



## Farm-to-table trend growing across the region

By: Samantha J. Subin June 24, 2019

David Smith has been raising livestock from his 67-acre farm in Sparks since 1999.

What started out as a backyard experiment with 75 chickens, sprouted into a 2,500 chicken operation that supplies eggs and livestock to approximately 25 restaurants and consumers across Maryland during a time of increased focus on locally grown food.

"People want to make a local connection and it's a feel good thing supporting local farmers," Smith said. "They want to put a face on their food."

In the past, local farmers relied on farmers markets to showcase products, a revenue stream that's declined since 2016. Now, thanks to the thriving farm-to-table movement in Maryland, retailers, restaurants and customers are turning to them for easy access to local food.

Since the 2000s, the term's been used to describe the push to buy and sell locally grown foods in grocery stores, restaurants and neighborhood markets. The industry is difficult – produce is expensive, fraud is prevalent and the process is time consuming but recalls across food industries – a 2018 E.coli outbreak linked to romaine lettuce killed five people and infected 210 across 36 states — only furthered the movement.

"People are more careful about what they put into their bodies," said Binda Singh, co-owner of Ananda, an Indian farm-to-table restaurant in Fulton. "You are what you eat and I'm just surprised it took us this long to figure it out."

On his 2-acre farm, near the restaurant, Singh grows eggplants, tomatoes, cilantro and other produce, a homage to his childhood farming in India.

"We have the land," Singh said. "Rather than grow grass, I'd rather grow the product."

### Broader appeal

Once dubbed an expensive industry, farm-to-table is becoming more accessible to lower income communities, thanks to programs implemented by the Maryland Department of Agriculture, nonprofits and schools.

In Baltimore alone, there are at least 20 urban farms, community gardens and greenhouses, according to the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future. Springfield Farm, owned by Smith, is only a 30- to 40-minute drive from the city.

Between 2012 and 2017, revenue from produce sold directly from farmer to consumer jumped from a \$28 million to \$54 million industry, according to the USDA's Census of Agriculture.

Farm-to-table is also shifting across the restaurant industry, offering cheaper and more affordable options that differ from upscale restaurants like Volt in Frederick that could cost consumers a pretty penny.

"You don't have to be a high-end white tablecloth restaurant to be able to do local sourcing," said Renee Catacalos, a Maryland farm-to-table expert.



Dan Wecker, chef and co-owner of The Elkrige Furnace Inn, shows off his lettuce and home-grown produce during a May 30 visit. (The Daily Record / Samantha Subin)

At The ElkrIDGE Furnace Inn, a farm-to-table restaurant in Howard County, owner Dan Wecker is seeing more customers trek from Baltimore, Hamden and the Falls Road area.

"We're reaching out to a growing community," Wecker said on a recent afternoon in one of his greenhouse's, brimming with lettuces, purple cauliflower and other specialty produce. "We've been farm-to-table forever but we're just getting recognized for it more."

Food transport emissions are another consumer concern amid global warming. At Wecker's restaurant, food travels less than five miles; the livestock and eggs come from a mile up the road and roughly 80 percent of the restaurant's produce originates from Wecker's backyard.

Still, Maryland's diversity of land with the Chesapeake Bay watershed, Piedmont plateau in central Maryland and Appalachian Mountain region toward the west, could lend itself to the movement's success.

"We have the advantage of being on the water," said Ginger Myers, a marketing specialist for agriculture and food systems at the University of Maryland Extension. "We have a seafood industry to support the population that others might not have." Some of Maryland's most valuable exports include Maryland blue crabs and oysters.



A zucchini blossom stuffed with ricotta, parmesan and spring peas in a chickpea batter sits on a bed of pink oyster mushrooms, purple asparagus and shallots. A majority of the produce used at The ElkrIDGE Furnace Inn is grown in the restaurant's backyard gardens. (The Daily Record / Samantha Subin)

Still, succeeding as a farm-to-table restaurant requires creativity.

"It takes awareness for a kitchen to be able to receive food from a variety of sources and use it in a sufficient food cash way," said Craig Sewell, who owned A Cook's Cafe, a recently closed farm-to-table restaurant in Annapolis. "It takes talent to be able to get the same yield from a farm-to-table tomato than it does from a uniform tomato," as some produce is smaller or more disfigured than commercial products.

Scheduling deliveries is another time-consuming process. Sewell spent 8-10 hours every week coordinating deliveries with more than 35 retailers. After 16 years he needed a change – now he's been working as a marketing and livestock specialist across Maryland. Wecker works almost 80 hours a week managing his restaurant and gardens.

### 'Not always easy'

Not all chefs and restaurant owners are willing to put in the time and effort.

"It is trouble," Wecker said. "It's not always easy and sometimes you plant seeds and nothing comes up or the bugs get them."

Fraud is another issue farm-to-table restaurants face nationwide. Some restaurants will advertise local suppliers they're no longer buying from or lie about the origin of their products. In 2018, an AP investigation revealed that a popular seafood company mislabeled and lied about the source of their products.

In Maryland, the same holds true.

"There'll be a hip, trendy restaurant in the city that gets 75 people or whatever for dinner and you find out 'well some of the stuff came locally but they bought some other things,'" Wecker said.

But despite fraud, farm-to-table is prospering across Maryland thanks to passionate farmers and hardworking employees.

"I love what I do here," Wecker said. "I couldn't ask for a more beautiful place to be, go to work and do what I'm doing."

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