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Vital information for hotel decision makers

Farm-to-table F&B is still important

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The farm-to-table culinary trend is a smart practice that goes beyond sending a marketing message to diners, said executives during a recent AH&LA panel discussion.

By Ed Watkins

Editor-at-Large

ewatkins@hotelnewsnow.com

Editor's note: This is the third of three reports from a meeting of the American Hotel & Lodging Association Food & Beverage Council held 19 May during the National Restaurant Association Show. The first [installment](#) looked at ways hoteliers can measure success of their F&B operations, while the second [article](#) examined the state of hotel roomservice.

CHICAGO—The movement toward restaurant menus featuring farm-to-table ingredients isn't a fad; it's something that will continue to be part of hotel food-and-beverage operations, said panelists during a discussion at last month's meeting of the American Hotel & Lodging Association Food & Beverage Council at the Godfrey Hotel.

"For us it's not a trend; it's about being conscious about what's happening in the world and about challenging our executive chefs to use local resources and local foods," said Kenneth Villamil, corporate global director of product and brand development for Hyatt Hotels Corporation's Park Hyatt and [Andaz](#) Hotels. "Since one of the tenets of the Andaz brand is to be barrier-free, it's important to have a connection to the locale and its indigeneness, to connect to local farmers and purveyors."

Alison Bybee, regional VP of operations for [Kimpton](#) Hotels & Restaurants, said even though the term is used a lot and there are different ways to define it, the farm-to-table philosophy will probably be a permanent fixture in restaurants.

"It's almost become the price of admission, and guests will continue to care about it, and it will matter to them what's on their plates," she said, adding that it can be a difficult concept for F&B operations to maintain.

"To be 100% sourced locally or to be 100% seasonal is not really financially viable, nor is it going to appeal to every single guest," Bybee said. "Strawberries may not be in season, but you still have to have strawberries. We all must be careful how we bill ourselves in this regard."

Different than sustainability

Speaking from the audience, Vince Barrett, VP of food and beverage for [New Castle Hotels & Resorts](#), said it's important to make a distinction between the farm-to-table movement and sustainability.

"Farm to table can be a slippery slope because it has a couple of different connotations," he said. "Some people believe farm to table is the same as organic and sustainable. They are completely different worlds."

He said when he worked as a chef he would purchase what was available in the community to build his menus.

"That was farm to table at the beginning. In today's environment, it is also about telling a story and getting your guests engaged in where the product is coming from," Barrett said.

Leadership skills

The panelists also discussed what hotel owners and operators expect from the hospitality higher education system.

"We definitely want people with advanced degrees: We want an MBA in personality and attitude and a doctorate in work ethic," said Richard Warnick, president and founder of [Warnick + Company](#). "It's great for students coming out of school to have knowledge, but it's more important they have their heads squarely planted on their shoulders."

Mia Mulrennan, president and CEO of [Rave-Worthy](#), a talent management, leadership development and service and brand strategy consulting firm, said hotel schools and programs need to teach practical skills and develop leadership qualities.

"Smart people see the synergy and value of having both," she said. "It's a must to have applied on-the-job experience as well as the competencies and skills related to doing business in a successful way."

Mulrennan referred to "the four foundational rolling wheels of leadership in the hospitality industry."

"First, can you *roll* up your sleeves, dig in and get the work done?" she said. "Secondly, can you *roll* out the red carpet, not just caring for your guests but for all the stakeholders involved in your property?"

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“Can you *roll* out a plan? Are you strategic? Can you create and communicate the purpose of what you’re doing?” she said. “Finally, can you *roll* in the revenues? Do you know how to read a (profit-and-loss statement)? Do you know how to talk to all the stakeholders about what brings in money? Do you know how to make decisions about costs?”