

THE
STATE
of
CAMPUS
FOOD



AT AUBURN, 20 PERCENT OF CAMPUS FOOD MUST BE LOCAL

STUDENTS PUSHED FOR CHANGE.

by Melissa Brown

ON AN AVERAGE DAY, THE NILE tilapia travels less than five miles from its watery home to an Auburn University dining tray.

"These are very healthy fish," said Auburn University School of Fisheries, Aquaculture and Aquatic Sciences research associate Mollie Smith. Inside an aquaponics greenhouse on a steaming September Wednesday, she sprinkled feed along the water's surface, attracting a thrashing, splashing hoard to its surface. "We know everything that has gone into their ecosystem."

It's the circle of life at Auburn's E.W. Shell Fisheries Center—and its cafeterias.

A Montgomery Advertiser review of the dining contracts at the four major universities in Alabama and Mississippi found that Auburn alone required specific local purchasing standards in their Aramark contracts. While other universities have "local food" programs, highlighting the occasional local ingredient or using vague language to suggest dining contractors buy local "when possible," Auburn requires dining to buy

20 percent of its annual products from Alabama businesses or out-of-state producers within a 200-mile radius, looping in nearby Georgia.

The commitment began to percolate nearly a decade ago, pushed forward by Auburn students interested in the local food movement and sustainability concerns. Glenn Loughridge, director of Dining Services, says one of the first meetings he took when he came to Auburn in 2012 was with the Auburn Real Food Challenge, a student group dedicated to getting 20 percent of "real" food ("local, fair, humane, and ecologically-sound") to campus by this year. Loughridge expects Auburn to meet that goal easily, but it will still take work.

"It's not a simple, 'We want Farmer John who lives down the street to sell us his field full of collard greens,'" Loughridge said. "We need to be able to trace back sources, to make sure they're certified, to make sure food is safe for our students to eat. It's not always a simple process of going to buy local stuff."

At the University of Alabama, Bama Dining promotes its "Homegrown Alabama" initiative, which denotes any locally grown and produced products at campus dining halls. According to UA's website, dining managers are "required to purchase" local products "whenever available."

"The dining halls at UA are unlike local restaurants that can promote all local ingredients, in that a local restaurant may serve 400 guests

in a typical day, and at UA we serve over 6,000 meals in an average day," Kristina Patridge, director of UA's Dining Services, said. "We purchase what we can, but if we can only get three cases of a certain item, we serve it until it is gone, and then may have to use products from another source."

At Auburn, produce comes from Clanton; dairy from Thomasville, Georgia; Alabama-made products from Evergreen and Dadeville. Auburn also loops in its own meat services department. Tilapia from

"IT'S NOT A SIMPLE,
'WE WANT FARMER JOHN
WHO LIVES DOWN THE
STREET TO SELL US
HIS FIELD FULL OF
COLLARD GREENS.'"

Auburn's flourishing hydroponics research appears as fish tacos in Auburn dining halls. Cucumbers from aquaponics greenhouses accent freshly picked lettuce salads.

"You win the hearts and minds when somebody tastes something that is different," Loughridge said. "When you have a tomato that's been vine-ripened and brought to campus that day, it's a different experience than that pulpy tomato from somewhere else. With campus food, students might have the feeling that they're a captured market, so you don't try as hard. We want to dispel that. We're trying harder." 🐟

Melissa Brown is an enterprise reporter focusing on criminal justice and public health issues at the Montgomery Advertiser.