Introduction

In today’s economy, Nevada’s agricultural producers face new challenges as well as developing opportunities. Markets for vegetable and fruit crops are changing as new international competition enters the market, and consumer tastes and preferences adapt to include new cultures and ideals. One method producers can employ to improve their position within this changing market is to adapt production to fit within a specific niche.

One of the most attractive of these niches is the thriving “high-end” or gourmet restaurant sector. This fact sheet will focus on three key factors producers should consider if they wish to shift production toward meeting the demands of executive chefs: assuring quality; providing variety; and adapting service. Also discussed are some potential benefits and drawbacks of entering this niche, as well as cases of innovative opportunities which have arisen from producing for restaurants.

One such benefit of producing for gourmet chefs is the potential for producers to boost revenue, often a necessity due to the increased costs of production for small-scale producers (Diamond et al., 2009). A relatively under-served portion of the Nevada economy, fine-dining restaurants in the state predominately rely on distribution networks which source outside the region (and/or country), and whose product supply is “one-size-fits-all.” The revenue-boosting opportunity for producers, especially small-scale enterprises, comes from adjusting practices to offer “products with specific qualities or production process characteristics” that chefs cannot access through their traditional, mainstream suppliers (Diamond et al., 2009).

Direct marketing channels in general also decrease total expenses associated with the use of third-party distributors and wholesalers and can shift this income directly to the producer (Keeling-Bond et al., 2006). In addition, top chefs may well prefer to purchase noncommercial grade produce which would be rejected by wholesalers because of other attributes such as flavor, rarity, freshness or quality (Burt et al., 2008).
Assuring Quality

In 2009, a survey of 31 Nevada chefs asked various questions about their preferences and habits relating to direct-from-producer purchases. When asked to rate the importance of “product quality” when selecting produce for their establishments, the average response was that it is “extremely important” (an average of 4.97 on a 1-to-5 scale). The result was almost identical when the chefs were asked how important a “consistency of quality” was when deciding to purchase from a particular farm (an average of 4.48 on a 1-to-5 scale).

When considering quality attributes, Doug Taylor, Executive Pastry Chef for MoltoVegas, says that for most of his colleagues, flavor and taste are most important, followed by the appearance of the produce and then sizing. In a series of comments gathered from Nevada chefs on produce deliveries they had received from farmers, almost all offered input related to flavor or taste, often referencing product acidity, sweetness, bitterness and overall development or strength.

Product freshness also ranks high within chef preferences, scoring an average of 4.97 - or “extremely important” - when making decisions to purchase from a farm in the previously mentioned 2009 survey. In an interview, one chef at a Michelin 3-star rated Las Vegas establishment noted, “I think that some farms just pick to sell and not because of quality. If a producer doesn’t have a good product don’t send it to us. Wait till it is ripe. If you want to wait a few days then tell us. We will work something out.” Similar responses can be found in survey results and interviews. Top chefs desire produce that can be used within a short time of delivery and which were harvested not long before they enter a dish.

In terms of appearance, many restaurateurs noted aspects related to color - especially for squashes and peppers - and blemishes from pests, packaging and transport. Lettuce and leafy green produce seem to provide the greatest concern with respect to appearance. Size largely played a factor when it was perceived to impact taste, but also when it impacted ability to apply produce to a particular dish.

Providing Variety

Perhaps one of the most promising ways for a producer to differentiate his/her products for the gourmet restaurant niche is by offering chefs the ability to access rare or specialty produce including ethnic or cultural products, heirloom varieties, or even by introducing new products they may not have thought of incorporating into their menus. In one interview, Chef Mary Sue Miliken recounts how she discovered sweet potato greens on a walk through a local Beverly Hills, Calif.
farmers market (Seasonal Chef, 1996). Chefs like Miliken may be interested in ingredients they cannot readily obtain from traditional distributors. Nevada examples include green almonds and young garlic.

