

RESTAURANTS LOOK HERE >>>
REACH THE INDUSTRY IN OUR COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE



QSR FEATURE

Living the Local Dream

September 28, 2009

Buying local is a great idea but one that leaves most quick-serves wondering how to make it work. How one small chain in the Pacific Northwest is doing it. By [Jamie Hartford](#)

In December, the only place you'll find a tomato at one of Grand Central Baking Co.'s retail cafés is in the sun-dried tomato mayonnaise or the house-made tomato relish. About seven years ago, Piper Davis, co-owner and cuisine manager for the two Seattle and six Portland, Oregon, restaurants, stopped buying the fresh variety for all but two months of the year, when they're in season locally.

Grand Central's decision to forego out-of-season tomatoes and, thus, those shipped in from far-flung places, was a step in line with the values of the local food movement, which advocates using ingredients sourced as close as possible to where they will be consumed in the name of creating a more sustainable food supply chain. In fine dining, where the practice has been gaining popularity in recent years, this hardly would have raised an eyebrow. But in the quick-service restaurant industry, where tomatoes have become as ubiquitous as soda fountains, it was a bold move.

Though consumers are starting to pick up on the "buy local" trend, with more than half of the respondents in a 2007 study by market research provider The Hartman Group saying it's important to buy locally grown food whenever possible, most quick-serves have yet to jump on board.

Grand Central Bakery, however, is making local sourcing work. From May through October, 80 percent of the produce used in the concept's artisan breads, pastries, sandwiches, salads, and soups comes directly from its producers—many of which are small 50- to 100-acre family-owned farms in Oregon's Willamette Valley. This spring, the company will also begin filling its silos with flour made from wheat grown on sustainable farms in the Columbia Plateau. Where other chains have barely dipped a toe in the waters of local sourcing, Grand Central is wading shoulder-deep and getting wetter all the time.

• • •

It wasn't always that way, though. When Davis' mother, Gwenyth Bassetti, founded the company in Seattle in 1989, local purchasing was not a priority, Davis says. It wasn't until after her brother, Ben, a fellow co-owner and now the company's president, brought the Grand Central concept to Portland in 1993 that it began to take off.

Piper Davis joined the family business in 1995, first in production in Seattle, then as a pastry baker in Portland. When Grand Central added a third Portland location, she became general manager. Davis' interest in the business was more food-oriented than her brother's, and she began attending meetings of the Portland chapter of Chefs Collaborative, an organization that promotes sustainability in foodservice operations. There she had the opportunity to interact with chefs in fine-dining restaurants who were creating menus around ingredients sourced from local farms. Her challenge was to learn from their methods and adapt them for a fast-casual bakery café.

"I remember thinking, 'Could we pull tomatoes off of the sandwiches? Could we do a seasonal menu?'" Davis says.

In fact, they could—and they did. They started by settling on the Grand Central "classics," a base menu including ham and swiss, turkey, and tuna sandwiches that remains the same year round. The classics were initially supplemented by quarterly seasonal specials that changed depending on what was available from local farms. That rotation, however, proved too constricting.

"We'd run into some times where the tomatoes weren't ready yet, but asparagus was done," Davis says.

To better deal with the occasional gaps in supply, they switched to seasonal specials that change every two to three weeks. Once or twice a week, the company's local farm partners send out an e-mail "farm list" of what they'll have available in the weeks ahead. Grand Central's kitchen staff then tailors the specials accordingly. In early December, for instance, there's a Willamette Valley beet salad. In May, there are rhubarb pastries and a chicken salad with asparagus through June. Summer brings eggplant parmesan.

• • •

In the early days, farmer suppliers delivered to Grand Central's then-three locations individually, dropping off totes of fruit and vegetables at each store. But as business grew, logistics became more of a challenge. Deliveries had to be scheduled at each location, and fresh produce required a lot of prep work in the back of the house.

"I spent a lot of time micromanaging things," Davis says.

In Portland, the company had already centralized production of its artisan breads, which, in addition to being used for sandwiches and sold in its own cafés, are available wholesale to grocery stores and other restaurants. The loaves were baked in a café on the east side then delivered to the other locations in the city by truck. Why, the thinking went, couldn't the same be done for other aspects of the operation?

Page 1 | [2 \(localfood-2.phtml\)](#) | [Next \(localfood-2.phtml\)](#)