



Capital City Public Market

Red Feather's Dave Krick rings the opening bell at the Capital City Public Market, 2010. The eco-restaurateur is Boise's Worm-Herder-in-Chief.



Serving
LOCAL

by Dennis O'Dell

Boise restaurateur Dave Krick was merely an interested bystander at a 2006 conference about local farming when he had a life-changing revelation. “What really hit home was the struggle of the American farmer. Many are living in poverty to raise healthy, nutritious food. I realized, oh gosh, we are part of the solution,” he said. Thus was born a new *raison d’être* for his Bittercreek Alehouse: support local farms whenever possible. “If we can provide an example for other restaurants, we can actually make a difference in our local food system. That became the mission of the restaurant ... that was the point when we said, ‘This is who we are,’” he explained.

Krick, who founded the Bittercreek Alehouse in 1996, and his business partner Kevin Kelpé have since integrated the “local” mantra into every phase of their business, which includes the neighboring Red Feather Lounge added in 2006. “We have a connection to everything we use ... we get to know the farmers, or at least know where their food comes from. We do

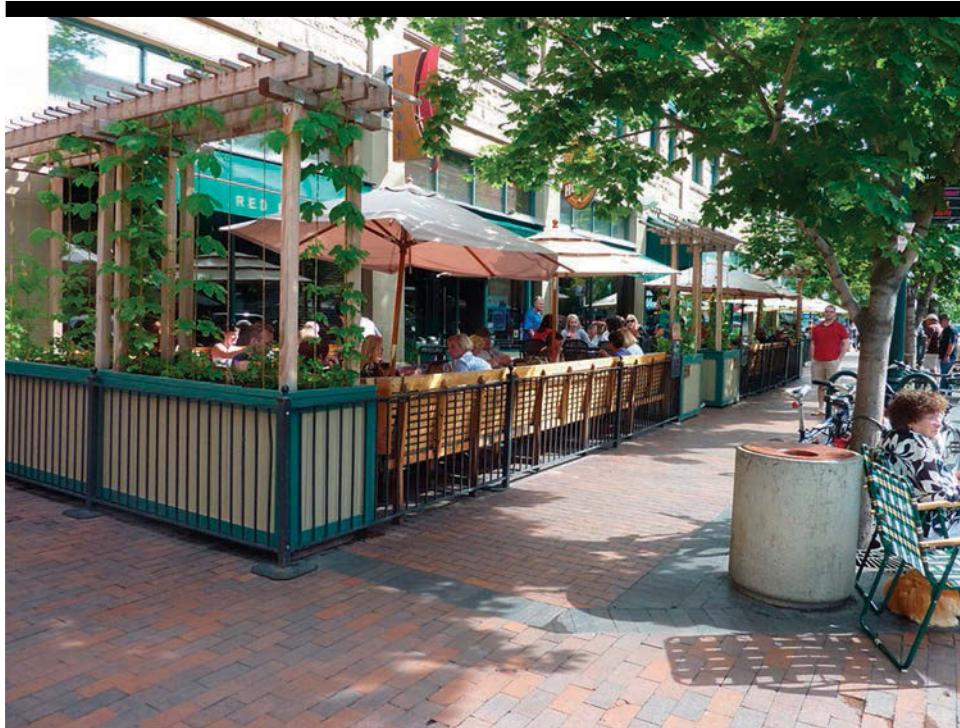
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this for our customers,” explained Krick. In the early days he went on foraging trips to seek out local farmers for particular produce. “At one point we even employed a full-time forager because we struggled to get enough local food.”

The restaurants no longer have to contact farmers; instead they have a steady stream of local farmers contacting them. Now they use some 20 local farmers to supply everything from greens to beef. “We realized over time that we were not doing anyone any favors by splitting our business, so we concentrated it in the hands of those who were designing their operation to work with our restaurant. It has worked out well for both them and us ... we are starting to see some farmers do really well,” he said. The purchase of local foods allows farmers to eliminate the middleman, which means they receive full retail price for the product rather than the normal 10 cents on the dollar through food brokers and retailers. This alone gives the farmer a much better opportunity to not only stay on the farm but also earn a living. The two restaurants serve between 130,000 and 150,000 meals a year. They use 200,000 pounds of potatoes and 60,000 to 70,000 eggs a year. Combine that with salad greens, cheese, meats and other products and there is a noticeable impact on local farms. “Restaurants like ours are markets that didn’t exist for local farmers 6-7 years ago,” explained Krick.