Often times, high-end restaurants will need less quantity of specific items than a producer would normally sell to a wholesaler, but this might be supplemented through wider demand for various products, providing the opportunity for producers to diversify the crops they grow with an assured sale at the end of production. In other instances, agriculturalists can vary a single product simply by offering it at different stages of growth. For example a leafy green such as a specialty variety of Arugula can be marketed at different stages of maturation to broaden the flavor offering and meet various uses in the kitchen (Gordon, 2006).

Adapting Service
Entering the gourmet restaurant market will most likely entail the need to shift current services and include additional ones. Eliminating the intermediate step of a distributor or wholesaler means the functions they traditionally perform must be absorbed by the producer in some way. One of the largest challenges becomes how to transport and deliver produce. Potential solutions to this issue as well as other functions absorbed by direct marketing schemes are discussed later.

Close partnerships between producers and chefs seem to make the longest-lasting and most mutually beneficial relationships. In many strong direct-to-firm marketing strategies with gourmet restaurants, chefs play a role in determining production schedule and practices. It is effective for producers to sit down with their chef clients to create a production plan that suits each other’s needs and aspirations for the partnership.

In contrast to many other recent market trends, much research shows that chefs are less concerned with organic labeling, and place greater emphasis on traceability and local sourcing. Farmers can provide chefs with an important key to success in meeting these preferences: they have knowledge about what can and cannot be grown locally while still fitting within the quality parameters desired. Chef Doug Taylor explains that many of the chefs in Las Vegas come from cities where they have worked with local farmers, but arrive in Nevada with the misperception that there is little or no agriculture in the state, especially in its southern region. Producers interested in direct marketing to chefs should consider providing chefs with detailed information about what they already grow, when products are available, and how comfortable they are with growing new products to meet the chef’s needs.

Costs and Benefits of Entering the Niche
Overall, the ultimate decision to enter the niche should depend upon an individual producer’s preferences regarding assuming additional service aspects, entering into partnerships and changing practices. Producing for restaurants can bring higher prices and higher profits if relationships are properly tended, but can also require an increased investment of time. Adapting practices to provide specialized produce may mean a change in typical seasons, planting methods, equipment, and more, but it also provides for enterprise diversification, a tool which can help manage risk. It may also provide for a more certain market, with pre-planting agreements in place to secure sales. Chefs may be more discerning in their tastes and requirements and have higher standards of quality, especially in terms of taste and freshness, than the average consumer and may request additional attention or involvement throughout the growing process.

Innovative Opportunities
Apart from the advantages and disadvantages mentioned previously, a number of opportunities have begun to arise in local gourmet produce

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<th>Farm Direct-to-Restaurant Sales</th>
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<td><strong>Advantages</strong></td>
<td><strong>Disadvantages</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Potential for higher price and profit</td>
<td>Requires increase in off-farm customer service</td>
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<td>Outlet for specialty or rare products</td>
<td>Competition from established distributors</td>
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<td>Precise production planning</td>
<td>Need for product line differentiation</td>
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<td>Potential for diverse implementation of risk management strategies</td>
<td>Lower per-customer sales volumes compared to traditional distribution networks</td>
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markets. They include producer-driven coordination, chef-established development programs, and bilateral initiatives, incorporating both producer and chef management. The following paragraphs provide an overview of the use of cooperatives, as well as the Frontera Farmer Foundation and RAFT programs in farmer-chef coordination.

**Cooperatives**

Throughout the nation, cooperative arrangements of varying size and functionality have been established by farmers who specifically sell high-quality produce to top gourmet markets. Such arrangements help to pool resources for growers, assure product access for customers and allow for coordination between the two groups. In one Wisconsin region, growers in the Home Grown Wisconsin cooperative don’t need to worry about delivering their produce directly to their customers’ restaurants, a practice which can be inefficient for a small-scale enterprise. The cooperative’s manager Rick DaVee explains that the organization completes marketing and supply chain tasks, including transport and delivery (Howard, 2003). In Athens, Georgia, the Athens Locally Grown cooperative sends weekly e-mails to their customer chefs informing them of the produce that will be available during the upcoming week. Orders are completed online through and are sent directly to the farmer for harvest. Completed orders are delivered to a weekly farmers market where chefs collect their orders, which may include flowers, fruits and vegetables, meats, eggs and dairy products. The cooperative serves a broad range of specialty and local growers and connects them with the niche market effectively (Abend, 2008).

