

Good Eats

THE GREATER PHILADELPHIA FOOD ECONOMY, AND GOOD FOOD'S POTENTIAL
TO DRIVE GROWTH, IMPROVE HEALTH, AND EXPAND OPPORTUNITY

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Trends toward plant-based, vegetarian, and vegan preferences also show continued popularity. Philadelphia hosted its first Vegan Restaurant Week in 2018, with 19 restaurants participating; in 2019, more than 40 restaurants have signed on to serve vegan fare. Though vegan restaurants in Philadelphia are not new—there have been small outposts of vegan-friendly fare in South Philly, West Philly, and Germantown for years—the new wave of options across the city suggests that plant-based dining is growing in popularity.

Also expanding is the demand for fruits and vegetables associated with the cuisine of Greater Philadelphia’s immigrant communities. The demand has grown and changed, says Emily Kohlhas, Director of Marketing for John Vena, Inc. a 100 year old fresh produce wholesaler and a cornerstone of the massive Philadelphia Wholesale Produce Market. Recently, demand has grown for tropical fruits, peppers, and other produce common in Central American cuisines as Greater Philadelphia becomes home to more people from the Dominican Republic, Mexico, and elsewhere in the Americas.²⁸ While restaurants serving this food to a broader audience is part of the trend, Kohlhas says “sustained demand from people who eat this type of food every day” is what keeps things like chayote, nopal, and calabacita in stock at the massive Market.

Local Spotlight: Philadelphia Wholesale Produce Market

Located between the Philadelphia International Airport and the Port of Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Wholesale Produce Market is one of the largest wholesale centers for fresh fruits and vegetables in the mid-Atlantic region. The largest fully-enclosed refrigerated wholesale produce terminal in the world, it houses more than 20 vendors that supply local, domestic, and international products to distributors, grocery stores, mom-and-pops, and restaurant chains across the region and beyond. Market vendors surveyed for this report say the strategic location between New York City and Washington D.C., and agglomeration of like businesses are powerful benefits to the Market, while many worry that climate change could change the way they do business in the future.

Formulate healthier versions of popular foods

Consumer trends and nutrition requirements from federal food programs have businesses looking for healthier alternatives to some popular foods. Matt Luchansky, Senior Vice President of Novick Brothers, a food distributor in South Philadelphia, says it would be much easier for his business to serve early childcare centers if more of the foods that meet centers’ food program requirements were made locally. “I know there's pasta places all throughout the City. What can they produce for me? Why do I have to go to the Bronx [where a manufacturer is] producing whole grain pasta? You're right here. I don't want to have to pick it up in Queens.”

Drexel Food Lab, a recipe and product development laboratory at Drexel University, works with food manufacturers to develop and test product formulations. Nutrition and sustainability are often in focus during these developments, and Drexel Food Lab has worked with food companies to make great tasting food that is better for people and the planet. In partnership with Get Healthy Philly to reduce sodium in popular foods, it recently assisted F&S Produce in Vineland, NJ in developing fresh vegetable-based deli salads to replace typical mayonnaise-based options; worked with Comcast Spectacor to develop a beef burger blended with mushrooms; and worked with New Jersey-based Amoroso’s Baking Company to develop a lower-sodium, whole grain-rich hoagie roll for schools and hospitals.

“Most of the manufacturers we speak with are perfectly happy to supply healthier food if indeed the market is there for them,” says Jon Deutsch, Founder and Director of the Drexel Food Lab and Professor of Food Studies at Drexel University. “Reducing calories, fat, salt and sugar, and increasing nutrient density while *still* making something delicious and craveable can be a challenge, and even changing one ingredient can be expensive for a manufacturer. Manufacturers need to know that their efforts to reformulate existing products to make them healthier or to introduce new healthy products will translate to sales. Drexel Food Lab’s expertise involves working with manufacturers to develop and reformulate good food products that contribute to more sustainable, healthier, or more accessible food while tasting great.”

²⁸ Thomas Ginsburg, “Philadelphia’s Immigrants : Who They Are and How They Are Changing the City.” *Philadelphia’s Immigrants : Who They Are and How They Are Changing the City*. (Philadelphia, PA: Pew Charitable Trusts, 2018.)