

Hyperlocal Restaurants: The Intersection of Food Service, Agriculture, and Public Health

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Abstract There is a paucity of literature connecting food service, agriculture, and public health with hyperlocal restaurants. The goal of this study was to explore this intersection by conducting semistructured interviews ($N = 11$) with hyperlocal restaurateurs and public health officials until data saturation was met. The interview results suggest that hyperlocal restaurateurs have a deep passion for their vocation and community. Results show that the restaurateurs were invested in providing the best quality and value to customers, even though their perception was that customers were wary of the associated cost. Results from both restaurateurs and public health officials also show that health inspectors do not ask about farm operations. This finding is consistent with Texas Administrative Code 229.210, which states that health inspectors cannot address any item from the farm unless there is a known adulteration (Texas Administrative Code, 2023). Suggestions and tools for practitioners and public health officials are included in this article.

Keywords: hyperlocal, sustainability, food safety, produce safety, health inspections, food quality, farm, health inspections, public health, food waste

Introduction

Local and hyperlocal food service operations have been on the National Restaurant Association's list of *What's Hot Culinary Forecast* for over a decade. For instance, the 2025 *What's Hot Culinary Forecast* lists "sustainability" and "local foods" as top trends (National Restaurant Association, 2024). The local food trend (termed locavore) is when food service operations work with farms close to their area (<400 mi) to source produce, eggs, and meats from local growers (Food, Conservation, and Energy Act, 2008).

In 1971, Chef Alice Waters founded Chez Panisse restaurant, which was considered the trailblazer for farm-to-table restaurant models that embody the slow food movement

(Chesbrough et al., 2014). The concept of hyperlocal foods (defined as foods sourced from the restaurant's own property) takes the local food movement to a different level with a large commitment from the food service operation (De Chabert-Rios & Deale, 2016). Hence, the restaurateur becomes invested in and dedicated to growing their own food, as shown in an image of a hyperlocal food service operation in Photo 1, which has its own set of complex challenges.

Restaurateurs who are committed to farm-to-table sourcing sometimes have land on which to grow produce. In urban areas, rooftop gardens with either traditional (soil) or hydroponic agriculture are more common (De Chabert-Rios & Deale, 2016). Additionally, the



Photo 1. An example of a food service operation that is invested in hyperlocal practices. Photo credit: iStockphoto, Kiara Bloom.

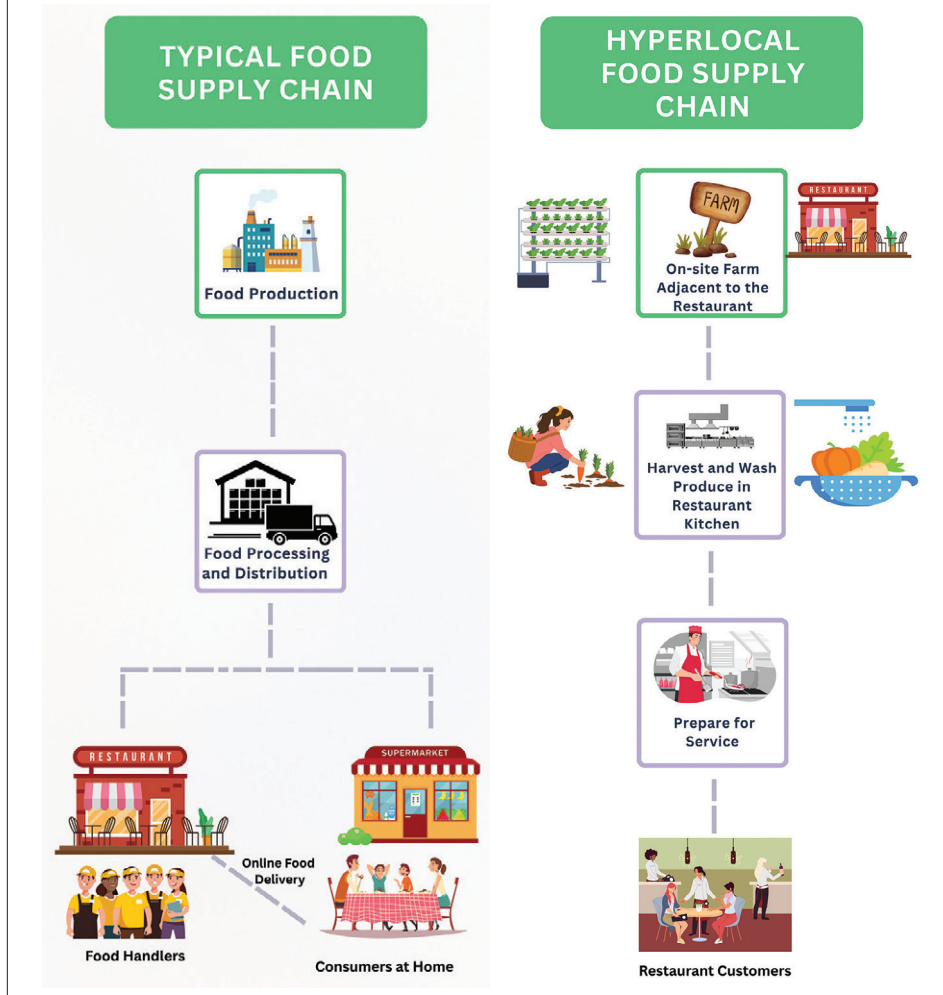
hyperlocal trend is demonstrated in school and community gardens, which can be used as a learning laboratory for students and their families to learn about and consume produce that is grown close to their home (Salter, 2010).

