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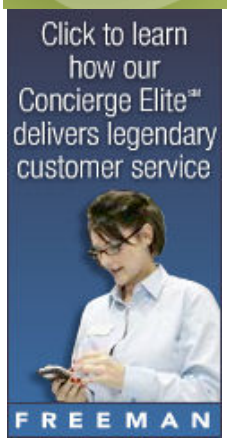

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Green Best Practices: From Field to Table

By Nancy Mann Jackson

When the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group (SSAWG) seeks out a destination for its annual conference, organizers look for sites that will prepare local foods for the organization's 1,200-attendee banquet. And those sites aren't always easy to find, says Jean Mills, SSAWG's Conference Coordinator. When Mills learned that the Chattanooga Convention Center (CCC) was serving local, sustainable food to its guests, it seemed like a perfect fit.

"We've always hired staff that actually identifies the sustainably or organically produced foods to be purchased by the facility for our event,"Mills says. "Most facilities don't know about the locally produced foods from their area, or if they do, they don't focus exclusively on those producers using sustainable or organic practices, which is our prime interest."

Through its Local Is Better program, the CCC is partnering with a local produce company to act as a broker between the convention center and local farmers. "We provide the broker with our anticipated produce needs and the broker then contracts with the farmer to plant and raise the crops," says Mike Shuford, Assistant Director of the CCC. "When the farmer's crops are harvested, the broker delivers the produce to us to serve to our clients."

In implementing the program, the CCC is working with local farmers and groups like SSAWG to create a calendar that identifies which types of produce are available during each month of the year. "When we design our banquet menus for upcoming conventions, our salespeople and event coordinators will use the calendar to help clients with their menu selections to ensure fresh, quality produce," Shuford says.

Chattanooga launched its program after studying the center's produce purchasing habits. Executives realized that most of the produce it used was picked before ripening in California

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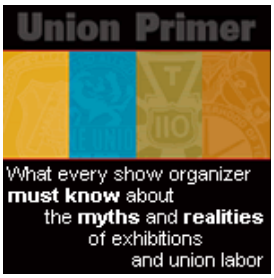

Launches & Acquisitions

or Florida and transported across the country to a warehouse before being delivered to the center. “The carbon footprint of getting the produce from the farm to the field, and across the country seemed enormous since we could get almost everything we needed within a 100-mile radius of our facility — and at an average of three days from being harvested,” Shuford says.

While the CCC already had its Local Is Better program in the works, the center benefited from the expertise and experience of SSAWG staff, who have made a tradition of helping facilities locate local produce and adapt to using it in the kitchen. “Many commercial kitchens are set up with lots of can openers and not very many knives for actually prepping the food,”Mills says. “It does take some adjustments to handle vegetables that don’t come pre-chopped, diced or sliced. But the beauty is that the fresh food has so much flavor, it isn’t necessary to throw in a bunch of extra ingredients to make a delicious dish. Fewer ingredients reduce costs.”

And while enjoying the local produce is a central part of SSAWG’s annual event, the legwork involved helps equip centers to offer more sustainable events to future groups as well. “Our goal is to help facilities locate more and more foods from their area that can be purchased on a regular basis by their facility,”Mills says. “By bringing in products that the chef didn’t know were available in the area, we create a win-win-win situation: The chef gets great ingredients to work with, the local farmers get a potential new loyal customer and our conference participants get a lovely dinner.”

Nancy Mann Jackson, a freelance writer and editor, writes for a number of associations and corporations. Contact her at nancy@nancyjackson.com.

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