



National Conference Center showcases “Discover the Taste of Local” menu

Chef sets goal of 70 percent buying within 100 miles of his kitchen
By [Shannon Sollinger](#) July 21, 2011



First course at the 'Discover the Taste of Local' luncheon offered local tomatoes paired with fresh mozzarella with basil from the center's herb garden; fresh shucked corn salad and char-grilled peppers with oregano vinaigrette; and soil-grown mesclun greens with local blackberries, candied walnuts, red onions and goat cheese. Credit: [Shannon Sollinger](#)

Rule Number One for a chef who wants to buy fresh and local: Don't start with a menu, end with it.

“I used to plan my menus, then go shopping,” said Executive Chef Craig Mason at the National Conference Center in Leesburg. “Now I find out what's available out there, then I write the menus.”

A July 13 luncheon showcased the National Conference Center's commitment to buying 70 percent of its meats, vegetables, fruits and greens from farmers doing business within 100 miles of the dining rooms on Upper Belmont Place.

A thriving herb garden on the grounds of the conference provides all the basil, mint, parsley, rosemary, sage, tarragon and thyme the kitchen can ask for. It travels a few hundred feet.

“Eat local, it's a thousand miles fresher,” said Sharon Meyers, director of catering. The purpose of the luncheon, she said, was to “show potential customers what we can do.”

Several farmers within that distance have changed the way they do business to be able to respond to the needs of a large, institutional buyer.

Dave Lay, of Linda's Mercantile in Winchester, calls Mason from his tractor and finds out what Mason is going to need in 60 days. Then he plants it.

Deb Williamson (formerly of FarmerGirls.com, the on-line farmers market in Warrenton), sales manager for Blue Ridge Produce in Culpeper, attended the luncheon to share her role in bringing fresh and local to a large kitchen.

“We aggregate from many farmers,” she explained. “I touch base daily with our farmers, check on what’s ripe, get the prices, then I talk to the chefs. Then I place orders with the farms.”

Mesclun greens and peppers on the day’s menu came from Blue Ridge Produce.

“Our goal is to provide local food on a wholesale level, to work with institutional buyers.”

The luncheon, served family style, offered three choices for first course and three choices of entree. “The Finale” was peach cobbler.

The goat cheese Mason used came from Sweet Valley Dairy in Elkton. “The stuff is absolutely fantastic,” the chef said. “They take a soft goat’s cheese, press the moisture out and soak it in Australian merlot for a few days, then deliver the wheel.”

He snacks on the rind, Mason confessed.

The rockfish on the menu came from Profish in Washington, D.C. Mason has also committed to using sustainable foods whenever possible. The Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch rates Chesapeake Bay rockfish a “Best Choice.”

Mason is also changing the way he orders, both to make the bulk orders easier on local purveyors, and to bring the price points down. A small party at the conference center could be 150 people, and if he wants to serve lamb chops – that’s 300 lamb chops and there are only 16 chops per lamb.

“If I call a local farmer and ask him to slaughter 15 lambs, he’s not going to do it. I only want the chops, and he has to sell all the legs, ground meat, shanks and so on. The thing to do is design a menu that uses all those other products. I need the lamb chops now, but somewhere down the road I’ve got space for lamb sausage, lamb shanks. I can get a cheaper price because I am buying the whole lamb, and I can have it butchered the way I’ll need it later.”

Mason started developing the “Taste of Local” program last fall, he said. “We really geared up this summer. I took a visit to Washington and Lee where they are doing this. We went to see what they are doing and how. One of the biggest barriers, given our volume, was how to get enough food and product.”

Now he calls Lay and Lay plants it two months before it gets delivered fresh on a Monday morning.

The National Conference Center books groups from two to 2,000, said Sales manager Carolyn Bradford. The clients add their thoughts to menu planning.

Beer and wine came from Corcoran Vineyards in nearby Waterford.

Dessert on the “Discover the Taste of Local” illustrated Mason’s “reverse engineered” menu: Well before the event, he chatted with Lay, out on his tractor as usual. What would he have in two weeks?

Peaches.

Peach cobbler it is.

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