

WHY LOCAL FOOD?

Reliance on seasonal, local food builds food security by ensuring continued local food production. It also supports local economic development by recirculating dollars; saves local farmland; provides fresher, tastier food; and lowers fossil fuel use and subsequent pollution by lessening the global transportation of food.

INTRODUCTION

These guidelines were developed for conference organizers, meeting planners, or event coordinators who are interested in supporting local farmers and highlighting the local or regional flavor in the meals served.

While serving local foods can be a challenge, the rewards of positive impressions among attendees and the boost to the local agricultural economy can also be significant. While the primary focus of these guidelines is on the food served at the meeting, consider other special events or ways you can feature local foods.

When contracting with the conference or meeting site, consider what needs to be done to access, prepare and serve local foods. Also consider finding a local recipient for food not used at each meal. By planning ahead and finding the appropriate contacts, you will be able to improve the likelihood that local foods will be served. The following ideas will guide your planning.

INITIAL CONTACTS

When deciding on the meeting site, raise the following points in your discussions with potential facilities

- Say that your organization is interested in supporting the local food system – farmers, food processors, farmer’s markets, etc.
- Ask if menus are flexible enough to take use locally produced food that is available at the time of the meeting.
- Ask if unserved food can be donated to a local agency such as a food bank, food pantry or soup kitchen.
- Request that local foods be highlighted on the menu.

THE CONTRACT

When signing a contract with a facility, consider including some or all of the points listed above.

ACTIONS

Identify a member(s) of your organization who can help make local contacts.

Consider an off-site special event or non-food service event such as door prizes or auctions that feature local food, wine, and regional cuisine.

If you supply a list of local restaurants to meeting attendees, identify any that support local farmers and processors.

Contact the local agriculture agency (state department or Ministry of Agriculture) and/ or the local Cooperative Extension offices to learn about what foods are available locally. Ask for lists of farmer markets, small farms or directories of locally produced and processed foods.

Contact the local Cooperative Extension office for educators or specialists who can help you find supplies of local foods.

Include local food products such as breads, wines, juices, milk and cheeses, eggs, seafood, and meats in addition to local produce.

Contact small farm associations, direct farm marketing associations, food policy associations, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) networks, food processor associations or farmer’s market associations. These groups are all excellent sources of information about local foods.

Get in touch with Chefs Collaborative, a network of chefs interested in promoting the use of local foods. A chef in your area may be of great assistance. More information on this group is available at www.chefnet.com

Honor the chef publicly and thank those who helped make local foods available. Also, chefs often are open to saying a few words about the food.

DONATING FOOD

Identify a local food bank, food pantry, soup kitchen or other agency that can make use of the donated food.

Ensure that local ordinances allow for food donations without liability and that the facility is aware of local health department guidelines or regulations regarding proper procedures for donated food. This may involve changing procedures on serving food so that unserved food is safe to donate.

For more information on donating food, refer to the document on donating food at www.chefnet.com/cc2k/html/donate.html. This document contains specific reference to the US federal legislation, the Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act.

EDUCATING MEETING ATTENDEES

It is important to let meeting attendees know about your efforts. A paragraph in your program about the steps you took to serve local foods will be of interest to those at the meeting. Information on printed menus about where the food was grown or produced will lead to interesting and educational conversations.

For buffet service, consider placing signage next to the food to identify its specific source. For example, a sign could say: “These organic salad greens came from Rabbit Run Farm.”



CASE STUDIES

Farm to Table Conference Evergreen State College, Olympia, WA March 2000

WSU Cooperative Extension agent Curtis Beus was the conference coordinator, assisted in local food coordination by farmer Caryn Robertson, chef Tom French, and many volunteers.

Wine and cheese, and three meals were served to 400 participants. Local food producers donated most of the food. Donations were difficult due to the time of year and the coordinators felt they should have purchased the food to help local farmers.

French used the college kitchen, which caused some friction with the kitchen staff. The coordinators felt that using the college chef would have worked out better.

The menu changed often depending on the availability or promise of donation by the local food producers. Disposing of the leftover food was not planned in advance.

Coordinators also had to run around the state collecting and delivering local foods and getting various permits. Better planning and delegation of responsibilities, with experienced and committed volunteers, are necessary for the procurement of local foods.

But despite the difficulties, they proved that an excellent and satisfying menu could be prepared using local foods, even in March in Washington State. They felt it was worth all of the effort.

Oregon Sustainability Forum, Portland, OR September 2001

Matthew Buck coordinated the event for Sustainable Northwest. There were 825 people for the first two days and on the third day, which was an open house, 3000 people participated. Eighty percent of the menu was prepared using local organic food.

Buck first contacted the Hilton Hotel. Contacts through Chefs Collaborative, a catering manager, and friends were made with the Hilton Chef and, after negotiations, contracts were signed for making use of local organic foods exclusively for the event. If profit margins were kept intact, the chef was ready to cooperate.

Buck had to go long distances and contact various sources even to collect small quantities of local food and it required constant meetings and communication with other conference coordinators. He made checklists to keep track of the progress.

He had to renegotiate the cost with the chef, due to the extra labor and time involved in using unprocessed ingredients. The money was paid directly to the food producers avoiding middlemen, but catering costs were still higher. One reason was the extra costs of local wines.

The quality, taste, and presentation of items were excellent. The event showed the participants were committed to the cause of sustainability, and the event created good will, since they donated the leftover food to workers, volunteers, food banks, and homeless folks.

SNE

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The **Society for Nutrition Education's** (SNE) mission is to enhance nutrition educators' abilities to promote healthful sustainable food choices and nutrition behaviors for a vision of healthy people in healthy communities.



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The Food and Farm Connections Team of **Washington State University Cooperative Extension** promotes sustainable, community-based agricultural systems in Western Washington by providing research-based information and educational programs for farmers, consumers, decision-makers, and others involved in the food system.

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A Sense of Place:

Serving Local Food at Your Meeting

Food is an important part of meetings and conferences. Attendees like to learn about the place where the meeting is being held. This definitely includes the food. In the few days spent together, attendees can learn about an area's agriculture, seasonal specialties and local cuisine with every bite.