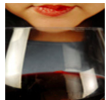


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Ung: Delivering fresh ingredients from small farms to North Jersey restaurants

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RESTAURANT REVIEWER

You may have seen the names on menus: Valley Shepherd cheeses, Garden State Stout and Pat LaFrieda meats. What makes these sources so sought after by the area's best chefs? We wanted to find out. This summer, Corner Table highlights some of the big names in locally produced food and beverages, visiting the places they're made and getting to know the people who make them.

Last year, executive chef Bryan Gregg was trying to transform the newly renovated [Ho-Ho-Kus Inn](#) into a farm-to-table restaurant that used mostly ingredients grown nearby.

Gregg's reasoning was simple: he wanted to support local farmers and serve customers fresh, quality food that they could trace back to the source. But how to do this at a busy restaurant that could serve 300 to 400 people on a Saturday night? Anything but simple.

Gregg was spending a lot of time on the phone, looking for local growers to provide various ingredients. He often had to send someone to farms to pick up things or arrange for deliveries. The end of the growing season loomed. And the local ingredients he did get weren't always the best quality.

But through chef friends, Gregg heard about a group called Zone 7. It had stepped into the role of farm-to-table middleman, connecting chefs like him with small farmers in New Jersey and eastern



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Mikey Azzara's company deals with small farms in South Jersey and Bucks County, Pa.

Farm fresh

Restaurants that serve local produce and other foods from Zone 7 farms in New Jersey and Pennsylvania:

Bergen County: Ho-Ho-Kus Inn & Tavern, Ho-Ho-Kus; Rocca, Glen Rock.

Pennsylvania. One call a week would bring a bounty of local produce, much of it organic – from Jersey corn and blueberries to sweet Walla-Walla onions, colorful heirloom tomatoes and unusual microgreens. Some even would be available in winter, thanks to greenhouses.

It was the key to a low-maintenance, diverse farm-to-table menu. But Zone 7 owner Mikey Azzara, who was based in central Jersey, said he wasn't set up to deliver to [Bergen County](#).

Gregg didn't like that answer. "He just kept hounding us," Azzara recalled. "He would call and e-mail all the time. 'When are you coming? When are you coming?'"

"Finally I said, 'OK, fine. If you promise me that you'll order at least \$500 worth of product a week, we'll come,'" Azzara said.

Replied Gregg: "It'll probably be more like \$1,000."

"So," Azzara said, "we basically rearranged the entire route so we could get up to him."

Mikey Azzara and Zone 7 aren't exactly household names. But they have become major behind-the-scenes forces in moving more produce from small farms onto the tables of top New Jersey restaurants.

Azzara, a [Bergen County](#) native who lived in [Lodi](#) until he was 7, spent several years working for the Northeast Organic Farming Association and also ran a community farmers' market in Lawrenceville, where he lived.

He quickly realized that farm-to-table dining was a struggle for everyone. Restaurant chefs were starved for just-picked produce and happy to pay for it, but had no time to pick it up. Farms grew plenty of quality fruits and vegetables but had no time to sell or deliver it to restaurants.

At first, Azzara tried to connect restaurants directly with farmers "so they could get top dollar for their product. I was thinking the middle man was kind of like the bad person in that equation."

But that didn't work. And chefs began saying things like: "Dude, just get a truck and start doing this. You know who all the farms are, you know who the interested chefs are."

And so in 2007, he did. Zone 7 was named for the region's growing zone, and in his first year, Azzara did a modest \$70,000 in sales, delivering only to 15 restaurants in central New Jersey.

Today, Azzara and nine part-time staffers pick up fruits and vegetables (as well as cheese, eggs, honey, grains and meat) from 40 farms (30 in New Jersey, 10 in Bucks County, Pa.), organize it at a warehouse in Mercer County and make about 85 deliveries all over New Jersey

Hudson County: Liberty House, Jersey City; Maritime Parc, Jersey City.

Essex County: Terra Tea Salon, Montclair; Fascino, Montclair; Bar Cara, Bloomfield; Arturo's Osteria & Pizzeria, Maplewood.

Morris County: Grato, Morris Plains; Tabor Road Tavern, Morris Plains.

and in the Philadelphia area. Half their produce is certified organic; another 30 percent generally meets organic standards but isn't certified. Azzara expects to do about \$1 million in sales this year.

Zone 7 takes about a 25 percent cut of everything that's sold, but Gloucester County organic farmer Bob Muth says the group has still secured better prices for his produce than he previously received. "Farmers down here in southern New Jersey are some of the best growers in the world, but on the marketing end we come up short," Muth said. Azzara has brought his produce to customers who are "not afraid to pay a big premium for it, especially if it tastes good."

Craig Levy, the chef-owner of Rocca in [Glen Rock](#), started using Zone 7 in May and last month, revamped his menu to highlight the seasonal produce: he now changes three to four dishes each week depending on what's offered, and also tells customers what farms he's buying from.

"People in this day and age are more much more aware of what they're putting in their mouth," Levy said. "I think people definitely appreciate [the changes] and it has been noticed."

Over at the [Ho-Ho-Kus](#) Inn, Gregg has been floored at the quality of what's been made available to him, so much variety that "Sometimes it's hard to come up with [dishes] fast enough."

He now gets 95 percent of his produce from Zone 7, and says the minor cost difference pays off in increased freshness and shelf life. "We got potatoes the other day that were dug out of the ground the day before. The skin was so thin, they were so sweet and tasty." Zone 7 has allowed Gregg to offer such unique appetizers as spiced popcorn (from Hunterdon County) with fried avocado and black bean shoots (fresh from Buckingham, Pa.).

Zone 7's scope became clear last Tuesday night in Hightstown, where each unloading truck turned the storage room into more of a food-geek paradise. Lush green basil and corn husks peeked out of wooden crates; workers hauled in boxes filled with summer squash, organic grape tomatoes, shallots the size of apples.

For Rocca, there were fat blueberries from Burlington County, heirloom tomatoes and red torpedo onions from Pennsylvania and violet globes of Sicilian eggplant from Vineland. Levy will use the blueberries in a crisp, the heirlooms in a caprese salad. The onions he planned to use in a spaetzle dish; and he was thinking about pairing the eggplant with snapper.

[Ho-Ho-Kus](#) Inn ordered, among other things, stubby Russian fingerling potatoes from Salem County and mache, baby purple mustard and fragrant lemon verbena from Cumberland County.

The potatoes would be paired with fluke for the restaurant's play on fish and chips, the mache and purple mustard turned into garnishes or salads. The lemon verbena? Sorbet.

"I'm thrilled that restaurants are really embracing this," Azzara says, "and our goal is to make sure that it is not just a trend."

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