

Institutional food buying could bolster local farms

By ERIC MORTENSON
Capital Press

PORTLAND — At Oregon Health & Science University recently, the lunch offerings included sandwiches made with organic chicken breast — locally sourced — on focaccia bread, baked locally and delivered daily. Plus salad made from local greens. Not a prepackaged, mass-produced item in sight.

This is hospital food? Providing minimally processed, nutritious food at a hospital, where the clientele includes patients, doctors and nurses, medical students and visitors, seems like a solid idea. And OHSU, the teaching hospital that employs 13,700 people and has one of Oregon's biggest economic footprints, was an early adopter of the practice.

The greater impact, however, could be to what a recent study referred to as "Ag of the Middle." That is, the farmers, ranchers and processors who are too big to make a living selling solely at farmers' markets and CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture), but too small to compete at the commodity level.

The study by Ecotrust, a Portland nonprofit, identified institutions as a prime market opportunity for middle-sized producers.

Ecotrust estimated Oregon's hospitals, schools, prisons, assisted living facilities and other institutions serve 40 million meals a year.

Institutional food service departments have immense buying power and purchase large quantities, the report pointed out. Even a relatively small tweak toward buying more Oregon grown and processed products would have a "significant ripple effect across the domestic food system," the Ecotrust report said.

Ranchers benefit

It paid off for a pair of Northeast Oregon cattle ranches. Carman Ranch in Wallowa, in partnership with McClaren Ranch, sells about 1,000 pounds of beef and bones a week to OHSU. The ranches take about five cows a week to a processor in Brownsville, 90 miles south of Portland, and sell the hospital 500 pounds of ground beef, 200 pounds of rounds, 100 pounds of steaks and 200 pounds of bones for soup and broth.

Cory Carman, a fourth-generation cattle rancher, said the relationship has been "phenomenal." OHSU accounts for 20 to 25 percent of the ranch's annual sales and is by far the ranch's biggest account, she said. The business would be "much smaller" without OHSU's consistent demand for quality and quantity. She said producers pursuing such relationships must understand they require patience, collaboration and flexibility on both ends.

"The biggest lesson is having that anchor customer," Carman said.

Carman said OHSU approached her out of the blue when it was looking for grass-fed beef to serve the thousands who are at "Pill Hill," as the campus overlooking Portland is known, every day.

Complex system

Fernando Divina, OHSU's executive chef, said the complex counts about 10,000 food transactions a day at nine outlets within the facility, including cafe and snack kiosk sales and 1,200 meals delivered to patients' rooms. OHSU's annual budget for food and beverages is about \$5 million, and the hospital made a conscious decision to walk its health talk by seeking out local producers, preferably organic.

"We want to buy everything regionally, if possible," Divina said. "That's our goal."

It isn't a simple process. Scott Cochrane, OHSU's food purchasing agent, said large institutions such as schools often have tight budgets. It's often cheaper for them to buy the volume they need from large distributors. To purchase in bulk locally at a competitive price point,

institutions may have to ask multiple growers to aggregate their production.

"I know they all want to, but there's a point where they can't cut their own throat," Cochrane said. "There's a lot of willing participants on the outside of the circle who can't get in."

Eecole Copen, OHSU's sustainable foods program coordinator, acknowledged it takes more work to buy food from smaller producers.

"You have to commit to being OK with dealing with multiple vendors," she said. "The whole system is based on willingness."

She and others refer to this type of purchasing as a larger version of CSA. It's ISA in this case: Institutional Supported Agriculture.

Copen said the payoff is a strengthened regional food system.

"We need more farmers," she said. "That's about food security, growing the local economy, jobs, income."

OHSU's first foray into the local food scene was establishing a farmers' market on campus. It's now in its ninth year and serves as an incubator for growers who eventually reach the point where they can sell wholesale to OHSU's food services department.

The idea isn't just a Portland foodie thing. Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston, about 180 miles east of Portland, buys vegetables from Finley's Fresh Produce, berries from another local grower, and pork and chicken from suppliers across the border in Washington. All of the beef purchased by the hospital is raised within 50 miles.

Nancy Gummer, Good Shepherd's nutrition services and diabetes education director, said she began buying locally about 10 years ago.

