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[food]

Home grown

'People want to visit Minnesota and taste who and what we are.'

Downtown chefs support locally grown food

BY MICHELLE BRUCH
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Minnesota farmers and chefs have launched the first-ever Midwest communication network between restaurateurs and local growers.

"The Heartland Food Network is the first time that a regional food group has included the entire food chain," said Paul Lynch of Fire Lake Grill House at 31 S. 7th St.

The "food chain" Lynch refers to is the new link between farmers, distributors and chefs. The network serves as a billboard for chefs to request local produce and allows farmers to communicate what they have available.

"Chefs are pressed for time," Lynch said. "You can sit for three or four hours trying to find local asparagus."

The Heartland Food Network was born out of an informal discussion at a Sysco food conference about three years ago.

"We talked about what is preventing farmers from getting into the back doors of restaurants," Lynch said. "We are the breadbasket of America. Why are we serving California fruits? We can grow more than corn and soybeans."

Trish Johnson, a Minnesota Project employee who coordinates the Heartland Food Network, said one barrier to buying local produce is that most chefs do not know what is available to them from Minnesota farms.

The Health Food Network remedies the problem by linking growers and chefs. The parties independently work out the details of each transaction, and distribution companies involved in the network include Bix Produce Co. and Sysco Corporation.

"A lot of incredible local food work has been going on in Minnesota for the last few decades," Johnson said. "We are building on the groundwork of what's existed. The last piece is to bring everyone together."

The project launched on June 19, and Downtown restaurants that are members of the network include Café Brenda and Spoonriver Café, Oceanaire and Fire Lake.

Each restaurant is provided a Heartland Food emblem they can use to publicize their commitment to buying local produce. Lynch said he hopes grocery stores will adopt the emblem as well.

"This increases yield in the field," said Lynch. "Farmers are now taking a risk because chefs sign up to buy produce a year from now."

To join the network, farms must have one or more family members make up the majority of on-site, day-to-day management decisions and contribute substantially to the labor requirements of the growing operation. Farmers must own the produce they sell, and the farm must generate income that directly supports the family. Produce must be grown in Minnesota, Iowa, the Dakotas or Wisconsin.

There is a cost to join the Health Food Network - \$295 for a charter membership through 2006. Next year, the cost is expected to be \$595 for

PAUL LYNCH, CHEF AT FIRELAKE GRILL HOUSE



FireLake Grill House Chef Paul Lynch prepares to cut buffalo meat.

the year. The startup cost was offset by U.S. and state grants.

Lynch said he is willing to pay for shorter shipping times and is happy to support local farmers. He questioned why restaurants are buying melons from Texas and Georgia this summer, while there are farmers selling better-tasting produce on the side of the road in Owatonna. A shipment that takes two to three-hours rather than two or three days makes a huge impact on taste, he said.

"Being in the center of Downtown, there are enough chain restaurants," Lynch said. "People want to visit Minnesota and taste who and what we are."

More information about the Heartland Food Network is available at www.mnproject.org/food-heartland.html.