

Let's make eating an experience, not just a habit:

By Tamra Watson, UDAF Marketing Specialist

A prominent Utah-Grocery man, Bob Harmon, once said: "Eating should be an experience not a habit."

Unfortunately, throughout the last couple of decades, the presence of food has become a monotonous normality. Eating, is most often done without thought: Insert, Chew, Digest, Repeat.

Truthfully, society is on the grab-and-go diet.

Similarly, grocery store shopping has transformed itself into an odious task. Staple items seem to disappear at the most inconvenient times. With less than 5-minutes on the clock, one curses the store marketing department for placing milk and bread on opposite ends. On a typical weekend trip, one dashes around the store, hoping to escape before the two-year-old throws a tantrum or the teenager asks for yet another 32 oz. Mountain Dew.

Perhaps in all the inconvenience and rushing, it is too easy to forget the option of "experiencing" food: an invitation to taste and savor what one consumes.

In this light, the old adage to "put your money where your mouth is" holds new meaning.

According to USDA statistics, the average Utahan will spend 11.3

percent of their annual income on food. With more than 850,000 households in Utah, the potential purchasing dollars available in the food market alone total more than \$6.3 billion.

Utah Food Entrepreneurship

Such numbers, coupled with Utah's ideal location for national and international distribution, makes the state ideal for food entrepreneurship.

According to specialty food author, Stephen Hall, Salt Lake City is one of the top 40 trade areas for quality merchandise within the U.S. Utah supports more than 300 grocery stores –200 owned/operated by Utah corporations – and more than 4,000 restaurants. Utah also supports three major food service distribution companies: Nicholas & Company, Sysco and U.S. Foods.

However, despite Utah's ideal entrepreneurial environment, the food industry is a fierce, competitive market.

On average, 20,000 new products are launched into the market each year. To promote such products, U.S. Food Manufactures spend more than \$7 billion annually in advertising to maintain consumer demand, making them the second

largest spender in national advertising.

Massive amounts are spent on retailer promotions –discounts, incentives and ideal shelf-placement fees – to incentivize consumers purchasing dollars through case lot sales, 10 for 10 deals, and lower prices.

It is no wonder Utah Food Businesses continually find themselves facing tough economic decisions, and asking their consumers for loyalty.

Steve DeJohn, General Sales Manager for Lehi Roller Mills once said:

"As consumers make their decision in the local grocery store or local restaurant, they are voting with their dollar, if a local company stays in business or goes out of business."

Yet, the food industry is changing – especially for local food businesses.

A Changing Market

Within the last 30 years, most of the food purchasing dollars have found their way through traditional grocery store and restaurant channels – until the local food movement splashed in.

And with it a new awareness to "remember" that food can be an experience, and not just a habit.

Today, consumers and food businesses have alternative buying/selling options: farmers markets, community supported agriculture (CSA) programs, local specialty stores, and even online sales.

Farmers Markets:

Utah supports more than 45 markets state wide, offering local communities a buffet of local fruits, vegetables, eggs, cheeses, breads and other added-value products.

While most markets will close at the end of this month, some markets in Utah, both in Salt Lake City and Cedar City have opted to keep their markets going year round. Many communities have also opted to add a “farmers market” portion to holiday expo and celebrations. Markets are generally free to attend for the public, but require their vendors to pay a booth fee.

Community Supported Agriculture

Community Supported Agriculture is a way for consumers to be directly involved with the farm/farmer that grows their food. At the beginning of the season, CSAs sell “shares” – an upfront cost that enables the farmer to plant his/her crops – and in return, the farmer promises a weekly delivery of seasonal produce from the farm.

Utah has more than 30 CSAs statewide, with a variety of options and seasons. A bit of research is recommended to consumers prior to making a decision – some

people love the variety of vegetables offered in a CSA, encouraging them to try to new recipes – and others prefer the traditional garden menu.

During the winter months, most CSAs will offer added-value products (i.e. jams, snacks, etc), to increase the marketing value of their “share.” Local specialty food entrepreneurs have used this market to introduce new specialty items.

Local Specialty Stores:

Most stores within the state will offer 20 to 25 local products - generally consisting of more perishable items like milk, eggs and ice cream, at similar prices of their competitors.

However, some stores will naturally shine when it comes to product differentiation, specializing in specialty meats, cheeses, breads and sweets.

These types of stores are generally interested in finding the next-best-product and frequently interview potential vendors.

Company Owned Stores/Online:

Utah food vendors love to interact with their consumers. Many food manufacturers have a store or sales office onsite that one can enjoy fresh product.

Many food companies offer food or farm tours to educate consumers on their growing and processing practices. Generally tour information is found on the organization’s website or social media pages.

In addition, many Utah products are featured at local conventions and events. When attending an event, take note of the brand and then search for it later online. Many of the small food businesses are willing to ship product directly to your door. Others offer giveaways via social media channels.

Consumer Power

With the added options, it will be interesting to observe how the food industry will evolve.

Some entrepreneurs claim it will follow Darwin’s survival-of-the-fittest (or richest), and others preach and sell in the name of community survival and food security.

However, it is the consumer that will have the ultimate power, to vote with their dollars, who shall decide what direction the industry will follow.

The question remains, as to whether that consumer will make his/her choice based on convenience and habit, or “put their money where their mouth is.”

And so we return to the statement/challenge in which we began – Eating should be an experience, not a habit.