“They helped us out several years ago by ordering and buying our product [pork and beef] on a regular basis and we have had a good relationship since,” said Ed Wilsey, owner with his wife Debby of the 11,000-acre Wilsey Ranch south of Marsing. The ranch is Global Animal Protection-certified, which guarantees that livestock are treated humanely. They age their beef for 25 days prior to slaughter to ensure it is tender, with good texture and flavor. They use a local USDA-certified family-owned processing company for the final product, all in keeping with the restaurants’ requirements. “We let our animals live in a normal or natural environment; they are grass fed for the most part and then we supplement them during the winter with hay that we grow ourselves on the ranch. We never give them any other animal byproducts, hormones or anything that is not natural.” For their efforts, the Wilseys received the Conservationist of the Year Award in 2011 by the Owyhee County Conservation District.

“In the beginning, we were saying ‘yes’ to buy from almost every producer or farmer because it was very cool and we were excited to work with the community,” said Kelpie. “So, anyone who came into the business with produce, we told them to just bring it until we found ourselves with hundreds of pounds of produce on the floor—and the worst part is, no one really knew what to do with it all.” The result was unnecessary waste.



Boiseans dine al fresco at the Red Feather Lounge and Bittercreek Alehouse, home of the urban worm.

The definition of the word “local” must be flexible, Kelpie added. “We prefer to think of local as about a 250-mile radius, which puts us into eastern Oregon. Political boundaries don’t really mean too much to us. If we feature seafood, it will come from Puget Sound rather than the Gulf of Mexico. We consider lamb local if it comes from anywhere in Idaho rather than from northern California. Avocados, on the other hand, we have to buy from California rather than Mexico—unfortunately that is about as local as we can get.”

Their rapport with farmers is an asset. “Now, if we want a product that no one has readily available, such as chicken, we can contact our farmers and simply ask if they would be interested in raising this product exclusively for us. There are farms that grow particular types of lettuce and



Claire Walter at culinary-colorado.com

Vermont red wigglers do the on-site composting below the Bittercreek/Red Feather. Worms compost table scraps and even the paper menus.

greens for our menu salads. Fortunately, farmers are very accommodating to our requests and go out of their way to provide us with the product," said Kelpé.

Krick says they must know the source of every product they serve. And they require that their food come from sustainable sources. "Beyond knowing where the food is coming from, we want to be able to go there and talk to them about it." Most of their food comes from "direct relationships"—that is, from farms they have vetted for quality. Even if there is no direct connection with the supplier, the restaurant uses local distributors. And local vendors supply other products that come from outside the region, such as coffee. Only a handful of products, mostly seafood, come from suppliers or vendors who are not local.

Adhering to these standards can be difficult. Unlike some restaurants that use local products only when it is convenient, Krick and Kelpé hold fast. "It is easy to do local a little bit; the hard part is doing a lot. That's been the challenge for us ... to be authentic. We've changed our menus at times because of our principles," Krick said. "Seafood is complicated because we want to have a food style that reflects our region and obviously there is not a lot of seafood available in our area," explained Kelpé. "We get trout and sturgeon from Hagerman and we can get salmon during the runs from the Columbia Valley. But we think it would be fun to serve shellfish too because the pub format of Bittercreek goes well with oysters and shrimp. At times, we have to go without featuring seafood."

That means a customer looking for a bowl of clam chowder will come up empty at the two restaurants. Krick said they gave up on clams years ago because they couldn't verify their origin. As with salmon and other seafood, they want to know the source of the clams to ensure they are receiving quality produce that is fished using sustainable methods. "We've had a lot of complaints over the years because of menu changes. Clam chowder was a big one. People literally walked out because they couldn't have clam chowder. But we aren't a coastal town ... we think potato chowder is more fitting anyway," he said.

