



**I**n November, 2002, more than 50 growers, agricultural professionals, and others gathered in the beachside town of Ventura as part of the California Farm Conference, to discuss how to market directly to restaurants and retailers. During a half-day short course led by **Kris Pustina**, a successful and innovative restaurateur in Ventura, and **Mark Mulcahy**, well-known marketing consultant, participants discussed the key elements for creating a successful, entrepreneurial relationship with local restaurants and retailers. The group also compiled a list of people, organizations and resources for future information and assistance. This leaflet summarizes the results of the group discussion in a question/answer format. Key contacts are listed at the end.

# SELLING

## Directly to Restaurants and Retailers



Compiled by  
Gail Feenstra, Jeri Ohmart, and David Chaney

with contributions from  
Mark Mulcahy (Organic Options), and  
Kris Pustina (Frankie's Restaurant, Ventura)

Published by the University of California Sustainable Agriculture  
Research and Education Program. Copyright 2003.

In a small group discussion format, all participants developed answers to the following critical questions about strategies for direct marketing:

## ▶ Whom should I talk to when I am ready to make my first contact with a restaurant or retailer?

### Communication and first contact is extremely important!

- 📎 Suggestions for whom to contact first:
  - Restaurant or retail owner (person responsible for buying food and beverage)
  - Restaurant or retailer's kitchen manager or assistant manager
  - Restaurant's chef and/or sous chef
  - Restaurant's pastry chef
  - Store's produce manager (the person who might directly buy from you) Consider the size of the store—do they buy direct, or only from distributors?
  - Store's deli manager (the person who prepares food and might need good produce)
  - Store's other manager (if a large chain)
- 📎 Know the restaurant or business. What kind of food does it specialize in? Have you eaten there? Who are the key people involved? Who patronizes the business? How long has it been in business? What are its signature features? What are the menus and/or products like?
- 📎 Come with recipes and information about your farm, your produce, the ways you can use the produce. Be creative. Give people ideas, menus. If it's a value-added product, such as a special sauce, give ideas about what it can be served with.
- 📎 Be sure you know the name of each person you contact and how to pronounce it. This will make a positive impression.
- 📎 If a person is not available at a particular time, leave a sample and tell him or her you will return. Leave a sample in any case—it's always a good idea.



## ▶ What are the key points I want to address in my first contact with the restaurant or retailer?

### Key points for restaurants:

- 📎 **Taste and sample:** First, be sure you let them taste and sample the product. Nothing takes the place of the tasting. Let them hold it, touch it, give them a sensory experience. Talk about your farm or business while you eat together.
- 📎 **Story:** Be sure that you are ready with the “story” of your farm. Make it a story, if you haven't already. People want to hear the real life context for your business. Make yourself and your farm real.
  - Where are you from? What's the history of your farm? Who else lives on the farm? What kinds of animals, if any, live there? Bring pictures. If you have a web site, be sure to direct them to it.
  - Invite them to visit your farm or ranch.
  - Tell them about your growing season.
  - Explain specifically how your product is better, even if the timing is not what they are used to.
  - Let them know about the shelf life of your product.

- 📎 **Farm practices:** Talk about how you grow your produce. Be specific. Buyers want to know—is it organic? Is it certified? Exactly what do you do in terms of your practices and what is your philosophy that accompanies those practices? For some buyers, certification is less important than knowing the details of your practice. If they know you grow organic, even though you may not be certified, they might be willing to buy from you. *It all depends on the relationship you establish!*
- 📎 **Logistics:** Find out their schedule and logistics. Ask them:
  - What is your ordering cycle?
  - What consumer groups do you cater to?
  - What are your receiving hours (very important)? Which days of the week do you receive? What are your invoice procedures?
  - What are your quality standards? Standards for organic?
  - How do you need the product boxed, labeled, signed (signage)?
- 📎 **Delivery:** Convince them of your ability to deliver. Then, be sure that your delivery schedule is reliable and consistent. Businesses need to be able to rely on regular, predictable orders (even though on their end they might need to be flexible). Be compulsive about being on time.
- 📎 **Discuss your needs, too:** Discuss your scheduling needs. Make up a price list, so you can be clear on the minimum you need.
- 📎 **Trust:** Build trust over time by maintaining the relationship. Be interested in the restaurant or retailer and their business. How are they doing? What are their interests in terms of their business? Keep to your agreements. Try to negotiate business details so that it's easy and workable for both of you.
- 📎 **Flavor:** Flavor is important! Be sure you maintain a good product! Give taste tests to demonstrate how good your produce tastes. If it needs to be prepared into a soup, for example, make some and bring it in.
- 📎 **Projections:** Be able to give restaurants or businesses accurate (as much as possible) projections about the availability of your product, at least one to two weeks ahead.
- 📎 **Contact Information:** Provide the restaurant with good contact information. Give your cell phone number if they might need to get in touch with you at odd times or while you are making delivery rounds.



- 📎 **Be flexible:** Be flexible about scheduling and providing produce. If you can provide more at the last minute, the restaurateur will love you!

