Farm to Table
GUIDE FOR RESTAURANTS
What is "local food"?

There isn’t one agreed upon definition of local food. People often define it based on geography, among other factors. Some people define “local” based on where it is grown in relation to their location—say, within 50, or even 250 miles.

“At one of the first restaurants I worked at, I spent hours picking basil. We bought tomatoes from local farmers too. It was obvious to me then the quality difference between the conventional stuff that came off the truck and what we were getting from local farmers.”

– Chef Alisa DeMarco, Prairie Fruits Farm, Champaign, IL

About this Guide

All Illinois restaurants can reap the benefits of using locally produced food. Use this guide to learn why you should use local food, and get tips on finding sources, incorporating local food into your menu, making it more cost effective and more.

What can I find that’s locally grown?

Illinois is home to an incredibly diverse selection of locally grown fruits and vegetables – tomatoes, sweet corn, melons, lettuce, peas, strawberries, asparagus, pumpkins – the list goes on and on. Additionally, you can find locally produced honey, eggs, meat, cheese, grains and more. Here’s a list of some things you can expect to find throughout the seasons:

1. Personal Belief System
2. Quality of Product and Freshness (Tied)
3. Relationship/Trust with Farmers
4. Varieties Available
5. Customer Demand

Why should you buy locally grown and produced foods?

We constantly and consistently hear from chefs and consumers that the top reasons they prefer locally grown foods are because of the quality and taste. But there are many benefits to using locally produced food. Here are just a few:

Locally grown food is fresh.
It doesn’t travel long distances from field to table.
Locally grown produce offers more variety.
Some fruits and vegetables are grown for their ability to withstand long shipping distances, not for their flavor.
Local farmers grow foods that maximize flavor, including heirloom and unique varieties.

When you buy local, you foster relationships.

Strong relationships with local farmers promotes transparency and trust.

Buying local food keeps us in touch with the seasons.

By eating with the seasons, we are eating foods when they are at their peak taste, the most abundant and the least expensive.

Supporting local farmers means more for the local economy.

According to a study by the New Economics Foundation in London, a dollar spent locally generates twice as much income for the local economy. When businesses are not owned locally, money leaves the community at every transaction.

Customers are asking for it.

Of the chefs we surveyed, 87% responded that their customers ask for locally produced food.

Buying local food reduces our environmental impact.

Local food travels fewer miles, meaning less fossil fuel is used in transporting food from distant locations. Also, diverse farms work in harmony with the natural environment to support healthy soils, water and wildlife.

Illinois... What’s In Season

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1. Adapted from “What Local Foods are in Season?”, University of Illinois Extension – Stephenson County
Getting Started Sourcing Locally Produced Food

Tips for getting started: Ask other chefs what they’re doing. Do they have any tips for local food beginners? What would they do differently if they could start over? Visit your local farmers market or find an online listing (see our resources page for suggestions). Start small. Do a special one night with some local produce or meat. Learn what you can and can’t do with the food.

From the Kitchen

Alisa Demarco is the chef at Prairie Fruits Farm in Champaign, where they host regular on-farm dinners and she is also a consultant at Hendrick House, a private dorm residence at the University of Illinois. Alisa’s first job, in the back of the house at a restaurant, was at the Great Impacts. She then attended the Culinary Institute of America. She came to Prairie Fruits Farm as a part-time cheesemaker. Leslie Cooperband and Wes Jarrell of Prairie Fruits Farm started the on-farm dinners because they recognized that education was a driving force in helping people understand the work of a small farmer. They wanted to show people that they could truly eat locally and source everything they need from the region. They didn’t intend to have five course meals at their farm dinners, but there was so much great food and diverse ingredients available locally that five courses easily became the standard.

How do you use local produce and meat?

Chef Farm-to-Table Survey

How do you use local produce and meat?

68% said year round
32% said seasonally

What meals do you serve?

46% serve dinner
39% serve lunch
15% serve breakfast

How do you buy locally grown produce and products?

34% buy at farmers’ markets
30% buy directly from the farm and have the products delivered
18% buy from a distributor
8% buy from a cooperative
10% buy from a different source than listed above

How long have you been using locally grown food?

