

also credits his grandmother as having a strong culinary influence on him, as well as a chef friend who invited him along after hours when area chefs would cook for each other. “There’s nothing more intuitively tender that you can do than to break bread with someone,” said Cherek.

Wisconsin Foodie differs from similar shows by emphasizing the food producers, not the recipes or the host. “My one criticism of TV food shows is that they’re too ‘citized,’ too urban-centric,” said Cherek. “Once you know the stories [behind the farmers and producers], you have more appreciation for the food you eat.”

Dan Van Rite, chef-owner of Milwaukee’s Hinterland Erie Street gastropub, is certainly influenced by the call of the wild. He locally sources various greens and all his vegetables as well as “co-ops” whole pigs, elk and venison with the Hinterland Brewery in Green Bay and The Whistling Swan (another Hinterland restaurant) in Door County.

For some products, he relies on Deborah Deacon, manager of the Milwaukee Winter Farmer’s Market, for sourcing. Van Rite also builds intentional relationships with farmers including Will Allen of Growing Power, the urban Milwaukee nonprofit land trust.

All of that networking and relationship building takes time. So why does Van Rite do it? In his opinion, “It’s better for the environment, the product is fresher, and you’re keeping it in the

economy close by,” he said. “You’re also helping small farmers out.”

Time and food costs are the two major challenges when transitioning to local ingredients. “Greens are super-expensive,” said Van Rite, “which is a hard thing for people to swallow.” And the potential of liability influences the decisions of many operators. When a processor and/or a distributor are in between the farmer and the restaurateur, they share responsibilities and liabilities for product information and safety.

At the 2011 Wisconsin Restaurant Expo’s Culinary Theater, Van Rite joined a panel of Milwaukee area chefs who talked about their experiences sourcing and utilizing local foods. The panel featured Jan Kelly, chef-owner of Meritage, Peter Sandroni, chef-owner of La Merenda, Jason Gorman, executive chef at Smyth at the Iron Horse Hotel, Adam Lucks, chef-owner of Honeypie and Comet Cafés, and Dave Swanson, chef-owner of Braise on the Go and creator of Braise RSA, a restaurant supported agriculture program. *Wisconsin Foodie*’s Cherek moderated the panel.

When Sandroni opened La Merenda, he intentionally included sourcing local foods in his

business plan. “We felt we needed to support the community,” he said.

But there were other motives too, notably the differences in freshness and flavor of local foods as well as the relationships that arise between the farmers, customers and the chefs.

“If you find a great ingredient, you want to find a way to use it in your restaurant,” said Cherek. “You want to introduce a new ingredient to your diner’s palate.”

“What comes fresh out of the ground is so much better,” said Meritage’s Kelly.



Dan Van Rite, Chef/Owner of Milwaukee gastropub Hinterland, talked about local ingredients while doing a demo in the Culinary Theater.

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Culinary students from MATC-Milwaukee join Peter Sandroni, Chef/Owner of La Merenda in Milwaukee, in preparing rustic goat cheese galette using locally sourced whole wheat flour and cheese.

“It has a better flavor profile.” But for her, the decision to source locally is more than just good tasting products. It’s the right thing to do. “They are families trying to make a living and [their products are] something I use everyday,” she said. “It’s very gratifying. It makes me feel good in a way that cooking makes me feel good.”

When he joined Smyth, Gorman set out to develop an identity for his food. “It’s a craft,” he said. “We love to be creative.” His signature “New Wisconsin Cuisine” and use of local ingredients features a modern perspective on Wisconsin traditions.

“I don’t know if it’s bringing people in because of the local ingredients,” Gorman admitted, “but it just tastes better.”

To overcome the practical challenges of sourcing locally, Swanson started Braise RSA with an initial \$25,000

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– Andrew Zimmern

grant from the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture Trade and Consumer Protection. Starting with one farm and four restaurant members, Braise RSA had a walk-in cooler where Swanson aggregated product, letting interested restaurateurs know what he had. Now he stocks a warehouse and counts more than 20 chefs and over 400 farmers among his members.

“We contract with farmers to grow 20,000 onions for Braise,” he said. “If you tell a farmer what to produce, they will produce it for you. The network is more important than the product.”

Liability issues have also kept some operators from embracing local food. Big distributors carry significant insurance against food-borne illnesses. But as Kelly noted, “We treat Braise RSA like any other vendor.” Whatever source you use, it’s important to ask questions about liability insurance coverage and about “Good Agricultural Practices” that ensure food safety.

Wisconsin operators will

A Few Words with Andrew Zimmern

Keynoting the 2011 Wisconsin Restaurant Expo, Chef Andrew Zimmern, host of the Travel Channel’s award-winning show *Bizarre Foods with Andrew Zimmern*, demonstrated he’s not just a media star. He also made an appearance at the Culinary Theater at the Expo preparing two of his favorite dishes: salt and pepper shrimp and black bean spare ribs. Both recipes, acquired during his travels, are ones he cooks for friends and family.

This Minnesotan, a transplant from New York City, has some definite opinions about sourcing locally. “I don’t think it’s a trend,” he said. “This is the way the world has been cooking for thousands of years—America has perverted it. The rest of the world cooks like this.”