Both agriculture and food service operations are major components of the food supply chain. One study demonstrated that from a sustainability standpoint, food procurement represented the major hotspot in food service operations in terms of energy use and carbon footprint (Baldwin et al., 2011). Similar to the farm-to-table movement, the investment in hyperlocal foods enhances a sustainable practice for food service operations, decreases food miles for procurement, and leads to significant food waste reduction. An infographic showing the key differences between a typical food supply chain and a hyperlocal food supply chain is illustrated in Figure 1.

Different regulatory agencies oversee farms and food service operations (restaurants and retail). Health inspections are conducted by local city or county public health agencies. In Texas, produce safety inspections are conducted by the Texas Department of Agriculture

FIGURE 1

Infographic Shows Key Differences Between a Typical Food Supply Chain and a Hyperlocal Food Supply Chain



ture. These public health officials have backgrounds related to their area of specialty and cannot be cross-trained because of the sizable scope of their job tasks.

In the context of hyperlocal restaurant operations, however, because the restaurant operator is also sometimes the farm operator, these tasks can intersect. There is a paucity of scientific literature on hyperlocal restaurants, though, and to the author's knowledge, no published research addresses the intersection of food service operations, agriculture, and public health. Therefore, the overarching goal of this study was to explore these intersections within the context of hyperlocal restaurants.

This study goal was accomplished through an exploratory qualitative approach involv-

ing semistructured interviews with hyperlocal restaurateurs and public health officials. Importantly, the purpose of this research was not to advocate for increased regulation of farms associated with hyperlocal restaurants but instead to convey the motivations, challenges, and pain points directly from the restaurateurs themselves—and to amplify their voices. Lastly, by leveraging the data from this study, the study findings could inform science-based recommendations for hyperlocal restauranters and public health officials.

Methods

Human subjects approval was obtained from the University of Houston's institutional review board (Study #5264) before the study

started. Qualitative data for this study were collected by conducting 1:1 interviews with participants ($N = 11$). More specifically, the investigator interviewed public health officials ($n = 3$), hyperlocal restaurateurs ($n = 6$), and contract food service operators who were involved in hyperlocal practices ($n = 2$).

Data saturation was determined when no new information or insight was collected through the interviews (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). One review study had shown that saturation is reached after 9–17 interviews (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). The interview questions for hyperlocal restaurateurs and contract food service operators were based on De Chabert-Rios & Deale (2016) with produce safety and public health questions incorporated into the framework. The semi-structured interview format allowed respondents to provide answers that could be compared with each other while also allowing adequate flexibility for unique and specific themes to emerge.

Content validity was evaluated through feedback from three food safety experts, whose suggestions and edits were incorporated prior to conducting the interviews. The open-ended questions were divided into the following sections: 1) motivations for having a farm in the food service operation, 2) operational challenges, 3) customer motivations, and 4) benefits of the farm to the food service operation and interested parties. The interviews with public health officials centered on questions pertaining to hyperlocal restaurants.

