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New Way Restaurants Can Buy Into Farm-Fresh Food

Chef borrows from CSA model to help restaurants tap local farmers to fill their menus

By **M.L. JOHNSON** Associated Press Writer
MILWAUKEE February 13, 2009 (AP)

The Associated Press
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The gap between farm and fine dining is narrowing.



David Swanson is seen in a cooler at the Pinehold Gardens Wednesday, Feb. 11, 2009, in Oak Creek,.... (AP)

Though touting the use of local foods has become all but ubiquitous at many of the nation's better restaurants, finding and getting those brag-worthy foods can be a hassle for restaurateurs and chefs.

That's one reason chef David Swanson started Braise RSA, which stands for "restaurant supported agriculture" and creates a business-to-business link between growers and restaurants.

The effort is modeled after popular community supported agriculture programs — now numbering in the thousands — in which families buy shares of local farmers' harvests in advance, then get weekly deliveries of produce during the growing season.

In this case, it's restaurants doing the buying. Swanson's program handles the orders and deliveries, freeing up farmers to farm and chefs to cook. Everyone, including diners, benefits, he says.

Farmers are able to sell thousands of pounds of food at once instead of a couple pounds at a time to individual families. The

farmers also receive part of the money upfront, which means they don't have to borrow to buy seed or pay for labor.

And with their costs reduced, farmers are willing to give the restaurants price breaks.

David Kozlowski, 53, of Pinehold Gardens, a 20-acre farm just south of Milwaukee, says tales of late payments and contracts not honored at harvest have made many small farmers reluctant to deal with restaurants.

But Braise RSA eliminates the risk because Swanson negotiates with restaurants, places the orders with farms and ensures payment, Kozlowski says.

It's an arrangement that's allowed Milwaukee's La Merenda tapas bar to offer locally sourced dishes, such as its sauteed rainbow trout with leeks and potatoes, says chef and owner Peter Sandroni.

The RSA supplies the leeks and potatoes, and Swanson introduced Sandroni to Rushing Waters Fisheries in Palmyra, which delivers its trout to the restaurant the day they are harvested.

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Finding affordable, fresh fish in the Midwest is "really a luxury," says Sandroni. And the vegetables are fresher because they have only a short trip to the table, he says.



Chef David Swanson is seen in a cooler at the Pinehold Gardens Wednesday, Feb. 11, 2009, in Oak... (AP)

Swanson came up with the idea for Braise RSA while working as a chef in Milwaukee and Chicago for 20 years. He started it last summer with a \$25,000 state grant that paid for construction of a root cellar and the purchase of other supplies.

Now about 20 farms supply eight businesses with everything from beets and carrots to black currants.

Swanson hopes to add cheese, poultry, eggs and meat down the road. He's also talking to farms about supplying

cranberries, wild rice, maple syrup and other quintessentially Wisconsin foods.

His is not the only farm-to-fine dining program. In California, the San Mateo County Convention and Visitors Bureau holds farm tours and other events to introduce chefs and farmers. It also recognizes restaurants that make substantial efforts to buy local.

But Braise RSA seems unique in handling much of the administrative hassles of managing those relationships.

Swanson says that's important because it takes restaurants time to learn to work with local food, which varies by season and doesn't come cleaned and bagged the way items from major distributors do.

"They're not used to getting the whole box of carrots with tops on," he says.

To help chefs, he created a seasonal chart showing when produce will be available and sends weekly e-mail forecasts. At La Merenda, that's helped produce dishes such as roasted beet salad with green beans, red onion, fennel and goat cheese.

"Dave has been very good at educating us on when things are available, for how long, how much," Sandroni says. "Definitely,

our menu has reflected that."

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