

# The Burlington Free Press

## Localvore Links Help Chef Richard Jarmusz Reinvent Hospital Food

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by Cheryl Herrick

Interesting things happen when a professional chef gets “stolen” from his position in an acclaimed hotel to head up a hospital’s food service operations just as demand for local products had started to soar.

Fletcher Allen Health Care Executive Chef Richard Jarmusz has been at the helm 10 years, and has been able to help lead the facility’s approach toward a more healthful, sustainable and delicious approach to the food it serves. And it’s given

Jarmusz and his team the time to build relationships with local farmers.

The hospital estimates that 42 percent of its food service purchasing is “local or sustainable,” and said 93 percent of beef, for example, is from in Vermont. During the growing season, farmers email or post what’s available and how much it costs, and the hospital is able to make local purchases at the best price available. Jarmusz says technology has made buying local easier.

“We have one full-time position that handles the purchasing. Because everything is online now, it’s really no more work to source products from individual farms (than it would be through a distributor),” he said. But the relationship doesn’t start and end with the purchase.

“This is the time of year we like to bring the farmers in for lunch. We tell them what we’ll be looking for this year, and it helps with their planning,” he said.

He described recent lunches, where Jarmusz and his staff fed their partner farmers and then show them around the hospital’s food service operations.

“Hank Bissell from Lewis Creek Farm was here and looking around with us and started nodding and saying that now he understood more about what we could do together,” Jarmusz said.

Jarmusz and his team have visited local suppliers, both to get to know the growers and to see what happens on their farms.



*Richard Jarmusz, executive chef at Fletcher Allen, harvests herbs from the Fletcher Allen Healing Garden.*

“We get to ask questions and we get to see how things run. I want to know whether their produce is from genetically modified seeds, and see their hand-washing station, ask about their pesticide use and see where they clean their produce,” Jarmusz said.

“If I feel comfortable eating it, then I feel comfortable serving it,” he stated simply.

And later, as the growing season gets into full swing, hospital staff will be invited to go out onto farms to work for a day.

“It’s developed so much more understanding and pride in our staff now...They’re making really good food, and they get where it comes from,” he added.

The folks who eat the food that his team creates have taken note. “Staff, patients and lots of students who come by just to eat — eating healthy and local is just important to everyone now. Everyone wants to know where their food is coming from. Last week, we had a salad with spinach and salmon we had smoked inhouse.

Three separate people came up to tell me how good it was. And there was a patient who told us that our food is better than any restaurant in Burlington. “When we started this, we had just hospital food. But now we’ve really got something to be proud of.”



*Forty-two percent of Fletcher Allen’s food service purchasing is local or sustainable.*



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