

# University of Wisconsin-Madison

## Division of University Housing: Dining and Culinary Services

**Location:** Madison, Wisconsin

**Business structure:** Dining and Culinary Services operates as an independent business with no financial support from the university.

**Local food offerings:** Produce, dairy products, baked goods, tofu, tempeh, eggs, cheese and meat. Some foods are processed, but not grown, locally.

**Suppliers:** Approximately 40 growers and food distributors including local enterprises such as Organic Valley and the campus dairy.

**Customers:** 16,000 students, staff and faculty annually.

**Volume:** Total annual food budget in 2008-2009 was \$8,574,256, 12.5 percent of which was spent on locally grown product. Food sourced from the UW-Madison dairy accounted for approximately 65 percent of this spending. An additional \$3,424,653 was spent on locally processed goods.

**Years in operation:** Over 30

**Grower/processor requirements:** Most produce must be refrigerated below 40° F. Produce processors must be inspected semi-annually and meet standards for keeping product cool and controlling microbes. Delivery vehicles must be enclosed, refrigerated and clean.

**# of employees:** 44 managerial staff (including 17 chefs), 80 hourly staff and 1,200 students.

**Pricing:** Students living in the residence halls purchase à la carte items at a discounted rate. Cash customers pay 60 percent more than residents. Vendor contracts are awarded through a competitive bidding process that considers cost, quality and other criteria.

**Website:**  
[www.housing.wisc.edu/dining/](http://www.housing.wisc.edu/dining/)



The UW-Madison Division of University Housing operates its own à la carte dining service. Fresh, shelf-stable, frozen and fresh-cut products are sourced from more than 30 suppliers including three local distributors and several regional growers. Meals are planned in advance by chefs, prepared in a central commissary and distributed across campus. While many items have traditionally been sourced from the campus dairy, the operation has steadily increased its sourcing of other local products over the past decade. Current efforts are focused on incorporating seasonal, fresh product into menus, improving kitchen facilities to accommodate fresh product, and enhancing sourcing and delivery efficiencies.

University Housing has a long tradition of operating its own dining service on the UW-Madison campus. Primary clientele are the 7,000 undergraduates living in campus residence halls. Menus are set and prepared in a central commissary and distributed across the university's dining locations. These include four dining rooms, two carryout locations, one deli and a room service delivery program. University Housing has an off-campus warehouse for canned food, dry goods and other shelf-stable items. Limited refrigerated storage is available throughout campus. The operation has a fleet of three box trucks, two of which are refrigerated.

The UW-Madison dairy has historically provided dairy products for University Housing. While other foods have been locally sourced over the years, University Housing didn't formally commit to local purchasing until the late 1990s. At this time, the College Food Project—a collaboration between growers, University Housing, the UW-Madison Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems and other partners—facilitated a shift toward more local sourcing. While this has expanded local and organic offerings, it has also increased the administration and labor required to order, receive, store, process and serve local food, particularly unprocessed fresh produce.

Although there is substantial student demand for local and sustainably grown food, Dining and Culinary Services primarily uses local food as culinary accents due to seasonal constraints and an irregular supply of local staples. University Housing intends to increase its local purchasing and plans to incorporate fresh product receiving and washing capacity at its new food service locations.

## Challenges

**Upper level management's decision to improve operational efficiencies by cutting suppliers.** This may reduce access for small and mid-scale growers and local distributors. University Housing's goal, however, is to reduce the number of suppliers delivering product from outside the region in order to expand its capacity to source locally.

**Shortage of locally grown fresh-cut and frozen product.** UW Housing purchases large quantities of pre-cleaned and cut fruit and vegetables. While much of this product is processed in Wisconsin, the majority is not locally grown.

**Liability insurance requirements.** Suppliers are required to carry \$1 million liability insurance policies. Grower consortiums, distributor alliances and cooperatives can help alleviate insurance costs by pooling or partially covering expenses.

**Marketing and merchandising.** University Housing has highlighted local food with point-of-sale signage. However, Julie Luke, Associate Director of Dining and Culinary Services, says that marketing and merchandising could be improved by more clearly and consistently emphasizing local menu items. Combined with sales tracking, improved marketing could also help measure campus demand for local food. A destination café featuring local food is a marketing strategy used successfully on another campus to measure demand.

**Seasonality and inconsistent supply of local product.** Wisconsin's short growing season makes it difficult to source local produce for much of the school year. Even

during the growing season, however, University Housing has encountered supply shortages and irregularities. As Luke explains, "If we're going to serve stuffed peppers, we need to know that we're going to have enough peppers for all our dining venues; otherwise, we don't have a complete entrée."

**Labor, training, and facilities needed for fresh product preparation.** Some UW Housing food service facilities are ill-equipped to receive and prepare fresh product. Likewise, its chefs and kitchen staff have required retraining to calculate fresh product conversions and prepare whole foods. Finally, the high cost of labor required for fresh product preparation cuts into the budget for local and sustainably grown food.

## Lessons

**Enthusiastic leaders in University Housing helped facilitate a relatively quick, smooth transition to local sourcing.** A recent legislative mandate bolstered local purchasing efforts by issuing a waiver enabling University Housing to purchase local food off contract.

**À la carte food service operations allow for cost transfer and menu experimentation.** Because University Housing operates an à la carte menu, it transfers cost premiums to its customers. As such, Dining and Culinary Services can experiment with

local and sustainable offerings, adapting supply to demand. In spite of this flexibility, some local and sustainable items—particularly beef—are still too expensive to include on the menu.

**Design and capacity development can prove advantageous for local food procurement initiatives.** Working with chefs and kitchen staff and equipping facilities to process fresh product reduces staff resistance to operational changes and enhances the likelihood of success.

**Anecdotal evidence indicates that the demand for local product exceeds the demand for organic food.** University Housing expanded its organic offerings several years ago but did not capture adequate sales. It is unclear whether the higher cost of organic food suppressed demand. Present indicators suggest robust demand for local food on campus that outpaces the demand for organic food.

