

Marketing Your Potato Crop to the Culinary Community
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Over the last years, all of us who grow potatoes on any sizeable acreage have felt the twin pressures of Idaho marketing and cheap Canadian imports, all the while experiencing increased costs of production. We have seen many multi-generational potato farms go out of business. We get auction advertisements frequently. We hear of fathers deciding against passing the potato farm onto the next generation.

The consumer market has, as we all know, been affected by Idaho's insistence that the Idaho russet is the world's best potato. Magazine recipes specify Idaho russets, when round white potatoes would do just as well. Secondly, we have also seen that the good old days of every family consuming ten pounds of potatoes a week are gone, probably forever. An increased number of potato packings and styles (from a single shrink-wrapped russet for microwaving to a five pound plastic bag of chefs), has fragmented consumer purchases. At the same time, people are eating out more than ever before, or using processed foods. The sad fact is, most people feel preparing a baked potato is just too hard.

These are hard, cold facts that are not going away, just as our land taxes are probably not going to become lower anytime soon.

Accordingly, over the last few years, we have supplemented our wholesale business with a number of direct marketing techniques. Many of you already do some or all of these, I am sure.

The first thing we promote in any way possible is the flavor of the potato. Most local farmers still choose their varieties with flavor in mind, in addition to the characteristics of disease-resistance, depth of eyes, and set.

The next message is that local potatoes have not consumed enormous amounts of fossil fuels getting to the consumer.

And, if it is true for your farm as it is for ours, another important message is that your potatoes are not sprayed with sprout inhibitors, unlike many or most potatoes from the West.

Our audience for these messages includes:

- Local restaurants
- Customers at Farmers' Markets
- Newspapers and other media
- Local supermarkets
- Local schools

Potatoes are our livelihood and our life and sometimes we underestimate how little any of the audiences I mention really know about potatoes or cooking them.

Up until recently, the potato has been relatively anonymous, a commodity like “egg” or “milk” or “banana.” So identifying it by area of origin and cooking properties really gives your potato an identity that is unique and therefore can be sold as such.

Here is how we have approached these markets:

Restaurants: we pound the pavement, so to speak. Bring samples around, talk them up, follow up on how they like them. Direct delivery takes time but it is worth it, we feel. We get a higher price than by wholesale and when they list our name on their menu it is good advertising.

Farmers’ Markets: Give your customers plenty of information. How you grow, how the plants look, what exactly “new” potatoes are, what the different varieties you grow taste like. Most people who shop at Farmers’ Markets are already interested in better quality of food and in learning about what they are eating. Have recipes available. Make cards for your various varieties. Be on the lookout for chefs who shop the market and offer to work out standing orders with them.

Newspapers: Bring some of your produce over to your food editor. Invite them to the farm, for planting, or harvest. Offer favorite family recipes, even tips for home gardeners. They need to come up with material every week, week after week, so an interesting story idea usually will be considered. Do keep in mind though that no newspaper owes anybody anything. It is up to use to do the work of creating the idea, as opposed to saying “hey why don’t you do a story on my farm.”

Local supermarkets: Consumer demand for local food is warming produce managers up to the idea of stocking food from family farms. Find out what’s involved in becoming a vendor and bring some samples over. The big chains need bar codes on bags, so keep that in mind the next time you have some printed. Or offer 50 pound bags that they can sell loose. And do some homework. As a farmer you may be producing most of your own food and so maybe you don’t get to the market that often. Before you approach any supermarket, become familiar with how it runs, and what its produce department is like, and what potatoes they are selling presently.

Local schools: If you are lucky, you may find a local school district that is supporting local foods, and that does not feel using fresh potatoes is “too much work.” That is the biggest hurdle for the food service manager: getting cooks to not grumble about having to wash or cut potatoes. Our experience has been that once local potatoes are on the menu, kids and teachers will ask for more. One important note: New York school regulations forbid the use of non-US produced food. If that is the case in your area, at least that rules Canada out, although the food buyers may not even know what they are getting from their wholesaler.

We are finding that the best school potato is the red B. They just need to rinse, and maybe make one cut before roasting them with some oil and herbs. Quick work for a popular result. I went to a school nutrition conference in October and met numerous food service managers who regularly use fresh potatoes and love to do so. Their recipes include parsleyed potatoes, salt potatoes (using leftover pretzel salt), and roasted. They leave the skin on in all instances. At the same conference, the national beef council was promoting a “hot beef sundae,” about which we

are a bit ambivalent but it does use a nice big scoop of mashed potatoes as the base. Just in case you want to try this at home, you top it with beef in gravy, a bit of sour cream and a cherry tomato on top.

The culinary trials that John Mishanec and Cornell have been running are turning out to be an excellent start for creating individual personalities for local potatoes. As chefs go for local ingredients, they want to know.... What does this potato do? Will it mash well, will it stay firm for a salad or fall apart when I boil it? Will it hold its color or turn gray?

These are the kinds of things chefs and home cooks should be able to know about your potatoes. You can run your own trials.... At home, try each variety you grow in a number of basic recipes: mashed, baked, roasted, potato salad slices, and French fries if you can. You can also give interested chefs a sampler of your varieties and ask for their input. That alone can generate a news story, with pictures and recipes. Good for the farm, good for the restaurant.

Keep notes on the cooking qualities of each variety so you will have ready access to this information, because you may be referring to it frequently. You will become an expert on your products, you will speak from experience and probably even have some recipes, and most of all you will be an advocate for the local potato, whether it is New Hampshire, Maine, Vermont or New York. Don't miss an opportunity to remind people of the fact that local potatoes are better and that people help keep farms alive – and open land open – when they buy from local farms. People need to be told that their actions have consequences and they have the ability to make a difference in their communities. I am not afraid to say that any time somebody – home cook or wholesaler – buys potatoes from the West or from Canada, they are helping bring down the family farm. They may not care, but at least they have been given the message.

The diversification of marketing efforts I outlined above have meant a lot more work for our farm, in labor, bagging time, sometimes hand digging and the marketing. It has added to our income and profit and we feel as though we are doing something pro-active and not just being tilled under.

I wish you energy and creativity in marketing your good local food.

Pat Sheldon