52% said 3-6 years
21% said 1-2 years
15% said 7-15 years
6% said less than a year
6% said more than 15 years

How do you use locally grown produce and products?

62% said part of the regular menu
22% said part of specials
16% responded with ‘other’

Understanding shelf life

One of the many benefits of using fresh, seasonal produce is you can often get a longer shelf life. However, this may vary with different varieties. As you start working with the produce, you will begin to understand the shelf life. Many chefs swear by freshly harvested salad greens because they have been recently harvested. However, some produce – heirloom tomatoes, for example – can have thin fragile skin which should be used in a few days.

How to deal with seasonality

While the growing season for fresh fruits and vegetables in Illinois can be limited, both chefs and farmers are creatively addressing this situation.

From the Kitchen

Chef Ken Myaska was working under venerable chefs in Las Vegas, flying in exotic ingredients from all over the world. The best meal had to be the most expensive meal, right? Well, after reading Michael Pollan’s Omnivore’s Dilemma, Myaska had an epiphany. Fast forward a few years and Myaska started farming in central Illinois with the dream to open a restaurant that used almost solely food from the farm.

Weiner was an opportunity to take over management of Station 220, a historic firehouse turned restaurant in downtown Bloomington. It was too good to pass up. Station 220 now offers a farm fresh tasting menu Thursday – Saturday that features dishes created solely with locally sourced food from Myaska’s Epiphany Farms and other regional farms. “We spend our money to benefit a better food system,” Myaska says.

Ask other chefs what they’re doing. Do they have any tips for local food beginners? What would they do differently if they could start over? Visit your local farmers market or find an online listing (see our resources page for suggestions). Start small. Do a special one night with some local produce or meat. Learn what you can and can’t do with the food.

Tips for getting started:

- Know what’s in season – In a normal year, asparagus makes an appearance in early spring, strawberries in early summer, tomatoes and sweet corn in midsummer and apples and squash in late fall.
- Preserve – Freeze, dry or can the summer’s bounty for use all year long. Plus, preserving techniques can lead to new menu items. Gourmet pickles anyone?
- Store – Root crops can be kept in cool, dark places or walk-in coolers. Potatoes, apples, carrots, beets, turnips and other root crops can keep for 3-6 months.
- Seek out year round producers – Season extension techniques are making local food available longer through the early winter and greens of all kinds – salad greens, kale, chard, spinach and others are available throughout the winter. Meat, honey, eggs and sprouts can generally be found year round.

How I Get Locally Produced Food

by Thad Morrow, Bacaro, Champaign, IL

“I use a combination of phone, email and going direct to the farmers market for getting orders. It’s easier to order by email because of the odd hours that we have at the restaurant, but I don’t want to become too removed from seeing the person. Inevitably they forget something cool that they have. You might see baby turnips or something that looks really good.”

1 Please contact your local health department to learn more about the rules and regulations for food preservation.
Innovative Solutions
Stewards of the Land

Stewards of the Land is a group of 25 farms that grow a huge variety of fruits, vegetables, and heirloom plants and raise wide range of poultry and meats. The farms are all located within a 50 mile radius from Fairbury, Illinois, a small farming community nestled among large fields of commercially-grown corn and soybeans. This innovative group of farmers cooperatively markets their produce by sending out a weekly email to restaurants in Chicago, Bloomington, Springfield and Champaign. After orders are placed, they are confirmed, aggregated on a central farm location and delivered within days. This makes it easier for restaurants and farmers alike and streamlines the ordering, billing and delivery process.

From the Kitchen

"Our customers are asking for it [local food]. It’s the most dramatic shift. People are much more interested and want more educated about food and dining. As your servers have to be sharper, and your cooks have to know what’s going on."

— Chef Thad Morrow, Raos, Champaign, IL

Food Safety

While many restaurants don’t require food safety certification, there is an increase in requests for Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification and proof of product liability insurance. A majority of growers and producers have liability insurance, and many are obtaining GAP certification. If either one of these is important to you, make sure to ask the producer early on.

Edible Economy

The USDA defines a "local food hub" as "a business or organization that is actively coordinating the aggregation, distribution, and marketing of source-identified locally grown food products from primarily small to mid-sized producers." There are plans underway for food hubs throughout the state that are early in their development. The Edible Economy Project, in partnership with Heartland Community College, local farmers, schools, businesses, and community members in 32 Central Illinois counties, is facilitating the development of a network of local food production, distribution, and processing facilities. Its goal is to foster a healthier, more self-sufficient community where more local money goes back into the local community.

