From Your Farm to Their Tables

Notes

These notes are provided by two restaurants purchasing specialist, Sam Rogers and Bethany Harris, with experience consulting and supporting restaurants groups throughout Los Angeles. After speaking at our Farm-to-Restaurants workshop, they provided notes and next steps for future growers interseted in approaching restaurant based sales channels, which are as follows:

No matter the size of your farm, selling your product is about building connections. Some relationships will be easy, and some will be challenging–that's just how it goes. You don't need hundreds of acres to sell your product–there is always someone who will be just as excited to receive your few bunches of herbs as you were to grow and harvest them. Find those people and grow together.

Farmers Market vs. Direct Sales

Remember that farmers' markets charge a percentage of your earnings, which is why selling directly to consumers is a more viable option for many growers. Direct sales also allow you to build deeper relationships. You can invite customers to visit your farm, meet the kitchen team, etc. It may even make sense to open your farm to the public once a week, or whatever works best for you and your team. People feel connected to a space they spend time in, and that connection often leads to loyal, long-term customers.

The Importance of Seconds

Restaurants and home chefs love to use "seconds"–these might be bruised apples or "holey" kale. Always offer them, but at a discounted price–you'll be surprised how much product you can move this way. Pastry chefs, in particular, love fruit seconds because they are often easier to use and help save money.

Flowers/Bolting

While you may see bolting or flowering crops as the end of a life cycle, chefs, home cooks, and even florists see it differently. Bolting cilantro and radish regularly sell out at farmers' markets before 8 a.m. You can confidently charge $5-$7 per bunch for these items. This also applies to brassica flowers, fennel flowers, sage flowers, mustard flowers, etc. If you grow fruit trees, consider offering the branches as well—many restaurants use them as seasonal décor.

Packing & Describing Units

Always include what you consider a "flat," "crate," or "bag" on your availability list. As a quick cheat sheet:

- Boxes: 20 lb
- Flats: 10 lb or packed by volume
- Bunch: A real handful (Note: herbs don't like rubber bands—consider packing them into bags instead and just let your customers know. It's a pro tip!)

How to Approach Restaurants/Chefs

DM them! Reach out to chefs you like or who are in your area. Tell them who you are and what you're growing; extra points if you can suggest where your products would fit well on their menu. You should also visit restaurants or cafes you're interested in selling to—3 p.m. is usually the sweet spot, as it's the lull between lunch and dinner service. If it seems like a busy day and the chef can't give you much time, don't take it personally. If the meeting doesn't go as planned, try again in a week or two.

Remember to bring:

- Samples: Best practice is for these to be given as complimentary previews of what is on your availability list.
- Your availability list (printed): Include prices, contact info, and a brief write-up about your farm.

Once you have a relationship going, bring seed catalogs to your buyers and open a conversation about what they might like you to grow. But remember—don't put all your eggs in one basket. Chefs can be enthusiastic, but they might move to another restaurant. Stay creative, but keep organized.

Availability Sheets

We've attached a few sample availability sheets. Availability can be shared via email or text —whatever works best for you. Your sheet should include:

- Product
- Size (if necessary)
- Pack unit
- Price per unit
- Limited supply notes (if applicable)

Always include when you need orders by and when you expect to deliver.

Important: Don't overpromise.

Order Windows

Ask your chefs to place orders about 48 hours in advance of delivery. This gives you time to organize, harvest, pack, and deliver. You can adjust this time window to suit your needs, but be cautious of delivering at a chef's whim, as this can create a bad pattern.

Transparency

Shortages happen—it's inevitable. Communicate this with your chefs/buyers as soon as you know, giving them time to source the product elsewhere. This is normal and nothing to stress over—just be honest. If your product is damaged (e.g., aphids in kale), let them know when it will be available again. No need for over-apologies—just transparency.

Harvest/Post-Harvest Practices

I wanted to highlight **Cool Bots**, which can turn any space into a walk-in fridge. Plants, flowers, and fruits don't like being harvested and left out—they want to be cleaned and stored cold. The Cool Bot is an excellent solution for this.

Delivery Systems & Timing

Top delivery days are typically Tuesday and Thursday. Coordinate with your chefs to determine a good delivery window, and make an effort to stick to it. Always check in with someone when you deliver, and consider texting the chef an image of where the delivery was placed. It's helpful for everyone. As for delivery fees, I recommend building them into your prices. You can also implement order minimums, where delivery is free if they order a certain amount.

Packing Materials

Include packing costs in your prices. Dropping off products in wet or collapsing boxes is never ideal—they'll likely get stacked before being put away, which leads to waste.

Balancing Niche & Basics

Grow what you love—your passion shows in the product. That said, don't rely on just one thing. Grow a variety of items—both what keeps you excited and what people "need," like cilantro or lemons. Basics ensure consistent weekly orders, while the more unique offerings will keep you and your customers excited about what you're doing!