

Big grocers don't buy from local farms, but pretend they do



Your Turn

Linda Fritz
Guest columnist

Grocery store ads claim to have “the freshest produce” and buy from “local” farms, but the truth is a very different story.

No more is the idyllic little Fisher Price farmer delivering just-picked produce from the neighborhood farm into the awaiting produce manager’s hands. Instead, almost every national and regional grocery chain makes growers ship to a costly central distribution warehouse that may take days away from the life of the produce. And local? It’s more likely a large hydroponic company in a brick building downtown or a several hundred-acre corporate farm within a day’s drive.

How do I know this? I’m one of those little farms.

In the summer of 2014, from a chance meeting at a farmers market, it was arranged by the Kroger Cincinnati division that I would deliver my specialty produce of organically grown fresh edamame and sun sugar cherry tomatoes to select Kroger stores in the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky area. This was an amazing opportunity as a small farmer since I had started growing these vegetables to help as many people as possible eat healthier. I had even named my farm (Sun Sugar Farms) after the sun sugars since I’d never liked tomatoes before tasting them.

Over the past eight years, each summer I’ve delivered directly to about a dozen Kroger stores around a ton of produce. The crops I sold were not easy to grow organically on a commercial scale, so the idea was to ramp up the number of stores as production was fine-tuned. I worked with the store produce managers to bring them just the right amount of produce each week to avoid waste, usually picked and delivered that day. I did sampling demos and customers were excited to know that Kroger really did offer fresh and local. I even introduced the new compostable package I designed for the sun sugars that replaced the traditional unrecyclable plastic clamshell.

All that came to a standstill last

month, after I had started my Kroger deliveries to the smaller stores. As more tomatoes were ripening on the vines and promised to be the best season ever, one of the stores wanted to check with the new produce coordinator who wanted to check with the new division produce merchandiser who had to check with the somewhat new category manager to see if it was still OK to deliver to stores directly (DSD).

A week passed. When the category manager noticed my tomatoes at the Newport Kroger, he finally got back to the division produce merchandiser who let me know that he said, “no,” I could not deliver like this. As the tomatoes kept ripening, I got the category manager’s number and email and contacted him directly. He told me we’d have to talk about me becoming an “approved” vendor (when did I become unapproved? I followed Good Agricultural Practices for a farm my size, carried the right amount of insurance and I’d sold to Kroger for eight years). He said he’d call me the next day when he had time.

Days passed. The cherry tomatoes on my 1,000 tomato plants kept ripening. After some questions through LinkedIn to Kroger VPs asking if this is how Kroger leaves their small, women-owned farmers of eight years hanging, the category manager arranged a virtual meeting to discuss my farm becoming an approved vendor. More days pass. More tomatoes ripen.

From the meeting: Kroger is so worried about people getting sick and suing them that all produce they buy has to ship through a distribution center to be inspected before going to stores. This can add up to two days to a perishable item’s shelf life. It also costs the farmer \$2,500 to be entered into the system and \$100 per month the rest of the year, even when not supplying. Since my sales were at best \$10,000 a season, and I was only delivering up to 500 pints a week at the peak of a good year, I was too small for the warehouse to even open their doors to me. I needed to deliver pallets of produce, and at this point, it was a little late to plant more plants. Plus, since we pick the sun sugar cherry tomatoes at the peak of ripeness for maximum flavor, adding days of cold storage seemed like a guarantee for failure.

I even asked the category manager if



Linda Fritz, owner of Sun Sugar Farms in Verona, Ky., delivers some of her sun sugar cherry tomatoes to Country Fresh Market & Wine Depot on Beechmont Avenue. PROVIDED

Kroger could somehow help me pay my part-time employees to just pick and deliver this season’s harvest to the local food banks as a win-win for everyone. His response? He didn’t think that his billion-dollar company’s accounting department could absorb the loss since I wasn’t correctly set up in his system.

It’s been a huge challenge to find homes for the hundreds of pounds per week of tomatoes ripening since farmer’s markets are too small for the amount I’d grown for Kroger and most chain groceries also use warehouses. While the Kroger male execs sit in their downtown, air-conditioned offices, my small group of lady workers (in their 60s) are sweating out in the hot fields, picking through the plants for the pretty sun sugars to supply to the new independent markets I’ve found, grabbing the slightly split ones off the vines to give to food kitchens (who can only take so much), and sadly, composting buckets and buckets of badly split sun sugars we didn’t pick in time so the gnats won’t take over.

On the bright side, there have been some amazing independent markets who were able to take about half of this season’s sun sugars and who are truly committed to fresh and local: ETC Produce & Provisions, Lehr’s Prime Market, Kremer’s Market (sorry he repacks in plastic), Jungle Jim’s International Market Eastgate, County Fresh Farm Market & Wine Depot - Beechmont Avenue and The Farmstand Market & Cafe in Union, Ky.

I didn’t get into this stress (and the

stress of organic and regenerative farming in general) to make money – or lose money – but to help people eat healthier with a very special cherry tomato that doesn’t even taste like a tomato. It’s literally changed my life because I’ve invented the biodegradable and recyclable Sustainable Produce Container to hold my sun sugars and have now sold over 2 million of the different sizes to other growers to help them also avoid plastic packaging. Plus, most of the Kroger people have been awesome to work with through the years. Not to mention I eat so much better in the summer! Such blessings!

But if there isn’t a commercial market to challenge me (the sun sugars are not backed by the seed company to sell commercially because they are so delicate and because of their hybrid variability) and to help me reach the greatest number of people, this will probably be my last season as a farmer.

Kroger can’t have it both ways. I get that they’re worried about lawsuits and want to control everything. But they need to own it and stop pretending that they also offer the “freshest” local produce.

It’s physically impossible to say you offer “fresher than fresh” in Kroger’s current TV ad when that produce must sit in a warehouse waiting for inspectors to check out hundreds of pallets.

It’s misleading at best to say you offer “local” when most people’s idea of local is a 10-acre farm in Northern Kentucky like mine and not a 250-acre corporate tomato farm in Tennessee already supplying to Walmart.

And it’s an outright lie in the current TV ad that shows a Kroger produce manager character opening her store doors and the camera panning from store to Fisher Price country farm for the fresh corn that’s then handed to her by the farmer ending with more brought into the store by a politically correct assortment of farmers carrying bushel baskets that say local. This not only seems like false advertising but also kind of evil.

Kroger is using their big ad budget to lure customers in and gain an unjust advantage over smaller independent stores who truly do buy fresh and local. Does this seem fair to you?

Linda Fritz is the owner of Sun Sugar Farms in Verona, Ky.