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Foodservice

Restaurant chain starts local program

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A 49-unit restaurant chain in three Eastern states is the first multi-unit restaurant operation to jump on board with the Jersey Fresh program.

The New Jersey Department of Agriculture reached out to the chain, kick-starting plans for a partnership with the department's local produce program six months ago. By the first full week of August, the chain was serving local green beans and collard greens in prepared salads on its salad bar, complete with signage and promotion.

"We've done a great job of making sure we have programs in supermarkets and roadside stands, but we haven't done as great a job in the restaurant trade," said Douglas Fisher, secretary of agriculture for the state. "One of the things I've been working on with our marketing department is getting restaurants to serve Jersey Fresh when it's in season."

The chain, which is owned by CB Holding Corp., operates 35 restaurants in New Jersey and the remaining 14 in New York and Pennsylvania. It is working with four produce distributors in the area to source locally, including Pocano Produce Co., Stroudsburg, Penn.; Seashore Fruit & Produce, Atlantic City, N.J.; J. Kings Foodservice Professionals Inc., Holtsville, N.Y., and Hearn Kirkwood, Hanover, Md.

Although local produce was available earlier this summer, Charlie Brown's didn't start taking any until just this month, said Philip Butler, vice president of research and development.

"We wanted to wait until the peak of the season, when the market was flooded," Butler said. "I don't want to be 25% local on something, I want to be 80%."

The collard greens are incorporated into a roasted potato and collard green salad and the green beans steamed in a separate dish with red onion. Butler said the chain will sometimes have to pull from California or another region to fill.

"We also use a ton of zucchini, a ton of yellow squash, a ton of carrots and peppers, but those we use so much of the growers couldn't keep up with our usage," Butler said. "So we identified items where there was enough for our usage."

The chain expects to start using local tomatoes by the week of Aug. 16. Watermelon is up later in the season. Butler said he was planning only about four to five weeks ahead and was watching supply situations.

The five growers Charlie Brown's is working with were chosen mainly for the volume and variety of products they could supply, although sustainability efforts were also involved, Butler said. They are some of the larger growing operations in the region.

"There has been some education involved," said Dan Bhada, sales director, national accounts for J. Kings. "They wanted to use local grape tomatoes the whole summer, but they didn't realize they weren't available locally until July."

All four produce distributors Charlie Brown's is using are member of the Pro*Act produce distribution network, so they had existing relationships with each other and with New Jersey growers, Bhada said.

J. Kings says it uses a food safety program developed specifically for small growers, which incorporates the criteria from other food safety regulations, including Good Agricultural Practices and the California Leafy Green Handlers Marketing Agreement, and adjusted the requirements for smaller operations.

J. Kings also backhauls produce from local farms to alleviate issues caused by growers not having proper refrigeration units or transportation.



Courtesy Charlie Brown's

To promote its new Jersey Fresh program for sourcing local produce, Charlie Brown's Steakhouse locations feature in-restaurant signage.