

In Portland, farm to table reaches beyond fine dining restaurants and into sports bars, chains and tiny cafes

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Michael Russell, The Oregonian
By



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Grain & Gristle is among the crop of Portland restaurants taking farm-to-table concepts to the next level.

Dwayne Beliakoff was flying high in 2008, with a successful restaurant, **Roux**, and a winning bid to run another in downtown's Director Park, where he dreamed of an upscale lunch menu highlighting local ingredients.

Snow, then fire, brought him back to earth. A severe winter storm shut down the city's roads and stores for days, emptying Roux's kitchen and tables. Beliakoff was forced to close. Then, a fire at the park space exacerbated construction delays. Considering that and the poor economy, he and his business partner adjusted their plan.

"We couldn't just appeal to 'ladies who lunch' and people who always get a good bottle of wine,"

Beliakoff says. "We had to appeal to the business core, students at Portland State University, moms with kids running through the fountain."

They redesigned the park cafe as a burger shack.

One thing they didn't change? The commitment to local, seasonal produce.

It's written on the chalkboard at your neighborhood cafe, or at the bottom of the drive-through menu at that fast food place by the freeway: "We strive to use local ingredients."

The farm-to-table movement, adopted by pioneering Portland chefs in the early 1990s, has been around long enough to become a well-worn cliché and the butt of jokes. But, spurred by forward-thinking farmers and pesky diners, produce from Oregon and southwest Washington has leapt off the white linen tablecloth and into neighborhood sports bars, Northwest chains and tiny family-run eateries. Today, a crop of new chefs, along with purveyors of those chains, pubs and cafes, have joined Portland's farm-to-table pioneers in bringing the concept to the masses. That's not only been good for diners who want to know where their food comes from, but it's also drawn national attention

to Oregon's dining scene, and created a new market for rural farmers, even in an economic downturn.

A sign at Beliakoff's burger joint, **Violetta**, which opened in early 2010, shows the "anatomy" of their burger. Lines lead from each ingredient to the name of the source -- all farms and ranches in Oregon and Washington.

"If we were going to do fast food, we were going to do it our way, in a way that Oregonians would embrace," Beliakoff says.

Each year, he takes thousands of pounds of in-season, Northwest-grown tomatoes and slow roasts, marinates, oil packs and freezes them. These juicy roasted tomatoes are used all year long.

The phenomenon is being pondered in the boardrooms of Northwest chains, too. Anyone who's driven past a billboard showing Vancouver-based Burgerville's sweet potato fries or pumpkin shakes knows the 50-year-old company is committed to local, seasonal fare. **Cafe Yumm!**, a Eugene-based chain with 11 Oregon locations, announced last year they had contracted with a farm near Milton-Freewater to grow the black beans for their signature Yumm Bowl, a mess of brown rice, black beans, veggies, avocado, sour cream and their tangy Yumm Sauce.

"Black beans have not been a cash crop in Oregon ever," says Ed Gerdes, a vice president at Beau Delicious! International, the chain's franchiser. "We're creating a new market."

Diner 2011

The Oregonian is presenting this year's Diner reviews in the week leading up to the section's newspaper publication on Thursday, June 23.



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Sonny Davis (right) delivers Quinault Blueback Sockeye to Chef Vitaly Paley Wednesday in back of Paley's Place restaurant in Portland. Davis, a Quinault Tribe member, buys fish caught by his fellow tribe members and delivers to Portland once a week. Davis says the tribe is allowed to sell only a set number of fish outside of the tribe but with his company, Sea-atco, he is looking at other sustainable fish products to sell.

The chain's red beans come from Northwest farms, and the company plans to sign a contract this year with an Oregon poultry farmer. Gerdes says the restaurant follows the triple bottom line -- "people, planet, profit."

"We have the ultimate user, our guest, and we're trying to backtrack to the farmers to provide the product to us," he says.

Local products are also blooming at sports bars, not known as bastions of fine cuisine. **Spirit of '77**, Nate Tilden's hip spot near the Oregon Convention Center offers a "local farm salad," while the **Blitz Sports Bar** mini-chain makes an effort to spend its money with local processors and purveyors (if not producers), including using sausages from Zenner's Sausage Company. And 21

of the 26 beers on tap at **the new Tigard location** come from Northwest breweries, most in Oregon, says Tim Becker, director of operations for the Blitz mini-chain. The bar shops at a liquor store two blocks away and buys locally distilled liquors from Portland's increasing supply.

Even mom and pop shops are making an effort. Jami LeBaron of Sellwood's **Lovecup** shops at Clackamas Costco for most of her produce, looking for fruits and vegetables grown on the West Coast. But in the summer, she heads to Sauvie Island, picks her own berries and bakes them into pies for the cafe.

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Sonny Davis carries a deep-bottomed tray of Sockeye salmon up the stairs to **Paley's Place**. A few years ago, Davis, who grew up selling fish on Quinault tribal lands on the Washington coast, set up a company with the intention of selling seafood to high-end restaurants in Oregon and Washington.



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Chef Vitaly Paley breathes in the aroma of Chehalis River sturgeon delivered to his restaurant Wednesday by Sonny Davis of the Quinault tribe. Paley says the fish Davis delivers is the best and freshest there is.

This works for chef Vitaly Paley, who greets Davis inside the front door and puts a palm around one of the fat fish. "Smell that," Paley says. "It's so fresh."

When Paley moved to Oregon in 1994, he knew he wanted to use local produce, but didn't know how or where to begin. He befriended local chefs he'd read about at a Manhattan newsstand that carried The Oregonian -- Cory Schreiber of **Wildwood**, Greg Higgins of **Higgins**, Philippe Boulot of the **Heathman** -- and they would trade notes about farmers and ranchers.

Driven by demand, purveyors are easier to find now. Paley met Davis after tasting his fish at **Ned**

Ludd, a Northeast Portland restaurant known for using local ingredients.

One of the newer chefs accepting the farm-to-table baton is Ben Meyer, a former chef at Ned Ludd who now runs Northeast Portland's **Grain & Gristle**.

"The first time I was at the market and it dawned on me that I might be able to do this, I was talking to a farmer and I said, 'Is it even legal for me to buy vegetables from you for my restaurant?' And he's like, 'Yeah, I sell to Wildwood.' "

Meyer thinks the future lies in two directions: preserving produce by methods such as pickling -- "so in February I can bring out a flavor that we haven't seen since August" -- and by taking advantage of under-utilized city greenspace for agricultural purposes.

Pickles line the wall at Grain & Gristle. And, at Ned Ludd, Meyer helped turn a vacant lot behind the restaurant into a small urban farm. The plot was eventually deeded to the **Oregon Sustainable Agricultural Trust** for preservation. Its vegetables go to neighbors and on to the menu at Ned Ludd.

Grain & Gristle's salad greens come from a friend who farms exclusively in the side gardens of private Portland homes. But Meyer works with larger farms as well, especially in winter when "smaller farmers basically stop selling."

"I'm not doing this because it sells more food. It would be a lot easier to just pick up the phone and call Sysco," the "Walmart of restaurant supply," Meyer says. "Red Robin doesn't do any of this and they sell 1,000 times more food in a day than I do."

But Meyer does see room for the movement to grow.

"I think we're at a really unique time where people are going to say, 'You're just being nitpicky about the farm-to-table thing,'" he says. "Well, somebody's got to be nitpicky. We have to drive production. The more we're on this, the more commonplace it will be."

-- **Michael Russell**

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