

Food trail bonds farmers, restaurants

A boon amid pandemic

By **SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN**
Capital Press

GARIBALDI — On a sleepy June morning in Garibaldi, a fishing village on Tillamook Bay, fisherman Jeff Wong was preparing to take his small boat on the water. “Hey, Grasshopper! Hi, Jimmy!” he called, waving to crabbers.

He swapped local gossip and talk about sea conditions as he readied the boat. Seagulls screeched. Sunlight glittered on blue-green water. The air smelled of fish and brine.

Wong, owner of CS Fishery, appeared calm. But he, along with other producers — dairy farmers, growers and ranchers — had been hit hard by COVID-19’s impact on the restaurant industry.

Pre-pandemic, Wong said he supplied 25 restaurants with seafood. Now, he supplies three.

According to the National Restaurant Association, during March through May, the sector lost 8 million jobs. The association predicts that nationwide, the industry will lose \$240 billion in sales by the end of 2020: \$7,609 per second. At least 3% of U.S. restaurants have closed permanently.

“It feels like every other day we hear a restaurant we knew and loved is closing,” said Laura Morgan, owner of The Big Foody, an Oregon-based food tourism company.

But as Oregon reopens, data show restaurant visits are increasing.

Experts say the industry may never again look the same. But along Oregon’s North Coast, producers and restaurant owners say they hope a program that boosted their sales before the pandemic will help them get back on their feet: an initiative called the North Coast Food Trail.

Beating a trail

A “food trail” is a route intended to promote food-related recreational travel. The idea is to get restaurants to buy from local producers and then use that as a draw for tourists to enjoy the bounty.

The North Coast Food Trail was pioneered in 2018 by Nan Devlin, executive director of the tourism organization Visit Tillamook Coast.

The self-guided “trail” is promoted through maps, brochures and website campaigns.

“When urbanites look at the maps, they see all these dots. For every little dot on the map, there’s this whole story,” Wong said.

Many producers and restaurant owners told the Capital Press they noticed a boost in visitors and sales after joining the trail.

“More and more, people are wanting to get away from the city, be near water and have localized experiences. The food trail is combating the concept of the ‘non-place,’ Walmarts that look the same wherever you are,” said Devlin.

As consumer demand for local food has grown, so has the trail, which now has 80 participants. To be part of the trail, restaurants must source at least 25% of their menu locally.

Devlin said one of the trail’s biggest impacts has been introducing farmers to restaurant owners.

Lexie Fields, manager of The Schooner, a restaurant in Netarts, said the trail has given her new choices and relationships.

“It’s been incredible,” said Fields. “It’s like, here’s this beekeeper no one knows, but now the food trail connects her to restaurant owners like me who think, ‘Wow, I need honey.’”

Experts say the program also helps bridge the urban-rural divide. Many producers give farm tours.

Judiaann Woo, a food and marketing consultant, contrasted the trail with the “farm-to-table” movement in Napa Valley, California.

“Napa feels too done up and polished,” said Woo. “In Oregon, you still really get to meet the maker: dodging cow pies when visiting a cheesemaker or smelling fishy after seeing the fishmonger. It’s just — um, real. I hope they don’t lose that.”

When COVID-19 hit, many food trail restaurants closed. Others pivoted to takeout and delivery but faced sales reductions, which had ripple effects for farmers.

Woo said if anyone can get through the pandemic with creativity, Oregon food producers can — those people she calls “Oregon dreamers.”

“You have a dream: I’m going to make cheese. I’m going to grow wasabi. I’m going to make the world’s finest salt. And you do it. It’s the Oregon dream,” she said.

The cheesemaker

Amy Seymour, founder of Nestucca Bay Creamery in Cloverdale, is one dot on the map.

The farm, in the family for 150 years, runs 300 dairy cows on a management-intensive grazing system, meaning cows are regularly moved to fresh pasture using a rotational fencing strategy.

Amy and her husband, Rob, are part of the Tillamook County Creamery Association dairy cooperative, which is also part of the North Coast Food Trail.

But Seymour wanted to do more than milk. She said she had always dreamed of making cheese, so in 2016, using the extra milk her cows produced, she started cheesemaking with Serene Zwissig, a cheesemaker from Oregon State University.

Nestucca Bay Creamery makes more than a dozen cheese varieties with a unique “terroir,” or flavor profile, based on the grass, soil, humidity and sea air.

The creamery runs a cheese shop, and joining the North Coast Food Trail further boosted



Amy Seymour, founder of Nestucca Bay Creamery and owner of a management-intensive pastured dairy farm in Cloverdale, turns a round of aging cheese.

Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

the brand’s popularity. At least six restaurants started buying Seymour’s cheese.

“I didn’t expect it would be so popular,” said Seymour.

It was late afternoon, and a line of dairy cows was leaving the milking barn, some walking and others skipping down the ramp toward green pastures.

When COVID-19 hit, Seymour said, things were far from picturesque. Virtually all restaurants canceled orders and few people visited the shop. The farm stayed afloat as a member-owner of Tillamook Creamery.

It’s still a tough season, Seymour said, but two restaurants are ordering again and tourism is on the rise.

The wasabi grower

Another “Oregon dreamer” is Jennifer Bloeser, one of the nation’s few wasabi growers.

What most Americans think of as “wasabi,” Bloeser said, is actually imitation wasabi made from horseradish, mustard and dye. According to the American Chemical Society, 99% of wasabi in U.S. sushi restaurants is imitation.

