



How the Pro's Compete

A point that has gotten lost amid the zeal to reconnect with the source of our food is that farming is a profession. Calling anyone with dirt under their fingernails a farmer does not advance it. Being quirky or philanthropic is no substitute for skill, and a forceful personality or a good cause do not compensate for produce that looks like the cat dragged it in.

The ability to produce food consistently, in significant volume, at commercial grade are the marks of a true professional. It means you have to get good at growing a wide variety of high-quality crops throughout the entire season, and always be working to get better. SPIN-Farming was designed to open up the farming profession to many more people who would not otherwise think it was an option, so we take it as a good sign that farmers markets are becoming more competitive, chefs are even more demanding, and techies are targeting the local food scene for disruption. It means there is opportunity for those who excel, and that markets are developing and operating as they should - ensuring that the best products are available, and that economic rewards flow to those who make them.

Opportunity brings competition, and the first reaction many have is to cut prices. Don't. It is the lazy way to compete. Price-cutting for the sole purpose of grabbing market share leaves every farmer with lower sales, and it does not attract or maintain regular customers. It is a race to the bottom and ultimately self-defeating. Consumers want a broad choice of products, price and styles. For one business to win another does not have to lose, which is why farmers can maintain a co-operative spirit. But a part from the "everybody has a chance" ethos, the pro's do have ways to make sure they get their fair share. Here are a few to help you get yours.

Don't rely on farmers markets. They don't appeal to, or have the capacity to reach, all the markets interested in buying local foods. Instead, use both old-fashioned shoe leather by leafletting door to door or posting fliers at well-trafficked sites, or become a keyboard commando, identifying and recruiting customers using Facebook and Twitter. Once you have a list of prospects, affordable and easy-to-use software can help turn them into customers and manage them. This gives you a customer base that is totally unique to you.

Use the Network Effect. Alert people you know who are involved in an interest about your business. They can get the word out to their groups. You might be surprised at the networks you are already connected to by "one degree of separation" that will drum up business for you simply by word of mouth.

Recruit customers where they live and work. Get business card templates from Staples, print them up with a fill-in space. Approach people at train stations, in parking lots of local businesses (with their permission) and explain your business and ask them to complete the card with their email address to receive a list of your weekly offerings.

Sell through allied organizations and businesses. Churches, schools, hospitals and doctor's offices are all on the local food bandwagon because promoting good health is in their best interest. Contact them to work out a customized CSA or weekly farm stand on their premises.

Use SPIN as a credential. It's becoming known as the practice of choice for the savviest, most talented and innovative farmers in the US, Canada, and increasingly the world. It's proof you are continually perfecting your craft and recognize that high product standards matter.

Specialize. A specialty can be an entirely new veggie (remember when kholrabi was considered exotic?), or an uncommon variety of a well-known one, like orange cauliflower and purple carrots. A signature product is a calling card, a way for people to remember you.

Be trendy. You can identify a food trend before it happens by noticing what the "tastemakers" are doing. Tastemakers are not just celebrity chefs. They can be doctors, rock stars or your grandmother.

Collaborate with seed companies. Find small, off-the-beaten track seed suppliers (find them in the suppliers area of the SPIN website) and work with them to bring entirely new crops to market.

Think like a merchandiser. Go beyond distinctive packaging and creatively organize how your produce is offered, tailored to different types of tastes or customers.

Change it up. Variety is the spice of life. Turning over your crop repertoire many times throughout the season will keep customers satisfied and loyal to you. It's easy if you practice SPIN-Farming because that's the basis of your production plan.

Remember these proven best practices. Whether you sell off-line or online or a combination of both, they work.

- Share your story
- Explain how you grow
- Show photos of your farm
- Hand out recipes
- Suggest uncommon uses for common crops
- Tell them how to keep it fresher, longer
- Give samples
- Eat all your own food so you know how it tastes and can offer your subjective opinion
- Clearly indicate pricing
- Design your farm stand strategically, for maximum customer flow
- Place brightly colored veggies in the middle of your table to capture their attention draw them in for a closer look

It's great that more and more people want to try their hand at growing food. But let's not conflate intention with performance, or style with substance. When it comes to commercial food production, get good or get out. Farming is not for dummies, and to throw your arugula on the table, you have to earn your place behind it.

SPIN-Farming Makes Agriculture Accessible to Anyone, Anywhere!