Produce such as tomatoes is another challenge in the winter months. "We try to buy during the winter from organic farms in California or simply not put them on the plates. But our customers wouldn't understand if we didn't have them (tomatoes) at all," said Kelpé. Chicken remains a challenge. Most restaurant customers prefer white meat and breasts, which leaves a large portion of each chicken with little or no use. "You need a lot of individual birds, and each one ends up being very expensive by the time you feed it

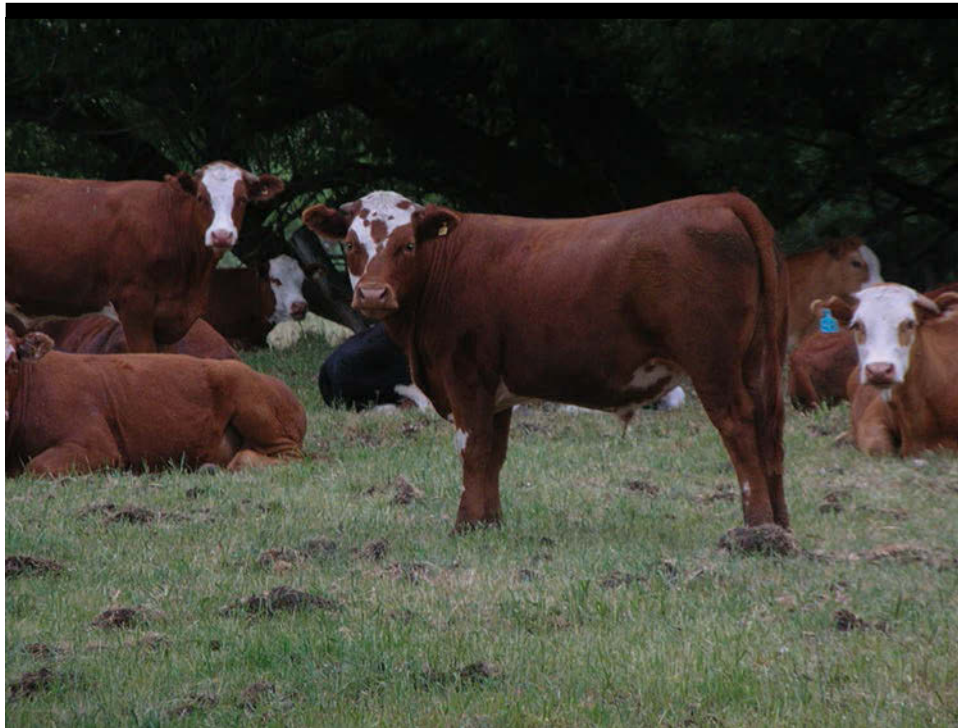
properly without pumping it full of hormones,” said Kelpé. “Our customers’ demand for white meat and chicken breasts is relentless. We continue to find uses for the rest of the meat since we have to pay for the entire bird.” Until a few years ago local chicken was hard to come by because there was no state-certified processor in Idaho. Now there are a handful of local chicken producers, but those don’t provide enough to meet the restaurants’ demand. Krick said about 60 percent of the chickens they use are raised locally.

The supply side for local foods is another challenge. Distribution is still an issue because it is very difficult for small farmers and producers to justify the expense of a delivery truck and driver. Idaho’s Bounty aggregates local supply and serves as a local distribution hub. “If more restaurant customers would ask for local foods, we believe larger distribution companies such as SYSCO and FSA would deliver more local foods,” Kelpé said. Added Krick: “When we decided to go down this road, one of the goals was to develop a normalized local food system that several businesses could use. Having a distributor like Idaho’s Bounty helps a lot.”

Their local food-buying procedure starts with a mandatory visit to the producer, which is one principle they will not compromise. If a producer or farmer refuses to allow a field visit, then they won’t do business. Food buyer Stacey Hines visits and inspects the farms and ranches to ensure the quality of both the product and the operation. The cleanliness of their suppliers is a major concern. For example, animals must be separated from gardening or crop spaces, and employees must have access to restrooms and hand-washing facilities.