“Everyone thinks of wasabi as that experience of heat in your sinuses. But real wasabi has flavor. It has sweetness and tastes like a vegetable rather than just punch-you-in-the-nose heat,” she said.

In 2003, Bloeser, then a marine scientist, first grew wasabi in her backyard after a stranger gave her plant starts. In 2010, she and her husband, Markus, started a company that became Oregon Coast Wasabi near Pacific City. It is the largest wasabi farm in the U.S. by acreage and production.

Botanists say there are few regions of the world where this zesty perennial can grow commercially, because the plants demand full shade, high oxygenation and well-drained soil. The Oregon Coast, Bloeser discovered, is ideal.

Bloeser joined the North Coast Food Trail in 2018 and has seen her restaurant reach expand.

Many restaurants use the wasabi greens in salads, soups and lasagna, she said. The rhizomes, thick stalks, are finely grated to make a brilliant green paste that is popular on pan-fried oysters. Restaurants even use juice from the leaves to make coconut wasabi lime sorbet, wasabi-berry ice cream, salad dressings, spicy-sweet lemonade and cocktails.

When COVID-19 hit, Bloeser’s business, which was selling to about 40 restaurants, suffered.

“Our business was cut in half. We’re surviving by selling wasabi direct and also selling plant starts,” said Bloeser.

She said she fears it will be a long time before things return to normal but is grateful the North Coast Food Trail reminds people to support local producers.

The salt maker

Oregon producer Ben Jacobsen also set out to make something few in the U.S. were making — gourmet salt.

Jacobsen said he was first introduced to high-quality salt while living in Denmark.

“I was blown away by how much better it was and how much better it made food,” he said. “From that moment on, I just became fascinated with salt.”

Back in Oregon, Jacobsen spent two and a half years testing 27 coastal locations, looking for the best seawater. At the time, he was living in Portland, working online and spending his free time hauling buckets of seawater home for experiments.

Finally, he found salt with the taste he was looking for in Netarts Bay.

He built a team, developed a process for turning seawater into dry flake salt and moved his operation, Jacobsen Salt Co., to Netarts.

The North Coast Food Trail boosted his local popularity, and his reputation spread far beyond the coast. Jacobsen said he supplies about 200 restaurants in Oregon and about 700 nationwide.

When COVID-19 hit, Jacobsen was crushed.

But Jacobsen said he was surprised by the local support that flooded in through online orders. And as restaurants resurface, he said he’s grateful for the support of local chefs.

The fisherman

Wong, the Garibaldi fisherman, said he has seen many producers along the food trail pivot during COVID-19, building direct-to-consumer and other markets to insulate themselves.

Wong himself has launched a new platform, is growing online sales, has expanded his food truck chain and is preparing to build a processing facility.

“I expect a lot will change around here,” he said.

Wong stopped his fishing boat and swung his legs up on the helm. He looked out at the water.

“Producers are on pins and needles not knowing what to expect,” he said. “Should they focus on restaurants? Invest in a farmers market? They’re scared about a (virus) resurgence. And even with the food trail bringing tourists back, it’s a compressed tourism season. Winter’s going to come hard and fast this year.”

The grill

Many restaurant owners say they feel similar unease.

Jake Burden, owner of Offshore Grill and Coffee House in Rockaway Beach, said his sales fell 50% March through May. June sales are up to 60% of normal volume, but Burden is still worried.

“There are a lot of unknowns for our business and the producers we work with. It’s scary. It keeps me up at night,” he said.

The Offshore Grill and Coffee House sources about 50% locally during the off-season and 90% locally during summer.

Burden is offering only takeout or outdoor seating options, and he may add an indoor reservation model soon. He expects

the restaurant industry will change because of COVID-19.

“Eating out will probably be more of a special occasion thing for a while,” he said.

Burden said he hopes the pandemic will have some silver linings — such as farmers and foodservice workers being treated with more dignity.

And as the phases of reopening move forward, Burden said he’s seeing more “regulars” again.

“That gives me hope,” he said.

The Schooner

Higher-end restaurants are also seeing a resurgence in customers.

At The Schooner in Netarts in mid-June, tables in the outdoor seating area were crowded with several dozen people laughing and talking over dinner.

“We’re so excited to be reopening,” said Lexie Fields, the manager.

The restaurant had closed entirely during lockdown.

Despite the North Coast Food Trail’s success in bringing back customers, Rachel Phaksuwan, executive chef, said the restaurant and its producers are still struggling.

Meat supply chains, for example, have been disrupted. Phaksuwan said because the pandemic disrupted butchering, the restaurant has had trouble securing beef and pork.

Fields said she is eager to work with more producers. Oregon farmers who want to supply the restaurant, Fields said, should come in and bring samples.

The trail forward

Devlin, the executive director of Visit Tillamook Coast, said the North Coast Food Trail continues to grow. Seaside just joined, and Astoria will join in 2021.

The trail is also open to new producers and restaurants. It costs \$50 — a one-time fee — to join the program, which goes toward marketing and promotion.

Food professionals say the trail serves as a “pilot program,” demonstrating what’s possible in uniting local producers with restaurants and drawing in agritourists.

“Food trails remind us that so much of what makes Oregon great is the ingredients and the people behind them,” said Woo, the food consultant.

The food industry may have a long road of recovery ahead, but experts say the North Coast Food Trail is a step toward normalcy.

“It’s been a tough season, but it makes me happy to see people rallying around our local restaurants and producers,” said Devlin.

“The farms never stopped growing and never stopped planting. I think the definition of hope is a farmer.”

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