

New doors opening for growers

Key Points

- New program helps producers of locally grown foods add value to what they grow.
- People want to know where their food comes from; more request locally grown.
- Another goal is to help educate lowans on the importance of eating right.

By **DARIN LEACH**

MANY of us caught in today's on-the-go lifestyle find it easier to stop for fast food and 32-ounce sodas rather than pack a homemade meal.

While Katie Routh, chef and food programs manager at The Wallace Centers of Iowa, understands how convenient it is to include unhealthy processed foods in our diets, she is on a mission to educate lowans on the importance of eating the right foods for their bodies. "I want consumers to know that they can have it all when it comes to the foods they eat," Routh says. "The foods we eat can indeed taste good, can be good for you, and they can be very easy to prepare."

Routh, a native of Mount Ayr in southwest Iowa, has followed her passion for food and cooking on a 13-year journey that has led her halfway around the world and now back to her rural Iowa roots.

This spring Routh is using her skills as a professional chef to help The Wallace Centers of Iowa develop the center's

newest program called "One Step at a Time." The program is helping farmers in southwest Iowa add value to the fruit and vegetables they harvest by providing guidance and training on such things as food safety protocols, recipe development and testing, and product placement.

Support local producers

One Step at a Time is being funded, in part, through a \$50,000 Rural Business Opportunity Grant awarded through USDA's Rural Development agency. "More and more people want to know where their food is coming from and are requesting locally grown foods," says Bill Menner, state director of Rural Development in Iowa. "They also recognize the importance of supporting local producers and local economies."

Surveys completed by the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship indicate that sales at farmers markets in Iowa are up 18% since 2004, with direct sales now approaching \$40 million. The state has more than 230 farmers markets.

"USDA's support will enable us to greatly broaden the outreach of our food programming," says Diane Weiland, chief executive officer of The Wallace Centers of Iowa. "In addition to expanding the restaurant at the Wallace Country Life Center near Orient and adding value to the fruits and vegetables grown there, we will also help other small producers through teaching and mentoring as they work to



GOOD FOODS: Katie Routh has a deep passion for food and cooking, and is on a mission to educate lowans on the importance of eating the right foods for health and wellness.

Chef brings world experiences back to Iowa

SOME of Katie Routh's fondest childhood memories are of helping her grandmothers and her mother in the kitchen baking and preparing food. "Food has always been very interesting to me, and I like how serving good and nutritious food makes people happy," says Routh. "I thought I would someday become a dietitian. I never really thought much about becoming a professional chef."

After high school Routh spent a year at Southwest Missouri State studying to be a dietitian. During that year she took a food preparation class and decided to pursue a culinary degree. She transferred to a culinary school in Colorado, where her adventures began.

Routh's career took her to restaurants in North Carolina and Chicago. She has worked as a personal chef in the Caribbean and Europe.

It was in North Carolina where Routh first saw how important locally grown fruits and vegetables can be to a healthy diet. While in Chicago, Routh cooked for a restaurant that was across the street from a downtown farmers market. "I loved getting to know the farmers at the local markets," she says. "It was important to know where the food I was cooking at the restaurants and at home came from."

Before returning to Iowa, Routh worked as a farm chef at Harmony Valley Farm in Viroqua, Wis. This is where she experimented with new flavors and developed many recipes. "The most successful recipes have a good flavor combination," she adds. "I look for simple, clean flavors that hit the sweet, salty and sour notes."

develop new food products."

Routh says one of the keys in making the leap from selling produce at a farmers market to having food products appear on gift shop and grocery store shelves is having solid business and marketing plans.

Develop a good plan

Services offered through One Step at a Time help with planning and introduce growers to a network of independent retailers. The program also includes information about food safety and food handling, along with recordkeeping, recipe development, cooking events, workshops and a support system to connect growers.

LOCALLY GROWN: One Step at a Time is a new program from The Wallace Centers of Iowa that's helping growers capture more value from their produce by offering tips on food safety, recipe development, and testing and product placement.

Growers in Adair, Adams, Cass, Clarke, Decatur, Greene, Guthrie, Madison, Ringgold, Taylor, Union and Warren counties are eligible for assistance. Farmers outside these counties may also contact The Wallace Centers of Iowa for advice.

The program aims to help as many as six local food producers this year and up to eight additional producers in 2013. For information about One Step at a Time, call 641-337-5019 or visit www.wallace.org.

Leach is public information coordinator with USDA Rural Development in Iowa.



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