With all his travels, Zimmern has encountered some truly bizarre meals including some he never wants to eat again. Definitely off the menu are the fermented shark he encountered in Iceland and fermented meats in general.

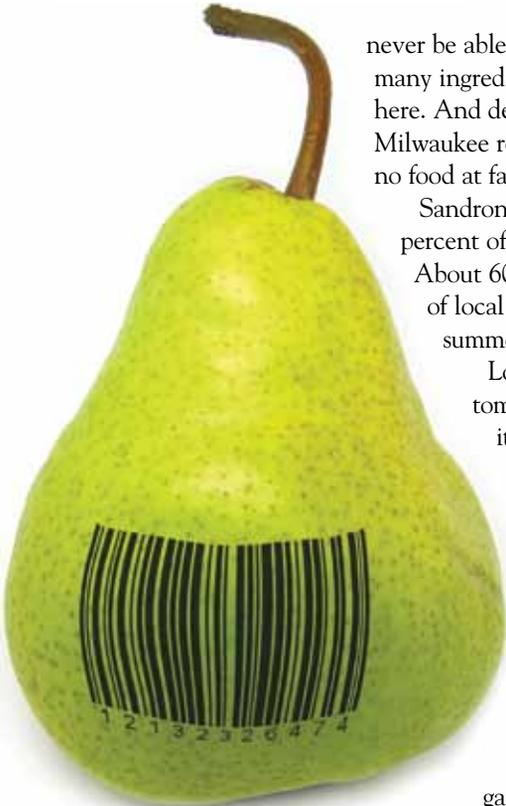
Ask chefs what they would want for their very last meal and you’re bound to encounter some interesting responses. For Zimmern, the menu ran the gamut from surf to turf and included a few surprises. “I’d start with a shellfish platter with good crab and lobster, and pretzel rolls with freshly grated horseradish. Then I’d like a mid-summer Bibb lettuce salad with buttermilk dressing, crushed black peppercorns and heirloom cherry tomatoes.”

“My entrée would be wild African kudu steak, grilled rare, asparagus with Hollandaise sauce and for dessert, butterscotch pots d’crème, a cheese plate, fruit and a root beer float.” Sounds like a well-rounded choice.



Andrew Zimmern’s inspiring keynote address kicked off the 2011 Wisconsin Restaurant Expo.

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never be able to buy locally 100 percent of the time since many ingredients like chocolate and salt are not produced here. And demand would outstrip supply. "If every Milwaukee restaurant wanted to source locally, there'd be no food at farmers' markets," said Swanson.

Sandroni of La Merenda estimated he sourced 58 percent of his orders locally during February alone. About 60 percent of Meritage's menu is comprised of local foods. Both percentages increase during the summer months.

Local greens, herbs or vegetables, especially tomatoes, are the most frequently requested items. But Wisconsin farmers are also growing unusual items such as aronia, Russian quince and hickory nuts. "You learn to adjust and be flexible on what you get," said Kelly.

Whether it's building your entire menu around the concept, working with local farmers or just getting seasonal vegetables at the farmer's market, restaurant operators need to figure out what works for them. Some operators find it enjoyable and economical to plant a small garden to supply their restaurant with seasonal herbs and vegetables.

Lucks of Honeypie and Comet Cafés started with ground beef. "We have consistent menu items," he said. "We get more comments about the quality of the food. Food is only as good as the ingredients you put into it."

For operators who want to begin the transition, the chefs offered some suggestions. "Work with people near you who are interested in working with you," said Swanson.

Lucks advocates attacking the issue one vegetable or product at a time. Don't try to transition everything on your menu.

"Start with what you can afford to do, what's on your menu that you're comfortable with," said Sandroni. "Don't take even the most minuscule ingredient for granted."

The trend toward local may be here to stay. *Wisconsin Foodie's* Ircink says "If it's a trend, I hope it's sustainable... you're supporting people in Wisconsin." **WR**

New Ideas and Inspiration Found at the 2011 Wisconsin Restaurant Expo

The 2011 Wisconsin Restaurant Expo, held March 21-23, was three days filled with exhibits, events and idea sharing opportunities for folks in the foodservice industry. "The positive energy and camaraderie at the Expo was so strong you could feel it," says Ada Lara Thimke, owner Lara's Tortilla Flats in Oshkosh. "It was a fantastic experience that was well worth my time."

The Expo's Culinary Theater was a popular attraction with attendees looking for new ideas and inspiration. This new Expo offering was made possible by the Wisconsin Restaurant Association, *Wisconsin Foodie*, Beer Capitol, Lakefront Brewery, Tenth and Blake Beer Company and many equipment donors.

The Culinary Theater featured successful area chefs demonstrating favorite dishes and sharing the recipes with attendees.

Visit everythingfoodservice.org for the chef's recipes and more about the Wisconsin Restaurant Expo. Save the date for 2012: March 12-14.

The Culinary Theater also included the chef symposium (featured in the preceding article) with six Milwaukee-area operators who are passionate about using local ingredients in their restaurants.



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