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The Huggable Middleman

Mikey Azzara's Zone 7 connects chefs hungry for fresh, local produce with small farmers who couldn't otherwise get it to them.

Posted July 12, 2010 by Abby Schultz

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Photo by Adam Grybowski.

Dan Richer wends his way through the narrow kitchen of Arturo's, the Maplewood osteria and pizzeria where he is chef and owner, to the parking lot out back. There he greets his produce distributor with a bear hug. Mikey Azzara, a New Jersey native who easily breaks out with a laugh, owns Zone 7 (freshfromzone7.com), a distribution company connecting more than 25 farms throughout New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania to more than 30 local restaurants, five grocers, and two public schools, one in West New York, one in Jersey City.



Photo by Mikey Azzara.

After greeting Richer, Azzara ducks into his truck to retrieve bright, lemony sorrel, sweet potatoes, lettuce, and one of Richer's favorites, delicately flavored French breakfast radishes. To Richer, Azzara is more than a produce distributor. He's the lifeline to sustainably produced, often organic, always super-fresh New Jersey fruits, vegetables, eggs, honey, and cheese. "He's bridging the gap," Richer says. "He's the liaison between farmers and restaurants."

Eating local is a hot trend in Jersey restaurants, but getting Jersey produce onto local restaurant menus isn't easy. Small-to medium-sized farms may not produce enough to satisfy commercial distributors and so sell most of what they grow directly to consumers at farmers' markets, roadside stands, and through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) cooperatives. Most don't have the time to solicit business from individual restaurants or the resources (like Azzara's 14-foot refrigerated box truck) to deliver around the state.

Josh Cederbaum, owner of Market in Montclair, which features fresh, local produce, tried buying from farmers at neighborhood markets but found they weren't willing to sell at wholesale prices. He had similar troubles with farm cooperatives, which also weren't equipped to handle orders and couldn't guarantee him specific products. Then he found Mikey, as everyone calls him. "Part of the reason we're so successful is because of this guy," Cederbaum says. "We couldn't do it without him, no way."

Azzara, 30, discovered this gap as an outreach director for the New Jersey chapter of the Northeast Organic Farming Association, where he tried without much luck to get farmers to sell directly to chefs. Finally, Will Mooney, owner and chef at Brothers Moon in Hopewell, gave Azzara a toy truck with "Farm-Fresh Produce" printed on the side, saying, "You know all the farmers, you know all the chefs. Dude, just get a truck and start doing this!" In May 2008, Azzara did. He amassed sales of \$70,000 that year, more than tripling that to \$250,000 last year.

While joking that his business should have schlep in its name, Azzara, who has run the Lawrenceville Farmers' Market for five years, plunged into this work as a "unique opportunity to do something the way you really think it should be done." Every Saturday morning, year round, he e-mails his customers a list of what the farmers have available that week. He delivers on Wednesdays and Thursdays, putting about 500 miles a week on his truck. (He also teaches a garden class at Lawrenceville Elementary School and works closely with schools, developing gardens and gardening curricula.) Last year his farmers, who still sell most of their produce through farmers' markets and cooperatives, took in as much as \$30,000 each through sales to Zone 7 (which is the agricultural climate zone for all of Jersey except Sussex County).

Azzara aspires to be a good middleman, offering chefs, store owners, and farmers a fair price. He hosts a winter meeting where farmers and chefs can meet and swap ideas. Richer of Arturo's says Azzara's apples may be a bit more expensive, but not by much.

"And if you put an apple next to an apple," he says, "Mikey's apples are much, much better."

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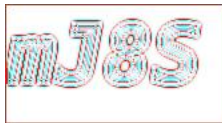
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