Hyperlocal restaurants in Texas were identified using a Google search and via the investigator's network and contacts. State and local health department officials were identified with the help of the investigator's network. Interviewees were recruited via the snowball sampling method of asking respondents for suggestions of who else could be interviewed. Potential interviewees were contacted, and the premise of the study was explained. It was made clear that their responses and feedback would be completely anonymous and no identifying markers would be collected. The interviews were not recorded; however, the investigator took detailed notes during the interviews and referred to them during data analysis.

The data were analyzed using the thematic analysis approach as described by Braun & Clarke (2006). Briefly, the following steps of qualitative analysis were followed:

1. Become familiar with the data (transcribe, read multiple times, note initial ideas)
2. Identify features of the data and generate codes
3. Identify themes
4. Review each theme in relation to steps 1 and 2
5. Name each theme
6. Create a report

The analysis process was recursive so that all themes and subthemes were captured appropriately.

Results and Discussion

The interview results are shown in Table 1. Interviews with each participant lasted approximately one hour (range: 30–70 min; mean: 49.8 ± 12.7; median: 52.5). The results highlight key themes, subthemes, and specific quotations that emerged. Each theme and sub-theme is detailed next to provide a narrative and discussion informed by the data.

Theme 1: Motivations for Being a Hyperlocal Restaurant

All interviewees were owners, chefs, or managers of the food service operation. Hyperlocal restaurateurs highlighted a deep passion for why they were dedicated to the challenging dual practice of running a farm and a restaurant kitchen at the same time. A chef mentioned how he uses the farm as a source of inspiration when designing the meals at the restaurant. He changes the menu every week or month depending on the growing season and decides what to serve diners based on what is in season. There was a sense of belonging and pride toward the community they serve. The restaurateurs believed strongly in how the surrounding community is tied to their own well-being and the success of their business. They felt that when diners walked onto their property, the diners felt a sense of awe in the produce that was growing and had a greater appreciation of where their meals were coming from.

For instance, one respondent said, “Being a hyperlocal restaurant and growing produce in-house is important to me as a chef. I feel like I am invested in the community and provide high-quality, tasty food to my customer. I have pride in what I serve.” A strong sub-theme among respondents was the belief that the quality of the produce grown in-house far surpassed the quality of produce delivered

by suppliers or available at retail. The only exception was that they felt that in-house produce was comparable in quality with what was available at farmers markets. A previously published collection of case studies showed a consistent pattern with subthemes of superior quality, fresh product, and increased creativity among hyperlocal restaurateurs (De Chabert-Rios & Deale, 2016).

In the study reported here, one respondent said they were unable to produce sufficient yield and had to rely heavily on vendors at a farmers market to supply the additional produce needed for the restaurant kitchen. This feedback highlights a key challenge in sustainably sourcing a diverse range of local products. Additionally, the restaurateurs reported regularly changing their menu items to maximize use of ingredients from their in-house farm, farmers markets, and other local sources (e.g., eggs, meat).

Theme 2: Farm and Restaurant Operations

When asked if anyone inspects the in-house farm within the hyperlocal restaurant, all respondents answered in the negative. Respondents mentioned that health inspectors inspect the restaurant kitchen only and do not ask about the farm. One respondent asked the health inspector about produce coming into the kitchen from their farm, and the health inspector suggested they wash the produce before using it in menu items. This statement is consistent with interviews conducted with regulatory agencies that oversee health inspections and produce safety. More specifically, per the Texas Administrative Code 229.210, health inspectors cannot address any items grown on the farm unless there had been evidence of adulteration such as potential foodborne bacterial or viral contamination (Texas Administrative Code, 2023).

In addition, the Produce Safety Rule is not applicable if a farm entity sells <\$25,000 worth of produce annually (Food and Drug Administration [FDA], 2024a). This amount, though, is complicated to calculate and assess in a hyperlocal food service operation. Thus, all the restaurateurs interviewed in this study were not considered covered by the Produce Safety Rule.

This rule is under the umbrella of the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA), which establishes science-based standards

for growing, harvesting, packing, and holding of vegetables in a manner safe for human consumption (FDA, 2024a). The overarching goal of FSMA is to shift the focus from responding to a foodborne illness outbreak to preventing it (FDA, 2024b). In the context of this study, however, the approach as it stands presently is reactive.

