

Grocery STORES:

Leaders in the restaurant industry?

By Marcus Von Albrecht

With all the hype surrounding the 100-mile diet, restaurants are facing a new challenge — meeting consumers' demands to offer nutritious and delicious locally produced menu items. People are becoming increasingly aware what they eat can impact their health and well-being. For this reason they are looking for foods that are free of trans fat, pre-biotic and pro-biotic based, organic, free range, contain no added preservatives and are made with wholesome farm fresh goods.

Fulfilling this request is no easy feat, however, grocery stores have responded resoundingly to customers' higher expectations, adding 'grab and go' items to deli or freezer selections. Some specialty stores have taken this to the next level adding small in-store restaurants equipped with kitchens, "stations" offering hundreds of different healthy yet delectable menu items and seating areas that allow patrons to dine-in.

Some small independent store operators that do not have the space to install large-scale kitchens are turning to food manufacturers to provide similar selections they can add to their deli departments.

These in-store eateries have been (and continue to be) successful, so why is it so difficult for restaurateurs to maintain a constant supply of locally produced foods on their menus?

While sourcing products is relatively easy, obtaining them is another matter. Small farmers often do not have a proper system in place to deliver goods. Larger companies or a consortium of farmers typically own big trucks and will only make deliveries if a large volume of goods is purchased. This is often beyond many establishments' requirements.

Additionally, the delivery of goods is not always possible because the growing season is not year round. This makes it difficult to have a constant supply of locally grown items on a menu. And even if the goods are in season there is still a chance they won't be ripe, delaying delivery by a couple days or weeks.

With the introduction of these new eat-in areas in grocery chains — in conjunction with the rising

popularity of chef-inspired home meal replacements — restaurants are beginning to feel the pinch from loss revenue. Today, time-starved consumers are choosing to buy their lunch at the grocery store or pick-up restaurant-quality, take-home dinners instead of chomping on traditional fast food.

As interest in ready to eat home meal replacements increases and new concepts are introduced to the marketplace, restaurants are feeling the pressure to "up the ante" and offer healthier, more sustainable menu items. Customers want to be able to read a menu and know exactly where the restaurant's tomatoes are grown, the location of the farm that raises the chicken and the type of milk used in the cheese.

Consumers aren't the only ones demanding change, at least not in British Columbia where the provincial government plans to restrict trans fat in all prepared and served restaurant food items. The regulation will limit the amount of trans fat in oils and margarines to two per cent of total fat and lower the allowable amount of trans fats in all other foods to five per cent. All food service establishments that require a permit to operate in B.C. must comply with the new regulation by Sept. 30, 2009. This includes restaurants, delis, cafeterias, educational institutions, health care institutions, schools, special events and bakeries.

But what does this mean for the independent purveyor? Times are changing and eating healthier and locally sourced and produced foods is a trend that is here to stay. So, to satisfy today's consumers:



- Check online or contact the province's agriculture department to source local products.
- Change menu item wording and add, "Accompanied with in season" followed by the foods (for example, corn) and the farms the products originated from.
- Lunch ideas should reflect comfort food that is wholesome and easy to prepare.
- Restaurateurs should familiarize themselves with local chefs' associations and what they are promoting.

It is time to get on the bandwagon and eat local, eat fresh and eat healthy.

Past president of the B.C. Chefs Association, Marcus Von Albrecht has 30 years experience in food and hospitality. He is the proprietor of Mava Foods in Richmond, B.C., which prepares home meal replacements for grocery stores and the Meals on Wheels programs in Vancouver. The company utilizes locally grown produce and proteins from Alberta in its products. Contact Marcus at marcus@mavafoods.com.

On the Web

WEB EXCLUSIVE COLUMNS:
 DIANE CHIASSON'S *FIRST IMPRESSIONS*
 MARK CUFF'S *THE WINE SELLER*
 DAVID SWANSTON'S *STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS*



On the Cover



HOT 'DIGGITY' DOG

These miniature dogs are big on flavour. Delicately spiced, cooked and smoked in natural casings, the miniature version of Brandt Meat Products' regular European-style wiener can add excitement to any menu. These pint-size eats are easy to prepare, appeal to a wide range of consumers and are ideal as an appetizer, shared starter, kid's meal or, if catering, as hors d'oeuvres.

To further satisfy customers' cravings for great tasting food at an affordable price, partner these bite-size dogs with a couple extraordinary sauces that are big on taste. Palatable pairings include smoky ketchup, maple mustard, sweet pepper relish and wasabi mayonnaise.

Frank Facts: Americans consume an estimated 20 billion hot dogs per year. That works out to about 70 hot dogs per person each year. While the hot dog is a popular entree, consumption does vary by region. New Yorkers consume more hot dogs than any other U.S. city, beating out Chicago and Los Angeles. But Chicago's O'Hare International Airport consumes six times more hot dogs (725,000 more) than Los Angeles International Airport and LaGuardia Airport combined. Americans will eat enough hot dogs at major league ballparks this year to stretch from RFK Stadium in Washington, D.C., to AT&T Park in San Francisco. Mustard is the most popular hot dog condiment in the U.S., followed by ketchup, chili, onions, sauerkraut, relish and coleslaw. *Source: National Hot Dog & Sausage Council.*