The project’s long-term vision is to build a modern local food infrastructure giving farmers access to expanded market, and consumers access to fresh, healthy local foods. As a first step, the Project is working with Central Illinois farmers to create a network of at least three on-farm food hubs—enabling connections among local people and local food for the benefit of the entire community. The Edible Economy and Heartland Community College received a USDA-Rural Business Enterprise Grant that will be used to provide technical assistance and training to farmers to facilitate this process and to develop a coordinated online ordering, transportation and information sharing system.

Price — Making it work for your business

Price. You buy wholesale because it’s the cheapest, most reliable place to get your food. Know that buying locally sourced food will likely be slightly more costly up front than traditional wholesale distributors’ prices. The price will likely be 5 to 10 percent higher. But with just a little planning, you can save that money elsewhere.

A standard practice for chefs and restaurant owners is to calculate food costs at 30 percent of total spending by an establishment. So when writing a menu, chefs often price the cost of a serving then multiply it by three to get the menu price. You cannot calculate prices that way with locally sourced food. Instead look at the entirety of what you’re serving.

“I look at my menu as a whole and balance out my dishes in a way so that I can bring local products in. The food cost on a pork dish might be 60 percent but I can create a pasta dish so that it is only a 10 percent food cost. They equal themselves out. I will make pasta by hand which will only cost me 10 cents to make it and use,” says Chef Demarco.

“Sometimes I balance it out on a plate — pork might cost me more, but I pair it with polenta and collards, which are less expensive. So I use a multitude of strategies. You have to look at the big picture.”

Chef Demarco suggests using locally produced food in dishes where you want to highlight the flavors of the vegetables and meats being used. For example, when doing soups or a minestrone, think about using conventional vegetables, but when contemplating side dishes think of courses that would highlight your locally available produce.

Another way to make local foods more economical is to negotiate with your product’s supplier. For a product in its entirety, such as using vegetable scraps for soup stocks. Buying whole animals and learning to use them from snout to tail is much more economical than trying to serve just the premium cuts of meat. Chef Chris Pandel at Balena in Chicago buys a whole pig and makes sausages, roasts, curing hams, pates, charcuterie and more. He notes that Balena is part of a group of restaurants (BOKA group) and their food costs are the lowest of the whole company. Their menu features a mixed grill of pork; for $25, a customer receives smoked country ribs, sausage, smoked ham, pork stew with braised skin and pork meat balls.

Advertising local food

Once you start using local products, don’t forget this key step: let your customer know! There are a variety of ways you can promote the use of local food at your restaurant.

Put the name of the farm on the menu. There’s a good chance your customer could be a savvy farmers market shopper and turn away local food supporters? Put their name on the menu when you are not using their food. It may be tempting to say that you are using local food to bare customers in; but be honest, your farmers and customers will notice.

Sourcing locally produced food

To find locally produced food, a good place to start is at your local farmers market. Talk to other chefs that buy locally. Go visit a farm. Buy. Taste. Innovate. Repeat.

Find a Farmers Market:

Illinois Farm Direct — illinoisfarmdirect.org
Illinois MarkerMarket — markermarket.uiuc.edu
Local Harvest — localharvest.org
Regional directories of farmers:
Buy Fresh Buy Local Central Illinois – irstudents.org/bfl
TriState Locally Grown Food Guide - tinyurl.com/tristatetlocal
Northwest Local Foods Guide - tinyurl.com/northwestlocal

Buy Fresh Buy Local Central Illinois: a yearly directory of farmers and producers in central Illinois, including contact information and general products offered.

Chicago Green Restaurant Coalition: The cooperative provides members with education resources about Chicago area service outlets and access to a comprehensive online database of sustainable goods and services in the area.

FamilyFarmed.org: is collaborating with the Green Chicago Restaurant Coalition to help restaurants and foodservice companies source local/regional meat, produce, dairy, poultry, eggs, and specialty products. To simplify the process FamilyFarmed.org will help you work with your existing distributors or recommend new distributors depending on your restaurant’s needs.

