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### A SUSTAINABLE LINK

From farm to plate—one man's drive to keep it local.  
BY JULIA LAWLOR • PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEVIN HENRY

When you're one man on a mission to fix the food system, there are never enough hours in the day. That's a lesson Mikey Azzara, founder of the Lawrenceville-based sustainable food delivery service Zone 7, has learned all too well since he went into business in the spring of 2008.

On a blustery afternoon in mid-April, he finds himself two hours behind schedule and knee-deep in boxes of spring lettuce, asparagus, apples and kale piled on a loading dock at The Lawrenceville School. He and two part-time employees have been picking up the produce all morning from farmers in eastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

A rainstorm has swept in, and once it blows over it won't be long before the surrounding central New Jersey fields are bathed in the red hues of a setting sun. His customers—some of the most celebrated chefs in the state of New Jersey—are waiting. And the only thing scarier than an unhappy farmer is an impatient chef.

"The biggest learning curve has been figuring out how to gather everything from the farmers and deliver it to restaurants before 5 pm," Azzara said earlier that morning as he steered his white Mitsubishi truck from farm to farm along the back roads of Bucks County, Pennsylvania. "In the past, there were some days we wouldn't deliver until 9 or 10 at night."

Gradually, though, the kinks are being worked out. Demand for Zone 7's services is increasing, a development that is nerve-racking in the short run for Azzara, but at the same time encouraging to him and all his customers who believe in the locavore cause. "Zone 7" is named after New Jersey's U.S. Department of Agriculture-designated climate and growing zone. Azzara considers it the missing link between small farmers and food purveyors—including restaurants, health food markets and a few New Jersey school districts—that want to offer local, fresh, organic or sustainably grown produce, meat, cheese and eggs. Not all the products sold by his farmers are certified organic—but Azzara makes sure before he signs anyone on that the farmer is operating in the most sustainable manner possible. "We want them to be taking care of the soil, practicing crop rotation, cover cropping, spraying very little or not at all," he says.

Before Zone 7 appeared on the scene, most local farmers and chefs relied to

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varying degrees on the industrial food system for their needs. A large food-distribution company with fleets of tractor-trailer trucks and giant refrigerated warehouses might pick up a New Jersey farmer's lettuce and transport it to its Philadelphia warehouse, where the lettuce might then make its way to a restaurant in New York City. On the other hand, a chef in a New Jersey restaurant might call a food distributor and order several cases of strawberries that have made a 3,000-mile trip from California. Meanwhile, the farmer down the road has strawberries galore. Local farmers also find themselves competing in the global market. "I can get green beans cheaper from Guatemala than I can get them in New Jersey," says William Mooney, chef-owner of The Brothers Moon, a restaurant in Hopewell that now relies on Zone 7 for its fresh produce.

"We can see the food system is broken," says Azzara. "If a farm in New Jersey is selling to restaurants in New York and Philadelphia but not to restaurants in New Jersey, there's something wrong with that."

Azzara believes that Zone 7's business model is unique in the state, although he is aware of a few similar operations in other parts of the country—a distributor in California that serves several Western states; a company in Michigan; and scattered farmers' cooperatives that pool their resources and deliver their crops locally.

It wasn't until his junior year at Middlebury College in Vermont that Azzara, now 30, began to take an interest in food. A psychology major with a minor in environmental studies, he moved into student housing where dining-hall fare was mostly organic and sourced from local farmers. That summer, he went to Italy and fell in love with farming, working at an agriturismo in Tuscany that grew organic olives, grapes, lavender and vegetables. "Good food and taking care of the land is an important value there, and it's embedded in their culture," he says. "Here, it's a new thing."

After graduation, he returned home to Lawrenceville and worked at Cherry Grove Farm for a year and a half before landing a job as outreach coordinator for the New Jersey chapter of the Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA). He also started working one day a week as a garden teacher in Lawrence Township schools, a job he still holds, and launched the Lawrenceville Farmers Market.

