

FoodHub in the News



Willamette Week

May 12, 2010

By Kelly Clarke

Q&A: Deborah Kane

Put your money where your mouth is

Portland, OR – “Look! The Beaverton School District needs 150 pounds of sugar snap peas!” says Deborah Kane excitedly, pulling up a Marketplace post on Ecotrust’s new website FoodHub. “See, that’s the beauty of it! Beaverton posts that they need snap peas...or peaches. Well, maybe I’m a broccoli farmer, but the guy *next door* is a peach farmer, so I’m gonna tell him... It creates this platform for people to be seen.” A few years ago Kane, the head of local nonprofit Ecotrust’s Food & Farm program, was just trying to explain to people what the word “sustainable” meant. Jump forward to February 2010 and her team had managed to produce a website that’s been touted as a “Match.com for food,” the first site of its kind in the nation. Buyers can search for and order regionally produced goods, from purple passion asparagus to 19 kinds of tomatoes, while farmers update what fresh-picked foods they’ve got on a day-to-day basis, upping the chance that the stuff you eat around this city will come from a grower living in the same time zone. Kane will give locals the lowdown on the site at an InFARMation talk focused on how restaurants source their food on Wednesday, May 12 at Roots Organic Brewing. But first, she explained to *WW* why you should care about a site only for food pros and why being local isn’t always a good thing.

WW: What does FoodHub do for me and my neighbors?

Deborah Kane: Nothing. FoodHub is only for professional food buyers. [laughs] It’s not for the average farmers market shopper or eater. But the good news for them is that if the chef at your favorite restaurant is using FoodHub then you’re more likely than ever to see local products showing up on menus. New Seasons, Safeway, the [grocery] co-ops are online already. If you happen to find yourself imprisoned in the Oregon State Penitentiary you’ll be glad to know that the OSP is using FoodHub to localize their menu options, which are probably very few and far between.

What’s working right now?

The Marketplace section is on fire right now. It’s basically the Craigslist of the local food community. Look: Dancing Roots wants you to know they’ve got these new mushrooms. Secret Society is “looking for a consistent source of Pacific Pearl onions, mainly for pickling as cocktail onions.” There was a food cart guy on there just the other day who was selling his excess duck fat. There’s an amazing quince producer... heritage turkeys... and eggs. There are waaay more eggs out there than people think there are.

But people managed to get local goods before FoodHub...

Type in the word “cranberry” on Google, and you get 1.2 million results. Search “cranberries direct Oregon” and you’re still at 30,000 results. I feel like there was a lot of the proverbial trying to find a needle in a haystack. Buyers were wading through a whole bunch of information that wasn’t relevant to them, or [for instance, schools] were calling up other school food service directors and saying, “Who do you know?” which means the same three farmers keep getting phone calls. FoodHub already has 453 members. We’re shooting for 2,000 by the end of the year.

What’s your benchmark for success for FoodHub?

Our overarching goal within the Food and Farmers program is to create a robust regional food economy. I would just say FoodHub will have successfully supported that mission if we’re bringing new people into the conversation. I’m less concerned about the chef that’s already buying local goods who thinks FoodHub is not for him than I am about Salvador Molly’s, for example...

You want the Subway franchise.

I want the Subways. I totally do. I feel like it’s time to democratize the conversation about regional food, and take it away from the precious. [FoodHub] was just approached by the Blazers. Let’s revolutionize the offerings at Blazers games! I am so focused and concerned with what people would call “the ag of the middle,” that fourth-generation farmer in Canby who is not doing deals at a table at the farmers market. He’s trying to make a living on hundreds of acres. He’s not in the scene, he’s not best friends with our wonderful, lovely [restaurant] community. We, the consumer, have to expand our definition beyond the wonderful farmers we see at the farmers market, because 98 percent of Oregon agriculture is not represented at the Portland Farmers Market.

What’s the least sustainable things you eat? I’d feel better knowing you’re a flawed human being.

I am addicted to Safeway Select sausage and Miracle Whip. I grew up on that highly processed, additives out the wazoo, not even sure if those are real casings, sausage. I put Safeway sausage in my lasagna along with my homegrown tomatoes and my precious mozzarella.

Who is making a big difference in the local food economy?

I think Portland Public Schools is doing phenomenal work to change the food system. Parents are anxious for change, and they want it to happen really fast, but we’re feeding 20,000 kids a day on \$1.10 [each]. Eighteen out of 20 times they’re eating corn dogs, but on the two days that they’re not—you couldn’t imagine the work it took to add those two days in. [PPS] is absolutely localizing its supply chain, but like Sysco, it’s not shouting about it.

What's the next thing the average Portlander can do to help create a robust local food economy?

I feel like the beauty, in regards to the food conversation, is that there are various points of entry, whether it's "I'm part of a CSA" or "I asked a question when I was in the hospital about where the food came from." It's the idea that food is not a widget that comes from a factory, but a reflection of seasonality and a natural ecosystem.... You can be engaged in the food conversation simply by having a potluck with your neighbor, or putting a tomato plant in a pot on your porch. *The Oregonian* just did a story on homesteaders [radical homemakers]—I had such a negative reaction to that holier-than-thou, do-gooder, non-consumer, blah blah blah.... I want to be able to go and have my wonderfully productive, fantastic garden and then go buy an expensive handbag, you know? We're full of these contradictions. I sound heretical, but if the [emphasis] on "local" food is keeping people from becoming part of the conversation I get really frustrated.... Oregon is a very hungry state, and a nutritionist will tell you that it's way more important that people know how to cook with fresh fruits and vegetables than they know where they came from. That's a tension that I think we need to be a lot more conscious of. When people are worrying about how to put food on the table, for you to suggest that they worry about where it came from is difficult.

GO: Deborah Kane speaks as part of the InFARmation Series at Roots Organic Brewing, 1520 SE 7th Ave., 235-7668. 5:30 pm Wednesday, May 12. Info at friendsoffamilyfarmers.org. You can browse FoodHub for free at food-hub.org. Memberships cost \$100 a year.

URL: <http://www.wweek.com/editorial/3627/14014/?SOURCE=RSS>