

National Conference Center Expands “Farm to Table” Program

Overcomes challenges in serving 2,000 meals a day

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Several years ago, the National Conference Center in Leesburg, Va. decided to go green and implemented a wide array of energy saving programs. Last year, the site also began making a large, concerted effort to serve locally grown food-- quite a challenge for NCC's Executive Chef Craig Mason who serves upwards of 2,000 meals a day for NCC guests. So, they invited all of the region's farmers over for networking and an opportunity to discuss the community's needs as well as NCC's needs. Two local farms immediately came forward to partner with NCC and they have also implemented contract farming.

“When Chef Mason first came to our farm and mentioned that he was in need of spinach, I thought he was looking for 30 pounds,” explained Dave Lay, owner of Linda's Mercantile in Winchester, Va. and one of the farms working with NCC. “Then I realized that he was looking for 300 pounds of spinach—a week,” Dave added. “I initially thought he was joking.”

“The quantities can often be extremely large for small, local farms,” stated Mason. “When we have large training conferences, or large weddings, I am often cooking one to two thousand meals a day.” To get the quantities down accurately and be able to serve local food, Mason has to reverse engineer his menus and find out what's available first. A typical week would include 200-300 pounds of spinach, 500-600 pounds of tomatoes, 400-600 pounds of lettuce—as a start.

While the quantities are often a challenge, the upside is that NCC is located within close proximity to many farms. “It's easier for us to go to the farms and pick up the products,” Mason stated. It's not uncommon either to see Mason walking the fields with Dave or his wife Linda and checking to see which crops will be ready when. “Gone are the days when I would just pull some recipes together. Now, my first call is to the farms we work with,” Mason explained. NCC has a large herb garden planted on site too, and Mason strives to use as much of the local ingredients as possible. He also freezes some ingredients for use in the winter.

To further the NCC green program and reciprocate to Linda's Mercantile, NCC provides the farm with all of its used cooking oil which the farm uses to power its tractors and run its greenhouses.

Given Mason's and NCC's expertise on conference training, meetings and special events as well as their focus on local food, NCC recently released a white paper on how food impacts meeting performance. The paper emphasizes the importance of eating "brain food" versus junk food and how various foods measure up.

"Some people don't realize the power that food has over us all, including its influence on how we think and react in meetings," Mason added. "At NCC we are striving to emphasize the importance of healthy eating for a variety of reasons."

For a copy of the white paper, "Food for Thought", or to learn more about the NCC, go to www.conferencecenter.com.

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