### Key points for retail contacts:

- 📎 **Give samples:** Taste tests work wonders! They help a produce or deli manager make a decision in your favor. Ask if they will allow a tasting table for customers.
- 📎 **Be reliable:** Be very reliable on product quality. The store has to depend on you and your consistency.
- 📎 **Create easy and clear invoice procedures:** Make it clear for the user and for yourself. Keep it as simple as possible.
- 📎 **Keep clients current on your production:** Keep store managers and other clients up-to-date on your seasonality and availability, or on anything happening at your farm that might influence your product or delivery schedule.
- 📎 **Ask questions:** Show an interest in the retailer's business—how it's going, what kinds of goals they have, what their mission is.
- 📎 **Help them out:** Massage their egos (without going overboard). Give compliments. Make the relationship positive.
- 📎 **Show up regularly:** Consistency and reliability go a long way in building trust.
- 📎 **Do a monthly newsletter:** Farms with CSAs do this with their CSA customers. Do the same for retail or restaurant customers. It will keep them involved and connected to your farming operation. You want them to feel as though they belong and are invested!



- ✍ **Do call backs to check on quality satisfaction:** This is important not only from the point of view of quality, but of business relationships. It will let the buyer know that you are committed to high quality and serious about keeping up the arrangement.
- ✍ **Write your own mission statement.** You might want to use it sometime, and it's a good exercise for clarifying your essential goals.
- ✍ **Commitment, commitment, commitment** for both your product and your service!



## ▶ What “homework” should I do before my first meeting with restaurateurs or retailers?

- **What information should I have at my fingertips about my operation?**
- **What information should I know about the restaurant or retailer?**

### Homework about your own business

- Write up a history of your farm or be prepared to share it in some way. Don't just wing it; think about it and plan something out. Write down notes or an outline to carry with you on a visit to the business.
- Figure out the price you need for your products—a range if necessary.
- Know your product and why it's good or special.
- Be clear (for yourself as well as for them) about how much you can supply and when.
- Prepare a resumé and/or testimonials about your product. A list of quotes from fans is good! This can be verbal or written.

### Homework about their business

- Look on the Web. See if the business is on it. If so, find out as much as you can beforehand.
- Look at the Zagat Guide on restaurants ([www.zagat.com](http://www.zagat.com)). How is the business categorized? How is it rated?
- Check out its menus and clientele to see if your product fits with what they do.

- Find out their price requirements, if not beforehand, then in your first contact.
- Find out if they use “seconds”—that is produce that is not the top quality in terms of appearance, but which is good nevertheless. They might use vegetables in soups for example, or in a number of dishes where the appearance of the produce is not a factor. This can be very important in supply.

## ▶ What do I need to do to maintain a good relationship with my buyer?


### Maintaining positive relationships

- Strive for consistency.
- Be reliable on product quality.
- Keep the buyer current on your production practices.
- Ask questions—show an interest in their business.
- Help them out (massage their egos); start with a compliment.
- Keep the relationship friendly and personal. Consider giving gifts periodically, especially if they are related to your farm.
- Show that you are interested.
- Show up regularly.
- Do a monthly newsletter.
- Do call backs to check on quality satisfaction level.

▶ Where can I go for more assistance on this topic?

Contacts, information and assistance:

- Your peers
- Mid-sized distributors
- Agriculture Commissioner's Department in your county
- Albert's Organics (<http://www.albertsorganics.com>)
- California Certified Organic Farmers CCOF (<http://www.ccof.org>)
- Chef's Collaborative (<http://www.chefscollaborative.org>)
- Culinary Institute Of America (<http://www.ciachef.edu>)
- Farmers Union (<http://www.nfu.org>)
- Food Marketing Institute (<http://www.fmi.org>)
- Food Brokers/Distributors (blue book)
- Green, Diane. 1999. Selling Produce to Restaurants, A Marketing Guide for Small Farmers. Greentree Naturals, Sandpoint, Idaho.
- Localharvest.com
- Produce Marketing Association (<http://www.pma.com>)
- Raw Food movement ([http://healing.about.com/library/uc\\_rawfood\\_0205.htm](http://healing.about.com/library/uc_rawfood_0205.htm))
- SLOW Food movement (<http://www.slowfood.com>)
- Specialty Produce (<http://www.specialtyproduce.com>)
- University of California Cooperative Extension or your local county extension office (<http://ucanr.org/ce.cfm>)
- UC Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (SAREP) (<http://www.sarep.ucdavis.edu>)
- UC Small Farm Center (<http://www.sfc.ucdavis.edu>)
- Vance Publishing 'PACKER' (<http://www.thepacker.com>)
- *Zagat Survey: America's Top Restaurants* (categorized by year) (<http://www.zagat.com>)



Mark Mulcahy, Organic Options  
PO Box 1886, Glen Ellen, CA 95442  
707 939 8355 / 707 939 1613  
[markmulcahy2earthlink.net](mailto:markmulcahy2earthlink.net) / <http://www.fieldtoplate.com>

Funding for this pamphlet provided by the Western Region USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program.  
<http://wsare.usu.edu>

Publication available on the Web at  
<http://www.sarep.ucdavis.edu/cdpp/selldirect.pdf>