

Local food goes global via Delta

Battenkill products used in meals for premium flights

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From left to right: Seth McEachron, Battenkill Valley Creamery; Dan Horan, CEO of Five Acre Farms and Union Square Events' Executive Chef John Karangis. (Christina Tobia / Union Square Hospitality)

Salem

When Washington County-based Battenkill Valley Creamery teamed up with Five Acre Farms in February 2011, their partnership was destined to take off.

They probably had no idea just how high it could go — 35,000 feet, to be exact.

Today, Battenkill Valley Creamery's products, by way of Five Acre and Union Square Events Catering, are found on Delta Air Lines flights bound from New York to London and other European cities.

It's part of a larger push by Delta to bring more locally sourced ingredients to its onboard meals. Much of this effort is focused on the front of the plane, which accommodates premium passengers paying premium prices for the lie-flat seats, multi-course dinners, and select wines.

Even as snack boxes, pretzel bags and stroopwafels — Dutch waffle cookies with a caramel center — have replaced hot meals in coach, the three remaining domestic legacy carriers — American, Delta and United — have upped their game in the all-important front cabin.

While the carriers have enlisted famous chefs, Delta also has differentiated itself by focusing on locally sourced foods from farms surrounding several of its hubs, including Atlanta, New York and Seattle.

The move faces some hurdles.

"One of the biggest challenges is the scale," said **Beatriz Sims**, general manager of international menu and product development at Delta. "We're trying to find the balance between local sourcing and the scale."

A Delta 767 may have 200 seats in coach but just 26 in the Delta One front cabin, for example.

A farm that can regularly produce enough for several dozen meals a day might be hard-pressed to produce food for a thousand or more coach passengers.

In Battenkill's case, however, the extra demand from the airline helped absorb some idle capacity.

"At the time, we weren't using all of our milk in our processing facility," said **Seth McEachron**, whose family owns the Battenkill Valley Creamery. The 2011 partnership

with Brooklyn-based Five Acre opened up new distribution networks that would enable Battenkill's products — albeit under the Five Acre label — to reach gourmet groceries and restaurants in Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Hudson Valley and New England, as well as caterers such as Union Square Hospitality.

Dan Horan, a founder and now CEO of Five Acre Farms, said Battenkill Valley Creamery was the first of what would become a network of regional farms that would supply dairy, eggs and apples to retail outlets, restaurants, and now an airline, after Delta approached Union Square about preparing meals.

"Five Acre Farms is really committed to bringing local food into the mainstream," Horan said. "It's a big, big world out there but there's a lot of quality food" that's available.

The latest onboard menu includes such items as Migliorelli Farm beets and Cascun Farms roasted chicken. Migliorelli is in Tivoli, 50 miles south of the Capital Region, while Cascun is in Chenango County, northeast of Binghamton.

While the Battenkill name doesn't appear on the menu, its cows and rolling meadows are featured in Delta's onboard video on the local sourcing effort that's shown to passengers.

Restaurateur **Daniel "Danny" Meyer** heads the **Union Square Hospitality Group**, which also operates Shake Shacks, including the one at Saratoga Race Course, as well as such well-known restaurants as Blue Smoke, Union Square Café and Gramercy Tavern.

Union Square's catering unit prepares the meals in its New York City kitchens, which are then delivered to Delta's kitchens at Kennedy airport in Queens, to be put aboard the overseas flights.

"Our culinary partners, they're not just developing the menu and looking to Delta to say, "you cook it," said Sims. "Our partners are sourcing and creating the food and deliver it to Delta."

And the passengers, according to surveys and feedback that Delta's flight attendants get, like the food.

The responses, said Sims, are "pretty favorable ... customers care where their food comes from."

Delta has begun offering craft beers on its flights, both in first class and coach.

And the airline is in it for the long term, Sims said.

Sourcing locally "doesn't happen overnight," she said. But the effort has supported small farmers — the Five Acre name comes from the concept of a five-acre family farm — paying them a "fair price" that remains stable, according to Battenkill's McEachron.

"We pay very well, probably better than anyone else in the market," added Horan of Five Acre.

Processing its own milk allowed Battenkill to pursue other retail markets. It has become a fixture at the Troy Waterfront Farmers Market and its products can be found locally at **The Fresh Market** and some Price Choppers, Hannafords and ShopRites, as well as other retailers.

It even offers home deliveries in some communities.

It's a movement that started with farmers markets.

"Farmers markets have really raised the overall awareness of what's out there," said Horan. "There's a general desire by the public to know where things are from."

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