



## Direct Marketing Strategies

# Selling to Restaurants

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Restaurants and caterers can be a great place to sell products that are high quality, interesting and unusual. Washington State has many innovative chefs looking for unique products that they can incorporate into outstanding meals. Products that are hard to find through mainstream food suppliers, like heirloom or heritage products tend to be in higher demand. Likewise, products that are available early or late in the season or through the winter tend to be in higher demand. Specialty caterers can also provide an excellent opportunity for farmers to sell products and form custom grower relationships. Many caterers will do forward contracting with producers for significant quantities farm products and flowers at premium prices.

There are roughly 12,500 restaurants in Washington according to the Washington Restaurant Association ([www.warestaurant.org](http://www.warestaurant.org)). Many of these restaurants are independently owned and operated and tend to be the best place for farmers to start. While most chain restaurants depend solely on large distributors and have standard menus that depend on regular deliveries of a limited number of fresh ingredients, the opportunity to provide for the needs of an independent restaurateur are much greater. Seek out those establishments that offer daily or weekly specials or seasonal menus to increase the likelihood of finding a good partner. A chef that values the benefits of local sourcing and is willing to take the extra steps to develop a relationship with the farmer is the best guarantee of success.

However, the producer must understand their responsibilities in this business association. Whether providing a single ingredient for a special event or supplying a vast array of produce for the menu, the grower needs to understand the interdependence of supply and expectations in the kitchen. A strong partnership is enhanced when the farmer tends toward “under promising and over delivering.” When a chef has certain expectations and a dining room filled with anxious diners, you do not want to be the cause for added stress. Quality and consistency are the keys to success.

Chefs are best approached by calling ahead and making an appointment, especially in the morning. Do not call at meal times. Take samples to your appointment for the chef to try. Your job is to

- share what variety of products you have;
- when you will have them;
- the quantities that will be available;
- minimal processing and packing options;
- any timing parameters;
- the best way to get in touch with you; and
- your price.

Developing a spreadsheet or list of the products you will have throughout a year and highlighting what you have fresh each week are also valuable planning and communication tools.

Chefs will often be interested in your growing practices and “the story of your farm.” Sharing this information helps build your relationship. It may also lead to opportunities to highlight your farm on their menu or partner in other promotions.

Farmers selling to restaurants will need to establish good bookkeeping systems that include clear invoicing and accounts receivable. Most restaurants will not pay on delivery and may pay monthly. It is important to keep track of deliveries and always be sure to get a signed invoice in duplicate. File one copy for yourself.

### **Benefits of Selling Directly to Restaurants**

- Great market for smaller quantities of high quality items.
- Creates an opportunity to build a strong relationship between the farm and chef.
- Farm may be highlighted on the menu and in the media.
- Higher price point is often available.
- Can take non-standard sizes and products may not have to be graded.

### **Challenges of Selling Directly to Restaurants**

- Farms need to be in constant communication with restaurants which can take a lot of time.
- It may be difficult to match delivery times with restaurant needs.
- Farm must deliver high quality product every time.
- Farm may not be able to sell enough quantity to make it work.
- Must be able to have clear invoicing and detailed accounting.

The annual Farmer Fisher-Chef Connection Conference hosted by the Seattle Chefs Collaborative brings together regional food producers and buyers for business-to-business networking, presentations and workshops. The conference is typically held in February or March in Seattle. Please see [www.seattlechefs.org](http://www.seattlechefs.org) for more information.

In addition, the National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service (ATTRA) has an overview on “Selling to Restaurants” available free online: [www.attra.ncat.org](http://www.attra.ncat.org).

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## **Recommended Fact Sheets**

- 4. Licensing
- 7. Insurance
- 19. WSDA Food Processor License and Facilities

*For further information, to provide comments, or suggest a resource to add to this fact sheet, please email [smallfarms@agr.wa.gov](mailto:smallfarms@agr.wa.gov) or call (360) 902-2888.*