

Food hub good for business and consumers

Posted: 02/17/15, 11:32 AM PST

Chicoer.com

Sitting down at a restaurant, we order from the menu, marvel when a plate of food appears, and then dig in. Do we really care where it came from or what it took to get it on the table?

Many do.

The growing local and regional food movement stems partly from people wanting to know as much as they can about what they put in their bodies. There's also a recognition we're in one of the richest agricultural regions in the world, and supporting local growers supports the local economy.

But the bottom line is that options that haven't been available for small local food producers to serve the urge for local food.

That's why the new North Valley Food Hub is a remarkable step.

Like a food matchmaker, the Food Hub helps connect food sellers and buyers, so that both benefit.

The third party in the picture is the happy consumer who loves the idea of local.

The Food Hub bypasses the established marketing networks. Those can force small food producers to fill a dictated niche to survive, a troubling situation where there's little they can do to grow or change their operation.

Alternately, a food buyer is in the same boat, with limited sources offered for stocking the shelves.

But if growers and buyers can work through the food hub, new ingredients from new sources — and it's all local — can reach the consumers.

At this level, new choices can come to small operations, like restaurants, cafeterias, food services or other kinds of kitchens.

Chico State University cooks have bought through the program as well.

Food hubs have been talked about for a long time, especially in this area because the majority of producers and users are not the big guys.

Like anything new, no matter how good an idea it is, it can take a miracle to make something happen.

Food producers and growers have been eying this possibility for years.

Hatched late last year, about 20 growers sell online to 20-25 wholesale buyers weekly through the North Valley Food Hub.

Everyone seems pretty happy with the relationship, and food hubs throughout the country are pictures of the concept's success.

Another dimension for the North Valley Food Hub came into play when a private funding agency, 3CORE, meshed with Chico State University's engineering and agriculture students to produce a small cold storage unit that gives sellers and buyers some flexibility.

Advertisement

Food doesn't have to be used the minute it's picked, but has a little longer life, which means there's more options for it to be used.

There are other dimensions to the idea of a food hub, like decreasing waste. Small businesses need to keep their costs conservative, and any unexpected waste can undercut a small operation.

The concept of a food hub could also help encourage future farmers, who see they don't have to have a huge operation to make it.

It's good to see small ideas carried through, and we're glad locals — and many of them — have made this happen.

As word of the food hub grows, more options come to the farm and table, and everyone benefits.

Food hubs have operated throughout the country, with the U.S. Department of Agriculture a long-time supporter.

But the north valley found the pieces fell into place around Thanksgiving. It's still small, but the sky's the limit.

We may get away from small producers being pushed in their business by the numbers, trying to grow and sell as much as possible.

Now, because of the relationships that have developed, through the food hub, and with an eye to quality, small sellers and small buyers can make a go of it.

That means consumers win, with good choices in fresh food, and lower costs.