

FoodHub in the News



Willamette Week

October 13, 2010

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Grow Food, Will Travel

How rancher Scot Laney became Oregon's alternative food taxi service.

For farmer and rancher Phil Greif, the thought of saving \$600 every week was far too tempting to ignore.

That's how much he'd spend in one weekend, driving his vegetables and grass-fed beef four hours west to sell at Portland farmers markets from his home near La Grande. "We'd spend two nights in a hotel, pay for gas and meals. It was \$600 just going down and back," Greif says.

So when Greif spoke to another rancher, Scot Laney, about how he could keep that money in the bank and spend his time farming instead, Greif paid attention.

Months before, Laney, a self-described "serial entrepreneur," had been selling meat from his own cattle to restaurants and specialty retailers in Portland. He realized he could easily add other Oregon farmers' items to his truck—folks who were similarly dedicated to quality and stewardship of the environment, but had struggled with the time and expense they'd put into getting their goods to the Portland market.

With Laney's thought, a company was born—Eat Oregon First.

The company has been around for about 16 months, and is filling a critical need for Oregon farmers as well as buyers wanting to purchase artisan-quality goods, says Deborah Kane, Ecotrust's vice president of food and farms and creator of the food networking site FoodHub. Laney and Greif were first introduced via FoodHub.

"Distribution is the single largest barrier to the growth of the regional food economy," Kane says. FoodHub lets buyers and sellers of all sizes post their wish lists and availability lists, but transportation is up to them to arrange. Up until recently, restaurants and chefs wanting to order local, small-operation farm products had few choices—have the farmer truck it in themselves or buy what the big-truck wholesalers like Sysco might have in their giant warehouses.

"We're like the taxi service for FoodHub," Laney says.

Most of what he sells comes from his own land, the Basque Ranch in Tygh Valley, near Pendleton, or from a small fleet of fishing boats out of Garibaldi. That might not always be the case because he's adding new items—like Greif's sun-cured Candy Sweet onions and garlic scapes—with increasing regularity. The company has eight employees, who answer phones, take orders and make deliveries, and is slowly adding on to the six farms it works with currently.

The operation is blending the line between farmer and distributor—incorporating some of the positive practices of industrial, macro-food giants like Sysco and US Foodservice, while only selling small-production Oregon items within days of harvest, Laney says.

“Not everything about corporate food is bad—just at that giant level,” he says. Laney explains that he offers farmers healthy prices for volume while competing in the Portland restaurant and retail market. So far, he's supplying around 20 chefs and specialty retail customers.

Piper Davis, the cuisine director at Grand Central Bakery in Portland, says the prices the bakery's been paying for Laney's Oregon albacore tuna are definitely competitive. Grand Central has spent years developing relationships with farmers, and when Laney approached her with high-quality fish at a reasonable price, it was hard to ignore. GCB smokes it and puts it into a sandwich. “He's filling the niche—he sees the hole that's there in transportation,” says Davis.

Laney hopes he can make Oregon products more affordable, though he knows they will never be as cheap as industrially produced food. “What we want to do is lower the cost of local foods—it's economically exclusive right now,” he says. Eat Oregon First does it by buying local goods in volume and parceling them out, which brings the wholesale cost down for customers like Davis. He's careful, though, to visit new suppliers before putting their goods on his truck, making sure there's no “greenwashing” (exaggerating or deceptively selling something as “green” or “good for the environment”) going on. “Now chefs are asking us, ‘What else can you find?’ That's because they trust our eye,” he says.

That trust translates to demand: When Laney added eggs to the list of products available, he was overwhelmed by the response from customers. “There were orders for about 100 dozen more than we actually had,” he says.

Kane says she's thrilled that Laney's watched what's developed on FoodHub and is filling an obvious need, but isn't sure what he's doing is particularly newsworthy. Really, he's another guy, in a truck, pulling up to the back door of a kitchen.

“He doesn't fit the mainline description, only because he's new. But he's a distributor. That's what he does,” she says.

But Peter de Garmo, owner of PastaWorks, sees it another way. The four PastaWorks locations receive deliveries from four to six individual meat producers and probably 12 to 16 separate produce farmers every week and have begun to carry several Eat Oregon First items like Basque Ranch beef, honey, salmon and flour.

“What I see him doing is creating a parallel food distribution system. It won’t overturn the industrial system, but it’s an alternative,” de Garmo says. Laney is strengthening the informal system that connects products directly to stores, he adds.

“[Laney] brought some of the most amazing salmon I’ve ever seen, and at fair prices—it literally flies off the shelf in a matter of a weekend,” de Garmo says. He’s hopeful Laney’s unique business will continue to thrive and possibly divert dollars away from big-scale food producers and distributors.

“He’s really focusing on the regional food network,” de Garmo says. “It’s very daring in some ways—helping us break our dependence on national distribution chains.”

MORE: Eat Oregon First products can be found at Tabla Bistro, Nostrana and Lincoln restaurants, all PastaWorks locations and all Grand Central Bakery locations, among others. Visit eatoregonfirst.com or call 597-7030 for information.

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