

FoodHub in the News



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By Diane Dietz

Culinary Connection

FoodHub is an online resource linking area food buyers with the region's farmers and food processors

EUGENE, OREGON – The pledge at Adam's Sustainable Table is to serve wholesome, unadulterated organic and local foods.

This spring, under chef Melissa Williams wanted Oregon cranberries to sprinkle on salads. She knew they existed, grown in bogs around Coos Bay. "Somebody must be drying them," she remembers thinking.

Ordinarily, finding a new local food would mean a multi-hour quest, involving many phone calls. But this time she tapped into the newly created regional FoodHub internet site — and instantly posted her desire for cranberries before an audience of hundreds of farmers, food processors and other suppliers.

That's how she learned that Hummingbird Wholesale — only 10 blocks from the restaurant — not only stocked the cranberries, but also dried them locally and finished them with a touch of Oregon blackberry honey.

"It's hysterical to me how the connections can be happening a mile apart or 100 miles apart," said Deborah Kane, a project director at the Portland-based Ecotrust, which founded FoodHub.

FoodHub is a virtual marketplace launched in February and intended to re-create a regional economy for meat, vegetables and other foodstuffs by linking wholesale buyers and sellers in Oregon, Washington, Alaska, Montana, Idaho and California.

The project sits at the apex of at least a half dozen social movements:

The FoodHub gets more local foods into the locavores' grocery stores. It serves the farm-to-school movement by helping food service directors find local foods in quantities they need. It can mean that food travels fewer miles between farm and table, reducing green house gases.

The FoodHub also allows for smaller-scale food production, which some regard as safer than larger multi-state operations. And chefs are insisting on the delicate colors and flavors of vegetable varieties that no longer have to be bred for sturdiness to withstand long-haul shipping.

Offered fresh this week on FoodHub: late season green beans, chestnuts, winter squash, Jonagold apples, apple-finished pork, and gourmet lamb to be butchered in November.

“It’s getting pretty exciting to grow a lot of food in Oregon, sell it in Oregon and Washington — and people no longer have to buy from China,” said James Henderson, farm liaison with Hummingbird Wholesale. “Farmers are taking better care of the land, and we’re making a living, so it’s all good, good, good.”

The tighter the farmer-buyer-consumer cycle, the greater the potential for profit for the region.

The Willamette Farm and Food Coalition estimates that Lane County residents spend \$1 billion on food annually. Today, only 3 percent of that stays with local farmers.

“Every connection that gets made on the FoodHub,” Kane said, “is a sale that didn’t leave the region.”

The FoodHub was created with grants from federal, state and local government — including from the Eugene Water & Electric Board, which was an early supporter.

Businesses pay \$100 a year to use the site, although many have been offered scholarships to jump start the system. So far, more than 620 buyers and sellers have signed up.

Kane expects the FoodHub will be self-supporting on fees alone in about two years.

Forging links

Creating an Internet link between farmers and restaurateurs was an obvious move, Kane said, because each group is dependent on the other’s success. But the link didn’t arise in the ether the way that other business sites do.

“The food and ag community, they’re kind of late adopters,” Kane said. “Think of where they’re operating physically. Farmers are in fields; chefs are in kitchen.

“On the chef’s side, it has largely been a fax-and-phone kind of business. I would say the same is true on the farm side,” she said.

The FoodHub designers had to consider how much business information the farmers — who had historically been relatively private — would be willing to share on the web, Kane said.

The FoodHub offers a lot of choice, she said. “Their profile is theirs to manage. They’re sharing as much or as little as they feel comfortable with,” she said.

Linda Davies, a manager at Winter Green Farm at Noti, said the FoodHub is pretty comfortable to use.

“If I send a message out — whoever responds to me, it’s not public. If five farmers respond to me, the other farmers don’t know who has responded to me. It’s all like regular, closed e-mail. It’s all individual. You have to make personal contacts and then do your business.”

The buyers

Buyers on FoodHub so far include 35 bakeries, 46 caterers, 19 colleges or universities, 42 food service contractors, 48 grocery stores, 14 hospitals or other health facilities, 92 restaurants and 73 public schools — from Burgerville to Eugene School District to the Oregon State Prison.

“You have all these food service directors in the state of Oregon who really didn’t know where to begin,” Kane said. “FoodHub has given them a place to start.

“They can come into the site and immediately type in arugula or tomato or carrots — or whatever it is they’re looking for — and get a really nice list of qualified producers that might be in their area.”

The FoodHub database lists 2,000 products, including all the standard vegetables and meats, plus venison, beers and spices.

In July, chef Williams at Adam’s Sustainable Table used the FoodHub to locate enough rocket greens for 350 plates when catering the International Pinot Noir conference in McMinnville.

This week the restaurant has posted a call for goat butter.

Banquet chef Tim Hill at the Lane Community College conference center joined FoodHub a week ago and said he hopes to buy a lot of local foods.

“Sustainability is a key point of our business. We would really like to do anything we can do to help the local economy and to cut down on carbon emissions. It’s a better product, too, almost always.”

Tim Stevens, co-owner of Vanilla Jill’s frozen yogurt at the Coburg Station, said he sources everything he can locally. His FoodHub profile said he buys a dozen items including eggs, almonds, hardy kiwi and rhubarb.

Chef Eric Bertrand at Ratatouille bistro at Crescent Village in North Eugene said the FoodHub is a great concept. “I made connections with some people I really enjoy. And I found some new suppliers for me,” he said. “I go at least once a week to check on what’s going on there.”

The sellers

The FoodHub’s sellers include 11 bakeries, five breweries, 15 dairies, 241 farmers, 23 fishermen, 14 wineries and 98 food processors or manufacturers.

They seek links with specific buyers, or — when they have an oversupply of a certain crop — they post their produce on the FoodHub’s marketplace, for instance: “I’ve got 500 pounds of late season heirlooms. Call with your best offer.”

Some of the sales have been mind blowing for long-time farmers, Kane said. This week, for example, the Woodburn School District sought 700 pounds of carrots.

“We keep hearing story after story from farmers who never imagined in a million years that they would be selling to schools,” Kane said. “That was a market that went away a long time ago as the nation commodified the products that were being sent to schools.”

Farmer David Hoyle of Creative Growers in Noti already had buyers for most of his crop of heirloom vegetables this year, but he signed up and created a profile for his company on FoodHub.

“We sat back fisherman-style,” he said. “We were asking ‘Who was out there that we weren’t working with, who was flying under our radar and who would see our profile (and) take a bite.’”

The listing brought him three new accounts.

Future business opportunities will be made plain when the FoodHub aggregates all the supplies and all the demands at the site's first-year anniversary. Already, Kane can see unfulfilled demand for all things poultry.

"Eggs. Absolutely. Free range eggs. Farm fresh eggs. People can't get enough chickens. They can't get enough eggs," she said.

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