In this study, the majority of respondents had not done the Produce Safety Alliance (PSA) or Good Agriculture Practices (GAP) training, although one respondent had completed GAP training several years ago. Training, then, is an area of opportunity because the goal of training programs such as PSA and GAP is to educate and equip growers with the knowledge to recognize, address, and reduce risk of foodborne contaminants in various contexts on the farm (Beiza et al., 2023). Thus, even though the farms are not considered to be covered under the Produce Safety Rule, completing PSA or GAP training can provide valuable resources for the growers.

When respondents were asked if they had received any training, guidance, or mentorship at the outset, the response was consistently negative. More specifically, 10 out of the 11 respondents reported that they had no mentorship or guidance from another individual with experience. The exception occurred because one respondent had a familial tie in that the restaurant had been started by a parent more than 20 years ago. Others reported having used YouTube videos and books as sources of knowledge. Previous studies have shown that mentoring is a crucial factor that provides major advantages to emerging growers and entrepreneurs (Ferreira et al., 2020; Mills-Novoa, 2011; Scott & Richardson, 2021).

Theme 3: Challenges Associated With Hyperlocal Restaurant Operations

Three key overlapping subthemes emerged within this theme: 1) customer complaints about cost, 2) cost of growing produce in-house, and 3) the COVID-19 pandemic.

Several respondents noted customer complaints about the cost of items on the menu. One respondent mentioned that over the past few years, especially since the pandemic, diners have wanted to pay less for food due to the economy. This finding is consistent with literature on consumer behavior during the pandemic (Ellison et al., 2021). Another study

TABLE 1

Results of the Qualitative Semistructured Interviews Categorized by Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme	Quotes
Motivations for being a hyperlocal restaurant	Familial or friend ties to agriculture	"My business partner owned a farm. That's how we got the idea [to start a farm at the restaurant]." "My dad started this restaurant over 20 years ago, and we always had a farm in the restaurant and at our home."
	Passion for food and how it is grown	"I use the garden as a source of inspiration. If I see tomatoes growing, then I really think about how to use tomatoes in my cooking for that week. I change up the menu, sometimes once or twice a week or once a month at least, depending on what's growing in the garden."
	Diner well-being and community impact	"The farm is right in the middle of an outdoor space that is part of the restaurant. For customers, it is a pretty place to dine in." "I believe it impacts diners' mental well-being. Looking at the produce growing and having a sense of community." "It garners appreciation of food and where it is coming from." "My customers see my restaurant as a Blue Zone [i.e., areas where people have a lower risk of chronic disease]." "Goal of the garden was to open people's eyes to local produce." "Being a hyperlocal restaurant and growing produce in-house is important to me as a chef. I feel like I am invested in the community and providing high quality and better taste to my customers. I have pride in what I serve." "Customers love the restaurant. They have offered to serve as volunteer gardeners on the farm."
	Quality	"Quality from our farm is unmatched." "[You can] make something the best when you make it from scratch." "When we grow the produce ourselves, it is much better than when we purchase it from a big company."
Farm and restaurant operations	Regulatory agencies	"The health inspector does not look at the farm. They told us to wash the produce before using [it]." "The health inspector does not ask about the garden." "The health inspector only inspects our restaurant. They do not look at the farm."
	Produce Safety Alliance (PSA) or Good Agriculture Practices (GAP) certification	"I do not know what that is." "No. I am ServSafe certified." "I did GAP training several years ago. I do not have PSA certification."
	Training and mentoring	"I had no one to guide me. I just looked at tons of YouTube videos and bought a bunch of books from Amazon about farming." "I did not get any training. I have been growing for 20 years and just taught myself." "I had no mentor or training when I first started."
	Percentage of produce used from the farm	"For the vegetables we serve, 90% come from the farm." "We use 100% of what we grow, but I have to supplement from other sources. I have a tie-up with local farmers market vendors who deliver directly to the restaurant." "Less than 5% of what we serve comes from our garden." "I estimate that we serve 45% produce and 30% of animals and eggs sourced from the farm." "About 5% to 7% of our salads are sourced from what we grow." "Some of our garnishes are from the farm. But it is mostly for eyes and less for bellies since it is so small."
Challenges or pain points	Customer complaints about the cost	"Over the past few years, they [customers] want to pay less for food due to the economy." "There is a disconnect since the farm is not on-site and is 14 minutes away from the restaurant."
	Cost of growing produce in-house	"It is more expensive to raise your own food (meat and eggs) and grow your own produce than to work with a big chain supplier."
	COVID-19 pandemic	"We went from a 5% to-go to a 90% to-go model. Removed all tables. We survived only because we exist in the middle of a residential area."
	Labor	"We have a pretty high turnover since we are a college town and most of our employees are students." "It is a massive amount of labor. We found this out over the past 10 years." "[It is] important to have people you can rely on. I cannot be in two places (farm and restaurant kitchen) at one time."
	Advice for future generations	"No person should ever open a restaurant." "I will not recommend it (opening a hyperlocal restaurant) to someone. It is so much stress for so little profit. If they are passionate, then it might be okay."

