

# Fast-Casual Spots are Revolutionizing the Farm-to-Restaurant Relationship

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**Brands like Dig Inn and Sweetgreen disrupted the fast-casual model with Instagrammable buddha bowls, and now they're going one step further to attract their environmentally-conscious customers**



Dig Inn and Nico Schinco

Roughly 60 miles outside of New York City, in the Hudson Valley's Black Dirt region, Larry Tse is growing heirloom fruits and vegetables on 15 acres of land. In 2018, the farm harvested roughly 70,000 pounds of produce including summer squash, Persian cucumbers, Sungold tomatoes, and honey boat delicata squash. But unlike other upstate New Yorker farmers, Tse doesn't sell the fruits of his labor to farmers markets, grocery stores, or even distributors: He is the resident farmer for the fast-casual restaurant brand Dig Inn, with locations in Boston and New York.

"We're in a position where we can put more resources towards trialing new and different varieties of vegetables for our research and development team to use," said Tse.

"Ultimately, the goal for our farm and my role as a farmer is to help Dig Inn better understand the intricacies of farming and how to be a better partner to our supplier."



Larry Tse, Dig Inn's farmer. Dig Inn and Nico Schinco photo.

Dig Inn is one of a growing number of eateries, along with [fresh&co](#), [Sweetgreen](#), [Chopt](#), [Little Sesame](#), and [Tender Greens](#), that in the past decade disrupted the fast-casual restaurant model by focusing on seasonal food, sourced from local farms. Now, some of those companies are changing the farm-restaurant relationship by purchasing their own farms.

### **When brands turn to the land**

“We wanted to go a step further with farming our own land, in order to take our quality and target taste profiles to the next level,” said George Tenedios, co-founder and CEO of fresh&co, which owns 18 locations in NYC and purchased a 35-acre farm on the North Fork of Long Island in 2017.

The North Fork was a natural location for a fresh&co farm as many of the farms the company already works with are in the area. Currently, about 15 to 20 percent of the produce used in the restaurants is from its farm, including Brussels sprouts, Romanesco, broccoli, cauliflower, strawberries, red and yellow peppers, tomatoes, potatoes, sweet potatoes, basil, cilantro, kale, butternut squash, cucumbers, cabbage, onions, beets, and

mushrooms. The farm is ramping up to a goal of supplying more than 25 percent of the restaurants' produce while fresh&co's farm partners fill the rest.

The farms give brands a way to highlight their seasonal ingredients along with the work of farmers. Both Dig Inn and fresh&co market their farms on social media, and Dig Inn has even given out bags of produce from its farm at the openings of new locations. But when scrolling through Instagram, you wouldn't necessarily see the images about their farms as much different than the ones promoting their traditional farm partners.

And while Dig Inn and fresh&co don't expect to source 100 percent of their food from their own farms, they both believe that owning farms helps them be better partners to the farmers they work with.

"Fostering direct relationships with a large community of farm partners is core to our business, but this farm will be immensely helpful in education and training for our culinary team," Dig Inn founder Adam Eskin said. "We aim to build empathy for what our farm partners do, testing crops and methods that can also help them improve."

### **Why not every chain is buying a farm**



Little Sesame on the farm at Sunnyside in Sperryville, Virginia.

Still, buying a farm isn't something that works for every fast-casual model. Sweetgreen and

D.C.'s Little Sesame don't own farms, and while they haven't ruled out purchasing one, they both believe there are other ways to create relationships with farms that benefit both their companies and the farmers.

“We believe we can have the most impact when putting 100 percent of our energy into supporting local and regional food systems through building positive, productive relationships with farmers and leveraging our procurement power and value chain coordination, helping to ensure that small and midsize farmers have steady demand and a dedicated partner through all the ups and downs that farmers endure,” Sweetgreen co-founder Nicolas Jammet said.

In 2018, Sweetgreen partnered with more than 100 farms. For those farms, the partnership often allows them to scale up their production and enter new markets. Little Sesame, on the other hand, sources ingredients from individual farmers, farmer cooperatives, and purveyors such as Baldor Foods, one of the biggest produce distributors in the Northeast, founder Nick Wiseman said. He looks to create relationships based on shared values of dedication to responsible growing practices and commitment to environmental sustainability.

Take Little Sesame's chickpea farmer, Casey Bailey, with his 4,000-acre organic farm in Montana. Wiseman met Bailey years ago through his wife. Today, Little Sesame uses roughly 25,000 pounds of organic Kabuli chickpeas from Bailey per year between two shops; and the company is on track to double that number with new stores opening.

“We believe the best way to support farmers and help grow a sustainable food system is to seek out and forge relationships with farms and farmers — offering them an outlet for their bounty and thus the means to scale their businesses,” Wiseman said.

Little Sesame also recently began Little Seedlings, an annual fellowship in partnership with the National Young Farmers Coalition that will give \$5,000 to a local farmer. Similarly, Dig Inn recently began a young farmer incubator program, which aims to help new farmers obtain land leases, buy equipment, and access sales outlets for their produce.

For farmers like Tse, being employed by a company is full of benefits — such as having a guaranteed customer base, medical insurance, paid vacation — and other things more familiar to office workers than farmers.

“In the past I've worked on operations ranging from hand scale farms in Australia to large fully mechanized CSA farms,” Tse said.

“The fact that there is a built-in buyer means more of my attention can be spent farming and taking care of my crops. I never have to worry about where the produce is going or spend significant amounts of time looking for a customer.”

*Bridget Shirvell is a NY-based freelance writer covering food, travel, and sustainability. Her work has appeared in Martha Stewart Living, Civil Eats, PBS NewsHour and more. When she isn't busy working, Bridget and her husband are often trying to tire out their golden retriever with long walks in the Bronx and along the Connecticut shoreline. Follow her on Instagram: @breeshirvell.*

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