Does featuring locally sourced ingredients on your shelves and menus drive business? Or does it just increase costs and cause other business challenges? Restaurateurs and retailers share their experience with the benefits and obstacles of keeping it close to home.

BY ROBYN PFORR RYAN

Chef Jake Des Vignes and his business partner Yaron Milgrom are used to challenges. The pair has founded two successful restaurants in San Francisco's Mission district—Local Mission Eatery and seafood-focused Local's Corner—where their love of food and commitment to serving locally sourced ingredients are inextricably intertwined.

Still, they are facing a steeper climb with their newest venture, Local Mission Market, an all-local shop. The 2,700-square-foot market sells naturally grown produce from Northern California, sustainably caught wild fish, and all-natural, grass-fed beef from cattle raised by cowboys on horseback. Its kitchen staff makes pasta, sauces, pickles, sausages, fresh cheeses, bread, and pastries in-house, down to the packaging and labeling.
Vinland restaurant uses only ingredients found within Maine's borders. With a New England climate, that means no olive oil, no lemons, no black pepper, and no cane sugar.

"The reaction has been mixed," says Des Vignes. "There's a lot of traffic, but people aren't used to this kind of grocery store. There is not this massive bounty of produce people are used to seeing. There are no bananas, no pineapples. There is a lot of educating."

Several months in, Des Vignes has developed a rhythm for producing food for the market and the two restaurants. Mondays and Thursdays are dedicated to making fresh pasta; snacks, another two days. Five days a week, he visits the farmers markets for the best produce. The team candied stone fruits and citrus on Wednesday nights. Somewhere in between, they use a pressure canner to package products and create labels.

"It's been a big learning curve, but to us, local is not just about labeling," says Des Vignes. "It's about eating well and eating locally produced, all-around delicious food. We want to serve the best, right after it's pulled out of the ground or off the boat, when the flavor is at its best."

A National Movement
According to the "What's Hot 2014 Culinary Forecast," an annual survey of chefs compiled by the National Restaurant Association, local foods occupied three of the top 10 predicted menu trends for this year. Locally sourced meats and seafood and locally sourced produce ranked No. 1 and 2 on the list, while hyperlocal sourcing came in at No. 6. (Environmental sustainability and sustainable seafood also ranked in the top 10.)

More and more, chefs, restaurateurs, and grocery store owners are dedicating themselves to undertaking the extra work and extra risks involved in serving the freshest, locally sourced food. In Philadelphia, two recent college graduates have successfully weathered their second winter serving an almost entirely local menu out of their Farm Truck, a food truck offering creative dishes like a...
grilled squash and cheese sandwich and chipotle black bean chili in the leaner, cold months. The Hilton Nashville Downtown has begun offering a farm-to-hotel menu, sourced with food and produce mostly from Tennessee. AT&T Park, home of the San Francisco Giants, and Denver’s Colorado Convention Center have dedicated efforts to serving local food; the latter is planting a garden to grow produce to use in on-site menus. In St. Louis, the newly opened Foodie Foods grocery store is bringing pesticide-free, organic produce and value-added products from 150 local vendors to an underserved area. And chef David Levi, founder of Vinland in Portland, Maine, has made serving locally produced, seasonal menu a cornerstone of his new restaurant.

“This is the only way I would have opened a restaurant,” says Levi, who apprenticed at Noma in Copenhagen and Faviken Magasinet in northern Sweden. “This is about wanting to use my energy for a constructive and positive response to what is a troubling situation.”

Levi has a bold vision for Vinland. A history teacher-turned-chef, he wants his restaurant to be part of a food revolution that restores the American palate to eating healthier fare that is, ideally, locally sourced and sustainably harvested. To that end, he is using only ingredients found within Maine’s borders. With a New England climate, that means no olive oil, no lemons, no black pepper, and no cane sugar.

“Our long-term goal is to help launch a culinary program. There’s nothing more core to a culture than its food. The value of a culture reflects and derives from the food it cultivates. I think the best hope we have is to radically change the way we harvest and eat food,” he says. Within a few months, he plans to begin holding weekly cooking, nutrition, and ecology classes in his kitchen.

Through months of trial and error, Levi has devised inventive menus featuring Maine’s many offerings. Instead of olive oil, he uses clarified butter and animal fats or creates dishes that don’t need oil. Instead of cane sugar, he uses maple syrup or a food’s natural sweetness. Instead of lemons, he uses other acidifiers, such as apple cider vinegar, cranberries, sour fruit, and vegetables (even sauerkraut) or a paste he has made out of reduced yogurt whey. Vinland’s beverage menu includes wines and coffees harvested beyond Maine’s borders, but ensures they are organic and/or fair trade certified.

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After enduring years of supply problems, some retailers, such as Foragers City Grocers, have turned to farming themselves.
DELIVERING TO THE LOCAVORE MARKET

The increased hunger for locally produced food has given rise to several new business models that cater directly to consumers. With the click of a mouse, one can order from a bounty of produce and artisan pantry items, baked goods, and more for delivery within a city's limits.