From the Kitchen

“I try to give customers the idea that they are paying for the real price for food. It’s an ongoing process. My eggs cost more which means my food costs more. The eggs also taste a lot better.”

— Chef Thad Morrow, Raos, Champaign, IL

Food Hubs: The future of local food distribution

An Edible Illinois study found that 31 percent of Illinois’s food dollars stayed in the state, compared to 29 percent in 2000. This is a promising sign of cost savings that Illinois restaurants can enjoy.

Challenges of Farm to Restaurant Sales

1 Distribution and delivery can be challenging for chefs and growers. Chefs often find that availability, variety, and timeliness of delivery are obstacles to purchasing locally grown foods. Getting the right product in the right quantity at the right time is key to developing and maintaining successful direct-to-restaurant marketing relationships.

2 Limited seasonal availability and variety are also barriers to using local foods. The use of season extension is a way that growers can supply the necessary products that restaurants desire.

3 For small-scale growers attempting to sell to large restaurants, the infrastructure giving farmers access to expanded market, and/or inventory — 19%

3 For small-scale growers attempting to sell to large restaurants, the infrastructure giving farmers access to expanded market, and/or inventory is a major challenge. Local food marketing of source-identified locally grown food products from primarily small to mid-sized producers is a way to address issues of direct marketing. Collaborating with other growers and crop planning with the restaurants are ways to address issues of supplying adequate volume.

Lack of proper packaging - 3%

Seasonal availability - 19%

Other factors:

Storage - 2%

Quality - 3%

Insufficient volume - 19%

Cost - 18%

Product not available - 11%

Inconvenience with orders - 15%

Other:

— Lack of proper packaging
— Size of season
— Availability
— Overhead
— Transportation

Photo courtesy of Andria Crawford

87% of chefs responded that their customers ask for locally produced food.

Illinois — Where Fresh Is

Programs

Illinois...Where Fresh Is: This program maintains searchable databases of local farmers markets and Illinois producers. It is sponsored by the Illinois Department of Agriculture.

Buy Fresh Buy Local Central Illinois: a yearly directory of farmers and producers in central Illinois, including contact information and general products offered.

Buy Fresh Buy Local Central Illinois

TriState Locally Grown Food Guide - tinyurl.com/tristatetlocal
Northwest Local Foods Guide - tinyurl.com/northwestlocal
Illinois Farm Direct — illinoisfarmdirect.org
Illinois MarkerMarket — markermarket.uiuc.edu
Local Harvest — localharvest.org
Buy Fresh Buy Local Central Illinois – irstudents.org/bfl
Regional directories of farmers:

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1 Adapted from Iowa State University Extension.
Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Illinois Department of Agriculture, United States Department of Agriculture, the Illinois Community College Board, University of Illinois Extension Business Innovation Services, The Lumpkin Family Foundation and the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity for their assistance in making this guide possible.

Thanks to the Farm to Restaurant Advisory Committee members:
Julie Bates, Lincoln Land Community College
Michael Higgins, Maldaner's Restaurant
Eloise Karlatiras, Chicago Green Restaurant Coalition
Jay Kitterman, Lincoln Land Community College
Dar Knipe, University of Illinois Extension
Margaret Larson, University of Illinois Extension
Marnie Record, Lincoln Land Community College
Lisa Stott, Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity
Marty Travis, Spence Farm

Additional thanks to Cynthia Haskins, Alisa DeMarco, Stan Schutte, Thad Morrow, Jordan Coffey, Ken Myszka, Chris Pandel, Mike Butcher, Mel Lamar, Andrew Predmore, Sheila Walk and Kris Travis.

Cover photos courtesy of Julie Bates, Andria Crawford, Mandy Magill, Lincoln Land Community College, Illinois Stewardship Alliance

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Graphic Design by Julie Roland of B.Creative Graphic Design

About Illinois Stewardship Alliance

Illinois Stewardship Alliance (ISA) is a statewide non-profit organization with a mission to promote environmentally sustainable, economically viable, socially just local food systems through policy development, advocacy and education. We support food and farm systems where soils are treated as a precious resource, local food producers earn a fair, living wage, local food education is integrated into all levels of education, infrastructure is rebuilt to accommodate local food systems and good food is available to all.