compared online reviews of hyperlocal restaurants from the UK and the U.S., and the results showed consumers were more critical of prices in U.S. restaurants (Kim et al., 2020).

The pandemic affected the food service and retail industry significantly, and as of April 2020 (1 month after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic), 19% of restaurateurs had permanently closed their businesses (Sirsat, 2021).

For this study, all respondents were interviewed in 2025, and each alluded to the pandemic being a significant challenge they faced 5 years ago. One restaurateur credited their strategy of pivoting to a take-out model and being in the middle of a residential neighborhood as the reasons for their business survival. Another restaurateur shared that their lease was ending and the restaurant would close a month after our scheduled interview, underscoring how challenging it is to operate a hyperlocal restaurant, even in the absence of a crisis such as a pandemic.

In at least two instances, the farm was located 2–5 miles away from the restaurant rather than on the same property. As a result, diners might have perceived a disconnect between the farm and the restaurant—perhaps unaware that specific menu items were sourced directly from the nearby farm. Studies have shown that customers have mixed feelings about their willingness to pay more for locally produced food (Brown, 2003; Carpio & Isengildina-Massa, 2009); however, there might be a lack of understanding among customers regarding the cost of growing the produce in-house. One respondent mentioned this perception as a challenge, saying, “It is more expensive to raise your own food (meat

and eggs) and grow your own produce than to work with a big chain supplier.” This disconnect might lead customers to misunderstand why hyperlocal restaurant menu prices can reflect higher costs.

Labor was another challenging aspect of running a hyperlocal restaurant. One respondent mentioned that a parent helps him to “divide and conquer.” His father manages the farm, and he manages the restaurant. Another respondent noted their heavy reliance on college students, given the restaurant’s location in a college town, and highlighted the frequent staff turnover, particularly between semesters and during the summer months. High turnover and job-related stress are well-documented challenges in the food service industry (Jung & Yoon, 2014). A key point was that a single person cannot manage both the farm and the restaurant and that running a successful hyperlocal restaurant is intense and requires substantial support from family and/or hired staff.

Conclusion and Practical Implications for Practitioners

The overarching goal of FSMA was to shift from a reactive approach of dealing with foodborne illness outbreaks to a proactive approach of preventing the risk of a foodborne illness outbreak. Results from the study presented here, however, show that with hyperlocal restaurant operations, the reactive approach stands due to a lack of jurisdiction among public health agencies to treat hyperlocal restaurants as covered by the Produce Safety Rule, which establishes science-based standards of produce safety for human consumption. As per the

Produce Safety Rule, covered farms follow specific regulations in five main aspects: agricultural water quality, soil amendments of animal origin, worker health and hygiene, animal intrusion, and sanitary standards (FDA, 2024a).

One study about on-farm produce safety found that recordkeeping was a significant challenge for growers (Beiza et al., 2023). Maintaining effective records, however, can improve overall safety, reduce risk, and help restaurateurs identify recurring issues. The Farm Food Safety Plan template provided by PSA is a strong starting point for farms of any size to establish produce safety goals, set milestones, and build a framework for efficient on-farm recordkeeping (National GAPs Program, 2019).

The goal of this study is not to advocate for increased oversight of hyperlocal restaurants but to connect hyperlocal restaurateurs with existing tools and resources that are already designed to support their operations. Although most hyperlocal restaurants are not considered covered under the Produce Safety Rule and some of its provisions might not apply, engaging with its content can still offer valuable training and educational opportunities for farm growers and employees. 🌿

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