**Good Eggs.** Founded in 2013 by five former Google employees, Good Eggs is a web-based delivery service that allows customers to order a wide array of fresh foods and locally produced products. Five days a week, Good Eggs delivers customers' orders to their doorstep, for a fee, or free to one of a handful of neighborhood delivery stops. Currently, Good Eggs operates in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Brooklyn, N.Y., and New Orleans. The company has plans to expand broadly in the U.S. and worldwide, says co-founder Rob Spiro. The Good Eggs team of 115 employees works with more than 400 producers, using sustainable practices, and operates four food hubs. "Every week is our biggest one yet," Spiro says.

In late winter, Brooklyn, N.Y., customers had well over a hundred choices, including chicken pot pie made with pastured chickens and a butter crust, gluten-free Amoretti chocolate, dayboat scallops, littleneck clams, pasture-raised eggs, several dozen cheeses, yogurts, butters and ghee, frozen and fresh produce, naturally raised chickens, a whole goose, heritage corn tortillas, loaves of crusty bread, granola, fresh pasta, small-batch jams, and even a seasonal bouquet of flowers. Asked if there was anything Good Eggs has found it really can't deliver, Spiro replies, "Cream pies. One bump in the road ..."

**Farmigo.** Started by a software entrepreneur in 2009, Farmigo is bringing the bounty of a farmers market to self-organized food communities in the New York City and San Francisco Bay areas. Customers desiring access to locally produced food use Farmigo to create food communities of 10 or more people, often neighbors or work colleagues, and get produce delivered, free of charge, from a range of local farms. The site offers a variety of produce grown without pesticides, pasture-raised meat, dairy, and eggs free of GMOs, hormones, and antibiotics. The food is harvested, delivered to the Farmigo facility, sorted and packed into individual customer bags, then delivered, all within 48 hours of harvest.

Some 300 farms in 25 states participate with Farmigo. "It's not just about food, but what we're doing is also fostering the peer group that will help them continue to eat more healthfully," says founder Benzi Ronen. "We're connecting people to the people who grow their food, and that's a very meaningful experience."

**Ubrlocal.** The founders of this Seattle startup began testing their peer-to-peer marketplace website in beta last November. Their aim is to help grow the city's urban food economy through creating community connections. "We have a flourishing food scene in Seattle and a lot of people with tech talent who have a passion for food," says co-founder Liz Smith. "This allows them to connect with one another and share the resources they have and need to produce food."

After creating a simple profile, Seattle residents can use the site to sell, buy, trade, or gift food items and beyond, as long as it's related to growing and making food. In mid-winter, the marketplace included offers to sell a pair of Nigerian dwarf goats, a request to buy organic juices, a request from a small kombucha company to share a kitchen, an offer to use an underutilized greenhouse and garden beds, and offers to swap produce. Spring is expected to be a heavy time for the marketplace with requests for compost, plant starts, and buying and swapping locally grown or made food. The site has 200 users—or "prosumers," a term marrying consumer and producer—all located within a 10-mile radius of downtown Seattle, which the founders view as the uber-local distance within which one could walk or bike, hence the company name. Ubrlocal has had requests to establish marketplaces in five cities, Smith says.
A New Way of Doing Business

In many ways these stores and restaurants committed to local food are restitching patterns of eating and connecting with communities that have become increasingly fragmented with the changing dwelling, living, and work patterns of the 21st century. And to do it they’re often turning to new tools and technologies. Both Vinland and Local Mission Market were financed in part by successful Kickstarter campaigns. Local Mission Market offers a full web store for pickup and delivery and a custom in-store iPad app for weighed items and quicker checkouts. Good Eggs, a local-food delivery service with early rollouts in California, Brooklyn, N.Y., and New Orleans, uses highly developed computer software to run the fully online retailer.

“We’re trying to increase the connection between food producers and their customers, and we’re doing it in this Back to the Future way in which the newest technology has enabled better customer service,” explains Rob Spiro, one of the founders of Good Eggs.

Key Factors in Building Interest

The interest in local foods has been growing since Alice Waters’ founding of Chez Panisse in the 1970s, but has gained a new life
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since the mid 2000s. In 2007, two influential best sellers—Barbara Kingsolver’s Animal, Vegetable, Miracle and Michael Pollan’s The Omnivore’s Dilemma—highlighted the superior nutritional value and taste of fresh, local foods alongside the costs on the environment of transporting food over long distances. That same year, the New Oxford American Dictionary made “locavore” its word of the year.

The locavore movement encourages consumers to buy from farmers markets or even to grow or pick their own food as a healthier option that is also an environmentally friendly measure. An oft-cited statistic from Worldwatch Institute puts the average distance food travels from harvesting to the store at 1,500 miles. The increased interest in local foods has given rise to a growth in farmers markets. In 2012, the U.S. Department of Agriculture tallied 7,864 farmers markets, a 9.6 percent jump from the previous year.