Gummer said she wanted to quit buying meat from animals treated with antibiotics or raised in confined feeding operations. It took 10 years to find chicken she felt comfortable feeding hospital patients, staff and visitors.

In addition to buying local, Gummer avoids purchasing products that contain artificial colors, flavors or other additives. Her food budget is about \$500,000 annually.

"We feel what you eat has the biggest impact on your health," she said. "Food that's really healthy for humans is going to be grown in healthier soil, and handled and processed in a way that has less impact on the environment."

Flexible partnerships

Increased institutional buying of locally grown and processed food can reshape the food system, said Amanda Osborne, vice president of food and farms for Ecotrust and the lead author of the "Ag of the Middle" report.

Producer and buyer have to make some adjustments, however, Osborne said.

Institutions have to be flexible enough to partner with farmers and "take what they've got when they've got it" and pay promptly, she said.

They also should increase their frozen storage space so they can buy in bulk when things are in season and use them over time.

Farmers "have to be able to think like a bigger operation," she said. They need proper insurance coverage and must comply with food safety regulations.

"Those are barriers for institutional buyers," Osborne said. "That liability related stuff has to be in order."

Institutions can't afford to have employees standing around chopping, slicing and dicing vegetables, she added, and producers should look for creative ways to provide some of that minimal processing.

To fill big institutional orders, farmers can coordinate crop planning and combine production with neighbors, she said.

"This is a partnership and we problem solve together," she said. "That's the mindset to bring to it."

Edwards: Managing two artistic sides

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through several concepts before Edwards and the sandcastle committee decided on the final image in late February. A scrapped concept that Edwards liked depicted the mermaid holding the sandcastle like a snow globe.

"It makes a lot more sense to go with the one that they chose," she said. "The sandcastle needs to be a lot more prominent than the mermaid."

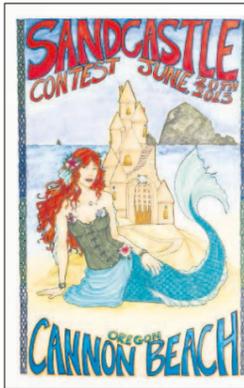
Dual careers

The Sandcastle poster isn't the first time Edwards has seen her work publicly displayed in Cannon Beach.

In 2013, she designed the slick decals, showing Haystack Rock's gray silhouette, on the police department's vehicles. In a couple of months, the officers will be sporting new badges whose centerpiece will no longer feature the Oregon state seal but Haystack Rock against a setting sun — another Edward's creation.

People are often surprised, Edwards said, to learn that the analytical aptitude of an officer and the aesthetic sensitivity of an artist could exist within the same person.

"They kind of look at me odd and go, 'How did that



Courtesy of Devon Edwards

This year's Sandcastle Contest poster created by Devon Edwards was originally rendered on illustration board in ink, gel pens, gouache paints, artist markers and watercolors. She worked in collaboration with the Chamber of Commerce's Sandcastle Contest Committee, but the mermaid idea was all hers.

happen?" she said, chuckling. "I had dual career aspirations: I've always wanted to be a police officer, and I've always wanted to be an artist."

Throughout high school, Edwards gave serious thought to how she could pursue both vocations. "Everyone said,

'Well, just be a sketch artist.' I'm like, 'That's so cliché! That's not what I want to do,'" she said.

Edwards earned a degree in interdisciplinary arts from Seattle University in 2010, was hired by the police department in 2011 and graduated from the Oregon Department of Public Safety Standards and Training in 2012. She was the officer who, on one of her security checks in January 2014, spotted Earnest Lee Dean, the robber of the Stephanie Inn, driving away from the crime scene.

After July, Edwards will join King County Sheriff's Office, an agency based in Seattle near her hometown of Gig Harbor.

Meanwhile, she is two classes away from completing her master of arts degree, with a focus in illustration, through the online Savannah College of Art and Design. "I'm so close to being done, I can taste it," she said.

The 'hard stuff'

Art is still a hobby for Edwards, who cites the art nouveau movement from the late-19th and early 20th-centuries and retro pin-up art as her greatest artistic influences. However, she plans to start

building her portfolio and talking with local galleries that deal in fine art and illustration, she said.

