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Awarded chefs talk local produce

By Ashley Bentley

LAS VEGAS — Ever want to pick the brain of an award-winning, produce-loving chef? The United Fresh Produce Association picked five of its favorite chefs from around the country and sat them down for a roundtable discussion during its annual convention April 22.

The result: A list of ideas and best practices from leaders in each restaurant industry segment, from fine dining to quick-service, like Au Bon Pain.

Au Bon Pain is doing something different with sandwiches lately, treating them as entire meals on their own.

“We try to integrate a lot of vegetables into the sandwiches themselves, treating it as a whole meal,” said Thomas John, senior vice president and executive chef of the Boston-based chain.

Au Bon Pain recently went through a rebranding process, and talked to customers to find out what they expected, John said.

“One thing which came out loud and clear is the health aspect of the food we offer,” John said. “People are really conscious about what they put into their bodies, so that’s where fresh produce plays a big role on our menus.”

Chris Jackson, executive chef and owner of Ted and Honey, a casual dining restaurant in Brooklyn, N.Y., works to make his menu follow the seasons, incorporating local fresh produce whenever possible. Jackson also uses fresh produce for his own processing purposes, canning and jarring his own sauces, pickled vegetables and baby food.

John said Au Bon Pain is looking to incorporate local produce into its distribution.

“I’m not sure I’ll be able to source what we use totally with local produce, but we sure to want to try to use as much as possible,” John said.

Michael Reich, executive chef at Renaissance Chicago Hotel, has a private garden at the hotel, and uses it to supply him with vegetables and herbs, even in the winter.

“If you came into my restaurant in the middle of winter, you’d have a great pesto pasta dish made at my garden,” Reich said.

Reich also spends 30 minutes per week on the phone with Chicago-based Testa Produce talking about what’s new, what’s coming in and what to buy.

Where he sees issues with local produce are when it comes to high volume.

“I never see enough volume to feed 200-400 people,” Reich said.

For a restaurant to serve organic and specialty produce, which generally comes at a higher price, customers need to know why, Jackson said.

“The cost aspect is one of the hardest hurdles to go over,” Jackson said. “If they know you’re doing that (sourcing organic and local produce), they’re going to pay a little more for sandwiches and stuff like that.”

Jackson said in the winter, he looks to items like potatoes, which are at their best. He also has a weekly sales appointment with J. Kings Foodservice Professionals Inc., and prefers a weekly email that brings him up to speed on availability of certain items.

John King of J. Kings, Holtsville, N.Y., said distribution, food safety and supply needs are holding up local produce from getting into many restaurants.

“We’ve disqualified a lot of growers because of food safety,” King said. “Four or five years ago when we showed farms a rough draft (of a food



Ashley Bentley

Chris Jackson, executive chef and owner of Ted & Honey in Brooklyn, N.Y., shares some of his insights at a roundtable discussion for the United Fresh Produce Association's 2010 Foodservice Excellence award winners. Jackson was the winner in the casual and family restaurant category, and attended and spoke at the association's annual convention April 20-23 in Las Vegas.

safety guidance document), they didn't know what to think.”

Kings said getting small growers on board with the kind of documentation that's needed to supply its distribution company and its customers would be a growing process. And if they're going to go through everything, they want to be assured a sale.

“Local guys, with a small season, we've got to get commitment from the chef,” King said. “They worry about growing, and then oh no, it comes in from somewhere else \$2 cheaper, I'm never going to sell it.”

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