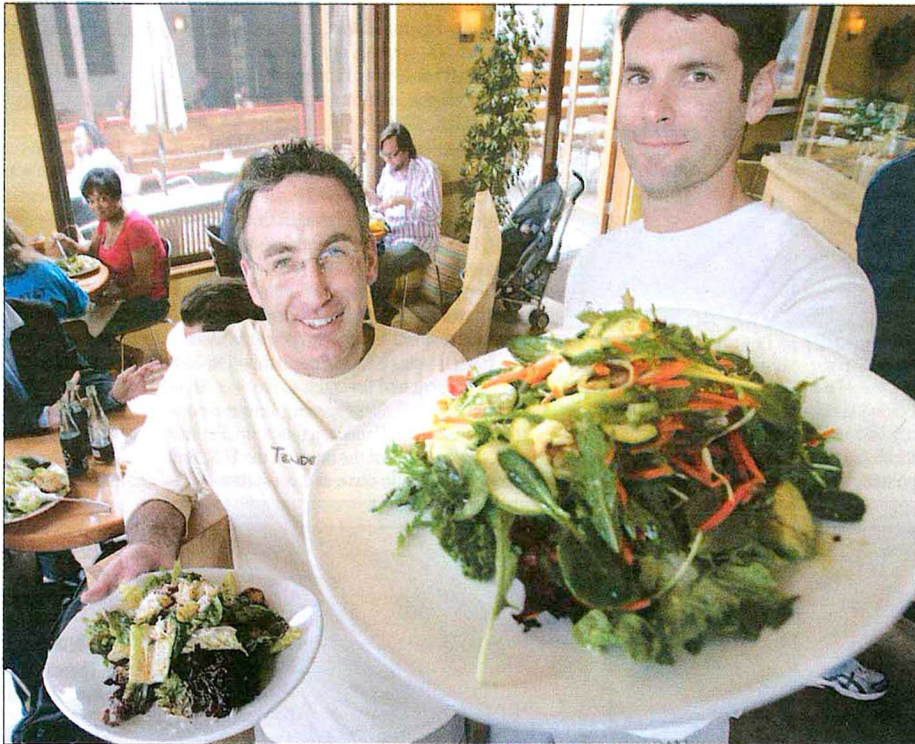


**Green Team:** David Dressler, left, and Matt Lyman, co-owners of Tender Greens in Culver City. The restaurant has partnered with Scarborough Farms in Oxnard. In return for a minority stake, the growers supply the eatery, which specializes in salads, with all of its lettuce.



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# Joining the Farm Team

## Restaurants forge closer ties and partnerships with local produce growers

By **EMILY BRYSON YORK**  
Staff Reporter

Los Angeles restaurant owners and chefs argue that the regionally produced or "homegrown" vegetables increasingly found on their menus taste better.

But they cost more, and the costs get especially steep if the vegetables are certified organic. That is driving restaurants to forge unprecedented alliances with California farmers as both try to convince consumers that closer is better when it comes to fresh produce.

For example, Tender Greens restaurant in Culver City has recently partnered with **Scarborough Farms Inc.** in Oxnard. The farm owns a minority stake in the restaurant, and provides the restaurant, known for its salads, with all of its lettuce.

"We had never partnered with a restaurant before, but I knew the owners from when they worked at One Pico and we'd built a relationship," said Scarborough President Anne Stein, who runs the farm with her sons.

Stein said she's doubled her planting area in the last decade, to 150 acres in Ventura, Oxnard and Santa Maria, to keep up with the restaurant's demand.

Some distributors are also feeling the benefits. Rick Fisher, regional sales manager of **LA & SF Specialty Inc.**, said that chefs insisting on supporting small farmers who have higher quality – and higher priced – produce has helped increase his business 20 percent annually over the last decade. The wholesaler is now a \$200 million company. Produce from small growers (often less than \$200,000 in annual sales) costs between 15 percent and 25 percent more than the average stuff.

"You can buy a commercial mesclun mix for \$5 a case but a lot of the local restaurants may want a mix grown locally, not washed with chlorine," he said. "So a lot of the chefs prefer to pay a couple dollars more a case."

The proliferation of farmer's markets in Los Angeles is further heightening Angelenos' appreciation of local produce.

Nathan Lyon has worked at L.A.-area farmer's

markets for Fresno farmer Ken Lee for about 10 years. He hosts his own regional food show on Discovery Health after coming in fourth on the Food Network's Next Top Chef reality show.

"Produce in the grocery store has traveled an average of 2,500 miles," he said. "And the varieties are chosen for longevity, not for flavor. There is no way the peaches I sell for Ken Lee will make it to Mississippi. It's going to rot because it's ripe and so full of sugar."

Fisher said he and his reps meet top chefs at farmers markets throughout the week.

"There's been a lot more going on with buying and sourcing locally," said Darren Tristano of Technomic Inc. "It's supporting the local economy, which I think consumers find appealing because they know where their money is going and they know where the foods is coming from."

The drawback, he said, is the cost.

"To be successful, restaurants have to manage their profit margins, and higher cost items like organics are often passed through to the customer. The only downside is pricing themselves past their customers' limit," he said.

Celeb chef Puck, who started buying produce from the Chino farm in Del Mar more than 25 years ago, said regional doesn't have to mean expensive, if you focus on produce that's in season. Diners get the added benefit of the vegetables tasting better.

"Steakhouses across the country have tomato salads on their menu all year," he said. "Why not wait until they're in season and it won't taste like cardboard?"

Tender Greens tackles the cost-price headache with scaled-back service. The concept is fast casual with open seating and food is ordered and served through a cafeteria line, so the staff is limited.

Chef-owner Jeff Oberholtzer credits local top chefs like Puck and Suzanne Goin of Lucques, who have been buying from local farmers for many years, with the proliferation of regionally grown veggies, which has helped to moderate the higher prices. As the farmers' business becomes stronger, they've increasingly been able to take a chance on more up-and-coming restaurants.

And since not everyone can afford to eat at Spago every day, Oberholtzer feels confident in his niche. "Big salads" at Tender Greens go for \$10. Puck's Chino vegetable salad sells for \$18 at Spago Beverly Hills.

Owners Oberholtzer, David Dressler and Matt Lyman plan to expand Tender Greens into four more locations by the end of 2008. The eventual plan is to cover the California coastal cities and stretch out into the Sunbelt. Scarborough has signed on to partner in up to 30 restaurants.

"All of the major players have come through and had a look, and sometimes come back to look again," Oberholtzer said. "And we've seen elements of Tender Greens copied in new restaurants."

### Restaurant reservations

Several high-end restaurants have recently opened with a focus on regional produce; some that have done so for years are looking for ways to strengthen their commitment. Some chefs and owners, however, are frustrated that their sermons are falling on deaf ears.

Anastasia Israel, co-owner of the recently opened Abode Restaurant in Santa Monica, said that about 75 percent of her menu is from regional sources. But most of her customers want to know what's organic.

"They are definitely more caught up with organic," she said. "They don't understand that a lot of places aren't certified organic and they don't think about the sustainability factor of things being regional."

Neal Frasier, who owns Grace restaurant in Los Angeles, introduced a five-course regional menu, meaning everything is raised or grown within 450 miles, about six weeks ago. So far, he's sold just 10 orders.

"I think it's a matter of people thinking they want to make a difference but not really wanting to make a difference," he said. "Like people who buy hybrids but don't carpool."