

Cornell Roundtable Looks at Local Food Sources

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Restaurants at all levels are heeding customers' demand for fresh, locally produced foods, according to participants in the Cornell Food Safety and Nutrition Roundtable, held in September 2007 at the Cornell School of Hotel Administration.

The Roundtable drew a distinguished group of industry practitioners and academic researchers to examine current food trends. In addition to local sourcing, Roundtable participants addressed the critical issue of maintaining the safety of food throughout the entire supply chain and turbulence in the labor market.

'Restaurant operators are happy to meet customers' demand for fresh products,' pointed out Roundtable chair Alex Susskind, associate professor at the Cornell School of Hotel Administration. 'But participants from Hillstone Restaurant Group and Fresh City explained that the process works differently at different price points. For example, with their tighter price range, fast casual restaurants must use a different strategy for integrating locally produced foods than, say, upscale casual restaurants, which have less direct price pressure.'

As guests' knowledge of local and environmentally sustainable foods grows, restaurant operators must also be increasingly sophisticated in their use of such products, as explained by panelists from Canyon Ranch and Mader's.

The local-food trend plays out against the need for restaurant operators to control the supply chain. For example, Ana Hooper, vice president of total quality at Darden Restaurants, explained the steps her company takes to oversee each step of food supply. 'Even with this effort, the critical point for food safety is at the earliest possible stages, in the plant or in the field,' she concluded.

Food safety is also affected by labor issues, as operators and their employees work to meet regulations involving food labeling and the need to keep guests informed about the products that they consume. Labor issues continue to bedevil the food-service industry, as pointed out by panel chair Steve Carley, of El Pollo Loco. Participants in this panel examined the turbulence in the labor market caused by changes in immigration, wage, and health insurance regulations. Ensuring a continuing labor supply will require finding some kind of balance in the midst of many proposals.

The Roundtable was presented by Cornell's Center for Hospitality Research, with participation from the Culinary Institute of America, the Cornell Department of Food Science and a broad group of industry representatives, including research organizations such as Maritz and NPD Food World.

For more information about future roundtables at the Cornell School of Hotel Administration, please visit <http://hotelschool.cornell.edu/research/chr/events/roundtables/>.

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