Overcoming Obstacles

Menus featuring local food are built on strongly fostered relationships with suppliers, carefully chosen for their growing principles and dedication to cultivating great food. At Local Mission Eatery, Des Vignes wasn’t able to offer anything with a marinara sauce after his supply of frozen summer tomatoes ran out a month into the winter—until he discovered a supplier of organic, canned tomatoes. Levi is still searching for a supplier of half- or whole- animal, grass-fed cattle. Kris Pepper, co-owner of Philadelphia’s Farm Truck, says his business did not become viable until he found local farms with good growing practices that he could partner with to provide the produce. Before that, produce costs were too high, he says.

“We’re lucky this is a viable business model, now that we’ve found our suppliers and know what we’re doing; people really respond to it,” Pepper says. “It’s an added bonus that we feel good about doing business this way.”

Chef Todd Villani and his sister, Laurie Meyers, have worked hard to find local vendors for fresh ingredients to serve at Terre à Terre in Carlstadt, N.J. Distributors often don’t identify the source of produce, Meyers says, so they have to do extra work to find out whether a farm is local and learn about its growing practices.

“It’s an ongoing struggle. It’s really about going to the docks and talking to the fishermen, talking to the people who make the food,” says Villani, who spent five years training under Marcus Samuelsson before opening his restaurant. “We wanted to be ultra-local and support our community, support local businesses, so we put in the extra time to find out whether a farm is local.

When Anna Castellani and her business partners opened Foragers City Grocery in Brooklyn, N.Y., in 2005, they found few farmers willing to sell to a small retail operation. At that time, farmers sold directly only to community-supported agriculture programs and restaurants.

“When we opened it was very, very early in this [local movement]. Our store was not well received. Customers were not thinking then of the provenance of their food. They didn’t see the value of local milk. They didn’t like the smell or taste of grass-fed beef,” Castellani says. “All that has changed now.”

Today, Foragers is thriving with two locations, a farm-to-table restaurant, and a wine store. “It took us a lot of effort and energy to find our vendors,” Castellani adds. “We learned all of our lessons the hard way, but we are proud of the products and produce we carry.”

Farming, Food Hubs, and Other Solutions

After enduring years of supply problems, some retailers, like Castellani, have turned to farming themselves. The Foragers founders routinely sold out of eggs and could not get enough clean, organic greens. Today, co-owner and Castellani’s husband, Richard Lamb, cultivates a quarter-acre of their own 3-acre farm, grows greens in their large greenhouse, and tends to a flock of some 120 chickens, soon to be 150 come spring.

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Far from Brooklyn, in the mountains of Virginia, Steven Hopp, founder of Harvest Table restaurant in Meadowview and husband of Animal Vegetable Miracle's Barbara Kingsolver, hired a manager to farm a quarter-acre and a large high tunnel on his farm to provide 80 different seasonal vegetables and herbs to fill in gaps for his restaurant. For Harvest Table's first three years of operation, Hopp continually dealt with insufficient supplies of restaurant staples like onions and greens. Today, the restaurant serves mostly locally sourced foods, organic when he can get it, but his focus is on supporting as many employees and food providers as he can in his Appalachian community.

"The bottom line is that we are devoted to this, but we do not make a profit," Hopp concedes. "I think as a business model this works in urban areas, but here we use democratic pricing and we try not to compromise the mission. Thankfully, my wife's book has been translated into 14 different languages and I can afford this."

Creating an Infrastructure
Sourcing local foods should become easier with an established foundation. Good Eggs' Spiro speaks of touring vacant buildings to find hub facilities for his delivery service that had been used for food production decades before. "In the past 50 years, our food system has become increasingly regionalized and the smaller-scale infrastructure has decayed. We hope to help create infrastructure," he says.

In New Jersey, Laurie Meyers has attended meetings to create a food hub in her area. Until that happens, she has been known to drive to farms and put boxes of produce in the back of her car to get it to her brother's restaurant. She is currently working to develop a buying club with another farm-to-table restaurant.

"This is not sustainable," Meyers says. "This is the Garden State. We have great produce. But it's been slow-going. The more chefs who value this, the more likely it will be that the government will help to put the infrastructure in place."

In St. Louis, Jeffrey Randol helped create a food hub several years ago—with a large scratch kitchen, cold and freezer storage, and processing equipment—that aggregated produce from local farmers so they could sell to larger institutional clients like schools and hospitals. Fields Foods, the new grocery store he co-founded, is an outgrowth of this successful hub and provides a greater demand stream for these farmers' produce, he says. The store has 25,000 square feet of grocery retail space and sells produce from 150 to 250 vendors, depending on the season, all located within a 100-mile radius of the store. The store is now able to partner with local farmers to help plan their growing season, giving the farmers added security and Randol's store the products his customers want.

Collaborating with local, artisan vendors and then sharing these vendors' stories with customers is something Villani loves to do. For his Valentine's Day menu this year, he got to know the pasta maker in Brooklyn who created a rose-colored beet pasta for the special occasion.

"Chefs now have a bigger voice than ever before," he says. "I come out and meet all the guests. You read them to see if they're open to hearing about the producers, and many are intrigued by it. They're learning more about the whole food system and not just thinking about the plate they're eating. It's a really exciting time."

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