

FoodHub in the News



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By Deborah Kane

What is FoodHub?

A new website makes it easy for growers and buyers to meet

Portland, OR – When describing [FoodHub](#), a new online directory and marketplace for regional food buyers and sellers, I often recount a conversation I had a few years back with a retail grocery buyer. This grocery buyer was frustrated. She wanted to support regional farmers, but often didn't know where to go to find suitable farm partners for her store.

“Why can't I just walk to my computer, type in the word ‘cranberry,’ and get a list of all the cranberry producers that might want to do business with our stores?” she wondered aloud.

Why indeed? This conversation was, in many respects, the start of FoodHub.

To test the theory that it's hard to find local farmers on the Internet, I recently sat down at my computer and typed in the word “broccoli.”

Google: Did you mean “broccoli?” (Why yes, I did, thank you.)

There were 4.2 million results for “broccoli.” Among the highlights: Wikipedia informed me that broccoli is a plant of the cabbage family *Brassicaceae*; Cooks.com let me know that if my broccoli turns olive-green in color I've overcooked it; BBC News encouraged consumption of broccoli at least once a week to reduce the risk of prostate cancer; and I learned that Erin Broccoli is on Facebook.

Demand for local food is at an all-time high; but time-pressed chefs and professional food buyers, even the most committed, really can't spare the time to wade through 4.2 million unqualified search results, let alone 100.

So we designed FoodHub to make it easy and efficient for regional food buyers and sellers to find each other, connect, and do business. Today a search for “broccoli” on FoodHub yields nine farmers, five of whom deliver direct and four whose broccoli is available through mainline distributors. Additional information such as certifications held, acreage, and whether they have liability insurance, among other details specific to each farm, is also available.

And finally — perhaps most importantly — these broccoli farmers and all their counterparts on FoodHub get to tell their stories. FoodHub makes it possible to share the rich stories behind our food: the names of the farmers' kids, what led the farm family to switch to organic practices, how they knew when to harvest the cherries for maximum sweetness, which cow took the blue ribbon at the county fair. These, in turn, provide a crucial competitive advantage to all those who merchandise local food.

FoodHub is a tool for local, small-scale growers to market their wares to buyers.

Membership in FoodHub costs \$100 per year and is open to food buyers and sellers of all kinds throughout Oregon, Washington, Alaska, Idaho, Montana, and California. Members create online profiles that include contact info, products they buy or sell, preferred methods for doing business, and many other useful details.

FoodHub has more than 3,000 items in its pantry. The site supports direct market relationships and leverages existing distribution channels to encourage growth in regional food sales. Sophisticated search capabilities allow buyers, both large and small, to instantly discover ready suppliers. Conversely, sellers can use FoodHub's search features to identify new buyer leads and build targeted customer databases.

In addition to its search and connect functions, FoodHub can professionalize communications and transactions between parties with its message center, preferred contacts feature, and standardized purchase orders and invoices. But by far the most popular page within FoodHub to date is the Marketplace. Much like a Craig's List for food, buyers and sellers post immediate needs and opportunities in FoodHub's Marketplace. Consider the following posts recently placed on FoodHub:

Local Baker Looking for Rhubarb: We are in search of local rhubarb for pie season. We prefer once a week deliveries to our North Portland Bakery. We need 250 – 350 pounds per week while in season (April – July). Please email through FoodHub to provide us with more information.

Artisan Cheese Coming out of the Caves: Our newest blue cheese – Caveman Blue will be ready to release from our caves within the next two weeks. Contact us now for information about ordering.

Soft White Spring Flour Now Available: We grow our wheat along the Willamette River, a guarantee for exceptional taste. You can buy the wheat berries for use in soups and salads or the freshly ground flour upon orders (1 lb and up). Flour is great for pastries like cookies, cakes and more.

Caterer in Search of Farmer: Grow for us! Looking to contract with local farmers for ingredients for our products. Specifically, we used approx 3,000lbs of Roma & and 750lbs of butternut squash in 2009 as well as zucchini and eggplant.

Blueberries Wanted: We are looking to buy fresh grown blueberries from Skagit, Whatcom, and Snohomish county in WA. Will buy fresh and field packed blueberries; 100-200lb/week during the season for resale at our farm stand. Berries must be sustainably raised.

Do Your Products Need a Ride? We deliver ice cream in our freezer truck from Bellingham to Seattle/Eastside, San Juan Islands, Skagit Valley, Port Townsend to Port Angeles. We would be willing to deliver your frozen goods along our regular routes for a nominal trip charge.

Restaurant Wants Farmer to Grow Habaneras: Looking to contract with local farmer(s) to purchase entire season's crop. We use approx 80+ bushels per year. You can process/store or we can. Let's Talk! We also need suppliers for market season - tomatoes, tomatillos, onions, jalapenos and cilantro.

In retrospect, I think we had a bit of an “if we build it they will come” sensibility during the design of FoodHub. But in the six weeks since its launch, FoodHub’s membership has grown to just under 400 members, with prisons, schools, caterers, food carts, grocers, restaurants, and others connecting with farmers, ranchers, cheese makers, vintners, fishermen, and prepared-foods makers, among many others.

The height of harvest season is still weeks, if not months, away, and already FoodHub is buzzing with activity destined to result in sales and new relationships for FoodHub members. And that was exactly our goal.

Deborah Kane is the vice president of Food & Farms at Ecotrust and the publisher of Edible Portland magazine. She was recently selected by Fast Company magazine as one of the top 10 most inspiring people working in sustainable food.

URL: http://www.culinate.com/articles/opinion/what_is_foodhub