

# FoodHub in the News



**Oregonian FoodDay**

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By Leslie Cole

## **FoodHub is fast becoming the “Facebook of local food”**

**PORTLAND, OR** – Remember life before Facebook? Someday, Northwest farmers and chefs might say that about FoodHub, an interactive online tool launched in February by the Portland-based nonprofit Ecotrust. The site ([www.ecotrust.org/foodhub](http://www.ecotrust.org/foodhub)) pairs food service professionals who want to buy local food with growers and processors wanting to sell it. With a new version of the online marketplace set to be released in a few weeks, we decided to get the details from Deborah Kane, Ecotrust’s vice-president of food and farms.

### **Q: What is FoodHub?**

**A:** FoodHub is a new online directory and marketplace that makes it possible for regional food buyers and sellers -- professionals, not consumers -- to quickly and easily find each other, connect and do business. Some people call it the Facebook of local food, or the Match.com for food buyers and food sellers.

### **Q: How many users do you have, and who are they?**

**A:** As of today (Aug. 19) FoodHub boasts 611 members. On the buyer side it’s everybody from restaurants to caterers to hospitals to schools to resorts. On the seller side, it’s anyone large or small producing or processing food in the Northwest, from fruits and vegetables to dairy, meat and fish. It’s big packers and processors, little companies making jams or pickles, wineries and distilleries. And it’s not just for the certified organic operator; it’s for Northwest agriculture of all kinds.

### **Q: How does it work?**

**A:** Buyers and sellers purchase an annual membership (\$100) and create an online profile -- who you are and how you like to do business. A restaurant might talk about products they like to buy and say, “We receive deliveries on Tuesdays and Thursdays between 6 and 9 a.m.; we need to have orders locked in by Friday noon.”

On the seller’s side, they might talk about minimum order amounts, payment information and give detailed information about specific products they have for sale. There’s also information about seasonality, a chart that shows what’s possible to buy at certain times of the year.

### **Q: Walk me through a transaction.**

**A:** If you’re a buyer looking for corn, you type in the word corn, add a specific variety if you want, and FoodHub will return a list of all the people in the system with corn in their profile, both buyers

and sellers. We want to give users a search result as well as encourage networking.

Then there's a feature called Marketplace; it's the Craigslist of the local food system, where people post information about time-sensitive opportunities. For example, today I see a post saying, "We have arugula ready to go right now. Deliver in Seattle area. Must move. 10 to 15 pounds available." The post right under it is from Nostrana (restaurant), seeking 15 pounds of eggplant, any variety, and two cases of sweet corn, delivered by Aug. 21.

The FoodHub community uses Marketplace for all kinds of things, like transportation needs. An ice cream maker in Puget Sound was running refrigerated trucks into Seattle for deliveries, then coming home empty. It was looking for someone to use that refrigerated space on the return trips. A Willamette Valley seed grower had lost all his beet stock in the freeze, and did a shout-out to all the farmers in valley, looking for storage beets.

**Q: Is anything else out there like this?**

**A:** Print directories for local (wholesale) food buyers and sellers exist across the country. People all over are trying to create closer connections, but I know of only a handful that have taken the next step and brought it online. As a result, we're getting phone calls left and right from people who are curious whether or not it would be possible to export FoodHub into their region. We decided to build FoodHub with open-source technology so it could be easily transferred and adapted by local experts once they got the baseline platform from us. But we're very committed to making sure FoodHub hums in the Pacific Northwest. It'll be at least a year before we focus on sharing the information.

**Q: The new version of FoodHub comes out in a few weeks. What's different?**

**A:** We'll be unveiling FoodHub 2.0 at the Oregon Restaurant and Lodging Association annual meeting in Bend on Sept. 19. The site will have a new look, and the home page is being redesigned to include a lot more information, things like, "So you want to buy local food? Watch this tutorial," or "Look at these 10 best practices."

When we launched FoodHub in February we thought we had a pretty robust list of products that could potentially be for sale in our region. It took about 24 hours for the first FoodHub member to tell us we forgot this one variety of leek, or missed two varieties of parsnips even though we had nine. The taxonomy, or the list of products, has probably tripled since we launched.

So version 2.0 has a much improved and streamlined product management interface. The school food service director who wants basic apples and asparagus can ask for that, but the chef who wants Jersey Knight asparagus and Cortland apples can specify his needs down to variety.

We're going to continue to roll out new features every month, such as more matchmaking for FoodHub users. We'll have a feature that notifies by e-mail all the eggplant producers, for instance, when a post from someone looking for eggplant goes up. We'll give suggestions about how to increase chances that a user's profile will be viewed.

**Q: Where do you see it going from here?**

**A:** I'd like FoodHub to look at distribution amounts and transportation efficiency. You'll have five farmers that are running the same route into Portland. We feel like we have an opportunity to really

start playing with how we can maximize efficiencies. So that maybe instead of five trucks, we can get it down to two. Those five farmers may not even realize they're running the same route, but we can see it in our system.

**Q: What are some of the strangest things you've seen posted on FoodHub?**

**A:** Somebody came into the marketplace and said, "Does anyone want my excess duck fat? Will sell cheap, or work out a trade." Right now I see: "Need 17.5 pounds of chicken livers." "Seeking local octopus." "Sun-cured candy sweet onions for sale." "It's not too early to order your gourmet lamb or your Thanksgiving turkey."

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URL: [http://www.oregonlive.com/foodday/index.ssf/2010/08/buyers\\_sellers\\_dig\\_into\\_foodhu.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/foodday/index.ssf/2010/08/buyers_sellers_dig_into_foodhu.html)