

REAP FOOD GROUP



SOURCING WITH INTEGRITY: HOW TO TELL THE REAL DEAL

A big part of what makes our corner of Wisconsin the envy of so many is the deep network of businesses, growers and organizations committed to nurturing a food system that stewards our planet and treats people and animals with dignity. REAP has built our mission and identity around these concepts, just as you have toiled to build a brand, mission and identity for your business.

The development of an identity and brand is integral to communicating your mission and vision with your customers and members. Your story is your brand. It brings together the pieces of a loyal, supportive and resilient community based in trust and transparency. Treat your farmers, vendors and suppliers as if they are part of your business. This elevates them from a supplier to a partner that is invested in your success. Alternately, when a supplier is not transparent or even dishonest about their product, it reflects badly on your business. And it reflects badly on all the other producers working so hard to do the right thing.

How do you know a producer who claims to be sustainable, local and ethical is the real deal?

REAP has pulled together a few simple, impactful ways you can build a supplier-base and sourcing plan rooted in trust, transparency and traceability.

Trusted references, affiliations or associations are always a good place to start. Organizations like REAP Food Group, FairShare CSA Coalition and the Dane County Farmers' Market have standards and verification systems and personal relationships with farmers. Farms that list in the Southern Wisconsin Farm Fresh Atlas commit to a pledge to specific good food production practices and values.

Look for third party certifications. Whether it is organic, grass-fed, pasture-raised, fair trade or other certification or label, it indicates that a third party has verified that farmer is doing what they claim and cares enough to follow through. These are important and trusted processes farmers go through to prove the integrity of their product to the buyer. Third party labels and audits are a good indicator that what you are sourcing is accurately represented.

Verify claims made about farming practices/products. Asking for proof of certifications and processing information is essential. If you are buying meat that has been pre-processed, inquire as to where it was done and make sure to follow-up with the processor.

Arrange a farm visit. Keep in mind that farmers are busy and you will want to schedule a day and time in advance. This provides an educational opportunity for you and a chance to get to know your supplier on a personal level. It's also important in maintaining transparency and building trust. According to Megan Minnick, purchasing manager at the Willy Street Co-op, "If the farmer/producer is not willing to have buyers tour their farm or facility, it is a really good sign that something fishy is going on, since nearly every local producer I've ever worked with is eager to have visitors and show off their operation."

They are not buzzwords. Identification of a grower's practices through labeling, packaging and communications is an easy thing to keep an eye on. Specifics are good. Being vague about what the product is, where it is produced/processed, production practices, etc. is a red flag. Think of this as a performance indicator.

If the price seems too good to be true, it probably is. Just like you, these farmers are doing their best to serve the community and environment. Farmers and producers who follow sustainable and ethical practices are paying more for everything and this is reflected in their prices.

REAP is here to work with you to improve supply process, encourage regenerative farming practices, champion local food, and push the good food movement into the future by building strong networks rooted in transparency and trust. Please reach out to us if you need any assistance!