Restaurant managers and the kitchen’s creative team of chefs and sous-chefs hold weekly meetings to discuss incoming products and how they will be used and prepared in the kitchen. If the staff and clients accept a new item, it is added to the menu and restaurant personnel are educated about it. This last step ensures that staff can inform customers about the product. Most restaurants use the same menu for long periods of time, changing primarily due to price increases or different products. But Red Feather and Bittercreek print new menus 3-4 times every week because available products change frequently. “We have to be highly flexible and agile with our menu,” explained Krick.

Krick has been described in national publications as an “eco-restauranteur” because of his green ventures, most notably two worm beds in the restaurants’ basement. As particular as the restaurants are with their food sources, they are equally as focused on where the leftover food goes. So



Wilsey Ranch

Wilsey Ranch in Owyhee County, a Red Feather supplier, takes pride in grass-fed cattle "as natural as a cow can get." In 2011, the ranch won the county's conservation award.

instead of landing in the back-alley dumpster, the leftovers become a free meal for more than 200,000 Vermont red wiggler worms, who in turn produce a rich mulch that Krick uses to fertilize patio flowers and plants in his home garden. The eventual goal is to eliminate garbage entirely.

Krick heard about organic farms that used worms for waste, but he couldn't find any information about composting in a restaurant setting. So he adapted what he learned to his restaurant business. Now the worms take care of 200 pounds of the compostable food created by the two restaurants. In addition to leftovers, the worms also enjoy paper and cardboard boxes, keeping more trash out of the dumpster or recycling bin. The two Boise restaurants were the first in the country to use on-site worm composting,

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Guy Hand

Red Feather/Bittercreek wins national acclaim for an inventive menu with local specialties such as potato chowder, lamb sausage and turnips with kale.

according to the Green Restaurant Association.

With a \$12,000 price tag on each bin, the startup cost was expensive. But the internal recycling system has worked so well that they are now selling mini-worm units for home vermicomposting at less than \$100 each. "It's not about getting our initial investment back, which we probably won't; it's more about the elimination of our garbage, so it fits our business objectives," Krick said.

Krick gives credit to his wife Jami Adams as the force behind the environmental changes the restaurants have made. "My wife grew up on a farm in Minnesota where the family had to stretch resources. She was appalled at the food waste in the restaurant," said Krick. "She was the general manager of the business at that

time and did not like our mentality of just 'use-use-use' while not really thinking about how we use. It was in every area—energy, waste and food. She pointed out example after example. I credit her for pushing us into the policies we have put into effect. If we are committed to the community in terms

of local food, we should also be committed to the community as to how we operate our business as a whole," he said.

Their recycling ethic extends to ketchup and other condiments. Commercial ketchup was available only in tin or plastic containers. Now they make their own ketchup, salad dressings and most other condiments to reduce waste, improve quality and use local ingredients. Pre-made products are less expensive, but Kelpé said the improved taste, lack of preservatives and reduction of waste is worth the added expense. Even used wine bottles fit the conservation mantra. They found a local company that could cut the tops off and grind the rims to make safe drinking glasses. Now, there are new companies that have opened in the valley to create various items from discarded wine bottles.

What is next for the Red Feather and Bittercreek enterprises? "Today there is much more energy-efficient kitchen equipment than when we built Bittercreek. Customization will also allow us to reuse things like water, capture heat and reuse it, and have energy-efficient lighting. Also, we plan to improve staff efficiency by having them take fewer steps between their job processes, basically with the floor plans and a system plans approach," said Kelpé. They also plan to brew local beers and spirits within the next year. Krick completed his diploma as a Master Brewer, a two-year process between the Siebel Institute in Chicago and continuing at Doemans in Munich, Germany.

Does the restaurants' devotion to local sources come at a financial sacrifice? Krick said they could have lower prices and higher profit margins if they used the usual commodity products. But their niche as restaurants that feature quality local food is a key element in their overall success. So, it could be a wash, he said. "We try not to think about it because we believe in our mission. I think a lot of our success as a restaurant is because we care about the products we use, and people trust us."

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Dennis K. O'Dell will soon graduate with a General Studies degree and a minor in Communication. A Vietnam-era veteran, he has produced several television shows on veterans' agencies for Treasure Valley Community Television.