The work that goes into her pieces is, for her, "very personal," she said. "It's kind of like channeling your emotions. It's your outlet."

The work of policing her community is also personal, particularly when tackling cases of family violence, which she called the "hard stuff": child abuse, sexual assault and domestic violence.

Family violence cases — which will become her area of expertise when she transfers to King County — embody the reason she got into law enforcement in the first place: "wanting to help people," she said.

Asked if confronting these issues regularly ever gets easier, emotionally speaking, Edwards said, "No."

"You get better at handling it, at being able to process it a lot better, but it doesn't always get easier, especially when kids are involved," she said. "If it gets too easy, if you just brush it off, then you need some help yourself. If it doesn't affect you in this job, then there's a problem."

— Erick Bengel

Wyden: Medicare the biggest challenge

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Tourism and recreation

Wyden and Travel Oregon leaders visited the state's seven wonders — the Oregon Coast, Smith Rock, Crater Lake, Mount Hood, the Painted Hills, the Wallowas and the Columbia Gorge — to stress the importance of tourism and recreation to the state's economy.

The senator said travel and tourism generates \$10 billion a year in revenue and provides 100,000 jobs.

Wyden, who serves on the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, said he would make his case for a greater emphasis on recreation by reminding lawmakers that many of the public complaints during federal government shutdowns were over the loss of access to parks.

"Maybe we don't care that much about this, that, something else," he said of public opinion, "but stop messing with our parks and our special places that we really enjoy so much."

Trade package

In an interview with The Daily Astorian, the Oregon Democrat, who is up for re-election to a fourth full term next year, described the trade package signed by President Barack Obama last week as "the most progressive trade policy in history."

Wyden, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Finance Committee, was instrumental in getting the trade bills approved. One bill gives the president expanded trade promotion authority and helps ensure trade deals like the Trans-Pacific Partnership have stronger protections for labor and the environment. A second bill provides trade adjustment assistance, such as job training, for workers displaced by globalization.

But many progressives and labor unions attacked the trade package, as did some liberal Democrats in Congress, such as U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore.

Wyden said people who have been critical of trade agreements in the past had made valid points about secrecy and accountability, which is why he and others have insisted on more transparency and enforcement.

The senator said 1 in 5 Oregon jobs depend on international trade and that trade-related jobs often pay better.

"My objective is to grow things in Oregon, make things in Oregon, add value to them in Oregon and then ship them somewhere," he said.

Transportation challenge

The collapse of a state transportation package at the Oregon Legislature in



JOSHUA BESSEX — The Daily Astorian

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden speaks during a group discussion at Fort George Brewery and Public House's Lovell Showroom Sunday. The discussion was part of Wyden's tour of Oregon's seven wonders to promote the economic impact of tourism and recreation.

June was an example of the political difficulty in financing infrastructure improvements.

Transportation advocates have called on the federal and state governments to increase bridge, road and highway spending. A recent report by a transportation advocacy group found that 17 of Clatsop County's 147 bridges were structurally deficient, the second-highest countywide share in Oregon.

Wyden doubts Republicans in Congress will agree to raise the gas tax, which helps finance the federal Highway Trust Fund.

The senator has proposed a bill with U.S. Sen. John Hoeven, R-N.D., that would extend \$180 billion in tax-exempt bond authority and \$45 billion in infrastructure tax credits to states over a decade for public-private partnership agreements on road, bridge, port, rail and

airport projects.

Wyden considers the bill a successor to his Build America Bonds, which helped state and local governments finance infrastructure projects during the recovery from the recession.

Medicare reform

Wyden also said he would continue to push for a bill, sponsored with U.S. Sen. Johnny Isakson, R-Ga., to help improve chronic disease treatment under Medicare, the federal health care program for the elderly.

More than two-thirds of Medicare beneficiaries had two or more chronic conditions, such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, heart disease, arthritis and diabetes, according to 2010 data from the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

"Medicare today is not the Medicare of 1965," the senator said. "It's about cancer. It's about diabetes, strokes, heart disease."

Wyden described chronic disease care in Medicare as fragmented and poorly coordinated.

"From the standpoint of the federal budget, there is no bigger challenge — none — than Medicare," he said.

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