Nevada home grown

Rural farmers and Las Vegas chefs partner to enhance local economies

“Get started now... grow something...”

Paula and Rodney Pudwill have this advice for homeowners and suburban farmers with a backyard or a few acres on which to grow herbs or vegetables. The demand for locally grown produce is so great, say the owners of Penguin Produce, that you can’t help but sell it to farmer’s markets, retail outlets or restaurants.

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The Pudwills, owners of a two-acre “boutique” farm in southern Nevada’s Sandy Valley, started small a few years ago with a handful of herbs. Today they get up with the sun six days a week to cut, wash, package and deliver a custom order of herbs to high-end restaurants 50 miles away in Las Vegas. Chefs clamor for the Pudwills’ herbs, which include basil, tarragon and chervil, but also exotic varieties such as lovage and nepitella—all ordered the night before.

A team of University faculty has played a major part in the produce-to-market concept taking root in Nevada. With more than half-a-million-dollars from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and other sources, they launched “Niche Products for Direct Markets: A Sustainable Opportunity for Small Desert Farmers.” Its goal is to stimulate horticulture production and establish marketing channels that address the needs of urban and rural residents and support the Nevada economy.

The market: burgeoning Las Vegas

A fast-growing city in a fast-growing state, Las Vegas is home to two million people and attracts 40 million visitors each year. It has one of the largest food service industries in North America, yet virtually all the food imported by the city comes from distances greater than 250 miles. In recent years, Nevada has collected more taxes from retail sales and dining than from gambling as a result of the megaresort transformation on the strip.

“..."Our research and demonstration orchard initially provided opportunities for Las Vegas chefs to realize you can grow quality fruit and vegetables in the hot desert," says Bob Morris, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension horticulturist. “This opened their eyes to the possibilities, and a number of the chefs are now willing to look at local products instead of buying everything out of state.”

Morris added that one of the challenges has been establishing routes for getting products safely to the Las Vegas market. The other issue is stimulating production.

Cooperative Extension piloted a study to help bridge the gap between local farmers and gourmet restaurants. Researchers found that chefs are willing to pay a higher price to obtain the quantity and quality desired. They need producers to let them know which products are available, and when, so they can plan seasonal menus a week in advance. The chefs...
were concerned about the potential quality and consistency of local products due to the harsh climate.

The study found that nearly all the surveyed growers wanted to enter the gourmet market as suppliers, but were unsure how to proceed. They wanted to determine which products interest chefs and restaurants, the quantities and packaging desired and the timing and delivery methods preferred.

“So we conducted classes for farmers on how to market fresh products to local restaurants, demonstrated production methods for small-scale producers, and arranged tours of gourmet restaurant kitchens on the strip,” says Holly Gatzke, Lincoln County extension educator, who has also conducted field days and demonstration sites to educate farmers.

Eighteen growers from rural counties in southern Nevada toured the top five restaurants at Caesars Palace, discussing food preferences and marketing issues. This tour confirmed there is a strong demand for locally grown, fresh, vine- or branch-ripened, flavorful products. The chefs indicated they prefer Nevada products with the name of the farm on the menu. They want a close relationship with farmers to ensure reliable shipments of quality produce at regular intervals.

The producers: a need for diversification

“Net farm income in rural Nevada has fluctuated over the past three years and does not show an increasing trend,” says Kynda Curtis, state extension economist and assistant professor in the Department of Resource Economics.

“Producers in desert regions need to diversify their operations to increase returns which will lead to sustainable farms. Experience in other states has shown that direct marketing to consumers through farmer’s markets, gourmet restaurants and specialty stores can provide growers with a dependable, higher-end market.”

Since the inception of the produce-to-market program four years ago, there has been an immense amount of activity among local growers. Farmer’s markets in Nevada have expanded from eight to 26 across the state. Chefs in Las Vegas and Reno are purchasing from local producers. Nevada farmers have expanded their use of local markets, which has stabilized income and provided new opportunities.

Jesse Scott, with the Buckhorn Ranch in Alamo, started initially with several hundred pounds of squash and later beets, and then began selling milk and cream.

“When working with chefs, I establish a relationship, listen and watch the types of products they’re using in the kitchens,” Scott says. “I deliver to Las Vegas Monday and Friday afternoons, bringing them quality products. Then I take their kitchen compost and cooking oil back to the farm to make biodiesel.”

Doug Taylor, executive pastry chef at the B & B Ristorante and Carnevino in Las Vegas envisions great potential in the chef-farmer collaboration.

“I started with one farmer nearly two years ago and now there are 21 farms involved in the program,” says Taylor. “Each farm offers something different and exciting each season. We are building an agriculture community. The demand is present, the hotels want it and our community wants it. We will have fresher food because it’s local, we will know the hands that feed us, and we can control what goes in and what comes out of the ground.

“This is building a community for the future of this city.”

For more information on the produce-to-market program, contact Holly Gatzke, (775) 726-3109, or gatzkeh@unce.unr.edu.