At NOFA, he held regional meetings of farmers and chefs, encouraging them to work together. Inevitably, when he'd follow up with them, "I'd find they hadn't started doing business. Most farmers didn't have enough time in the day to call on chefs on top of selling at farmers' markets and through CSA [community supported agriculture] programs. Chefs didn't have the time to call ten different farmers to get all the ingredients

they needed."

He began talking about the problem with both chefs and farmers, who urged him to start a distribution business that would serve as a link. Chef William Mooney at The

Brothers Moon in Hopewell kept at him, even presenting Azzara one holiday with a gift of a Matchbox toy truck with "Produce" written on the side. Mark and Judy Dornstreich, owners of Branch Creek Farm in Perkasio, Pennsylvania, helped him devise a business plan and eventually lent him the truck he used his first year in business. After more than four years at NOFA, he decided to take the leap.

"He's very energetic and very bright," Judy Dornstreich says, wrapping Azzara in a hug and leading him out into the fields to see the patch of stinging nettle she's harvesting for the Zone 7 chefs. "I always tell him to tell the chefs how proud I am that they're using these ingredients," she says. The couple's son, Jesse, has worked for Zone 7 since the start.

Matt Maximuck Jr., owner of a greenhouse operation called White Star Growers in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, sells 50,000 heads of lettuce a year to farm markets, restaurants, large distributors and Zone 7. Azzara, he says, "cares a little bit more about the farmers. There's a personal connection. He understands how important it is to support local farmers." White Star's lettuces—including deer tongue, Boston, red leaf and romaine—are a staple on the menu of one of New Jersey's highest-rated restaurants, elements in Princeton.

In his first year in business, Azzara did pickup and delivery just one day a week. Sales tripled the second year, when he bought the Mitsubishi truck with the help of his father. He would park the truck full of produce at Cherry Grove Farm, keeping the refrigeration unit running all night. "In the early days we called in a lot of favors," he says. "Some of our chefs let us keep stuff in their restaurant coolers overnight."

Azzara goes out of his way to accommodate his customers. Despite the 20 deliveries he's expected to make on this Wednesday in April, he agrees to return later to a farm that hasn't finished packing its greens, then spends several minutes waiting in a parking lot to meet "the Egg Lady," Sandra Guzikowski of



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Yardley, Pennsylvania, who's fallen behind in washing the 48 dozen eggs she's promised to supply.

This year, with sales projected to double again, he has moved the office out of his home and leased office, refrigeration and loading dock space at the Lawrenceville School. He currently serves about 25 farmers and 50 restaurants, markets, and schools, working six days a week.

One thing he's learned from the business so far is that his degree in psychology has not been wasted. Even-keeled and affable, he's been able to navigate volatile temperaments and sticky situations with ease. "Part of the service we provide is working with all the different personalities of the farmers and chefs—they're all a bunch of characters," he says. "The farmer's head is in the soil and the chef's head is in the kitchen. Bridging that gap is a huge service."

And interest in his services keeps growing. He's had calls from several restaurants along the Jersey Shore, for instance. He has had to rent an extra van on delivery days, and has even put his little Honda Fit into service, folding the seats down and stuffing it with greens. His girlfriend, Emily Suzuki, handles the bookkeeping. He's thinking of buying another van that would allow him to make pickups and deliveries while traveling on the Garden State Parkway. So far he has taken only a small salary for himself.

Ed Lidzbarski, owner of a 60-acre organic farm, E.R. & Sons Farm in Monroe Township, is thrilled that Zone 7 now buys 10 to 15 percent of his crop at a price higher than he was able to fetch a few years ago from retail buyers. "To have a guy like Mikey doing this is a blessing," he says. "He deals fair and square, he wants to do right by the farmer, he believes in what he's doing. He's not just in it for the money."

But if Azzara wants to make Zone 7 a viable source of income for himself, he knows he has to expand. To add more vehicles, hire more employees, acquire a warehouse means bringing in investors. Pressure could mount to deal in greater volumes, or to lower prices paid to small farmers.

"If Mikey gets real big, these are the issues he'll face," says Lidzbarski. "Like when people win the lottery, it changes them. I hope he's successful, and I hope he doesn't change."

For more information, visit [www.freshfromzone7.com](http://www.freshfromzone7.com).

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