**RAFT Grow-out through Chef’s Collaborative**

In 2004, an alliance called Renewing America’s Food Traditions was formed to promote agro-food awareness and conservation. Managed by Slow Food USA, the RAFT Alliance is comprised of producers, chefs and consumers. The Alliance includes the national Chef’s Collaborative, an organization which performs advocacy, education and networking functions related to local and sustainable agriculture within the agro-food community. In 2009, the Collaborative launched a cooperative grow-out program with the purpose of “celebrating and raising awareness of agricultural biodiversity, while promoting the development of markets for locally raised, regionally significant, heirloom produce...” (Chef’s Collaborative, 2009). The program in 2009 has focused on New England, with 28 growers planting 16 heirloom vegetable varieties which are traditional to the region (Estabrook, 2009). The Collaborative aims to expand the grow-out to a national level and promote ties between producers and gourmet chefs (Estabrook, 2009). Growing heirloom varieties like those in the grow-out offers benefits to chefs in the form of rare and marketable offerings for their menus, and to producers who can receive higher prices and avoid repurchasing seed every year as most heirlooms are open-pollinators and unlike hybrids, come back true to type (Estabrook, 2009). Apart from the grow-out program through RAFT, Chef’s Collaborative also offers a searchable online registry of its member chefs and producers which is designed as a networking tool.

**Frontera Farmer Foundation**

Several years ago, Rick Bayless, owner and executive chef of Frontera Grill and Topolobampo, recognized the need to play an active role in promoting local agriculture, thus ensuring access to quality products for his Chicago restaurants. Along with his wife and employees, he established the Frontera Farmer Foundation, which “provides capital development grants to small, sustainable farms serving his and other area restaurants and farmers’ markets” (Howard, 2003). Through these grants, the nonprofit offers a mutually beneficial opportunity for development of high-quality agriculture in the region surrounding the city. Producers who are looking to enter into the niche market or who have already entered but would like to expand may apply for grants to invest in infrastructure projects, like the Hagemans of Snug Haven Farm in Belleville, Wisc. who wanted to increase their number of heated hoop-houses for winter spinach. Warner Hageman explained that “Frontera pre-paid for half their winter tomato...
order so we were able to build three more houses” (Howard, 2003). Organizations like Bayless’ provide strong links between farmers and chefs, while at the same time increasing access to capital. While the Hagemans expanded their operation and have a set market, Bayless is able to receive a high-quality product that meets his preferences for locally grown foods, preferences which are shared by many chefs.

**Conclusion**

The decision to enter the gourmet restaurant niche market in Nevada will be based on the specific conditions met by each producer and should be a carefully considered option. The market has potential to increase profits, provide an avenue for enterprise diversification, offer relative market stability through partnership building, and be an opportunity for new experiences within the industry. It also demands a shift in services provided and conducted, a willingness to engage in shared decision-making, investment in research and experimentation, and an attention to detail. Producers who wish to supply the market will need to evaluate their enterprise, draw contingency plans, make contacts, develop relationships and take time to understand the preferences of their consumers in a detailed manner.

The focus of product processes must be on quality and timeliness, as well as product differentiation. In Nevada, the niche market is relatively untapped, with the largest need being to inform chefs of local produce availability. Finally, opportunities for producers who wish to enter the market have been implemented to relative success in other regions and hold promise for Nevada if adapted to local conditions, including cooperatives, networking and coordination programs, product and infrastructure development plans, and more. Being successful in taking produce from farm fresh to the gourmet table takes thinking outside the box and investing the time and effort to develop strong relationships.

**References**


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