

What's Next for Relay Foods: Better Bytes

Paul Spencer | Posted: Monday, April 22, 2013 12:00 am

Holy cow, did Relay Foods just claim it will soon release the most sophisticated food-related e-commerce site in the country?

That is how Caesar Layton, director of marketing and sales, described the exclusively mobile and tablet-ready site that will become available in May, after six months of development.

Now Relay Foods is prepared to talk about its secret weapon, after offering Richmond.com an exclusive view of the better bytes it has in store.

“Our digital narrative will take food and make everything about it transparent,” Layton said. He and designer/creative director Matthew Smith have described the new interface as a Wikipedia of food, with details about where the food is grown or made, what it is made of, who handles it and how customers rate it.

“Right now, if you go to the current site, the food is on a white background and it can feel like you’re buying a medical device,” Smith said. “Expect high-quality pictures from us, with food in a kitchen or cooking setting—we want to be like a good host.”

The pictures are of the tantalizing variety found in foodie magazines and cult chef cookbooks. Social media will be integrated, too. That raises a core issue around Relay Foods’ support for local farmers: Can the dirty work of harvesting and the chrome of mobile tech be mutually enhancing?

Sally Schwitters, executive director of Tricycle Gardens, believes so. “I think that’s the direction the local food movement is going in, wanting to experience the food up close and knowing the details,” she said. “Farms and your Facebook wall work differently, but when done right they can work together to satisfy a community, and I think Relay’s trying to do that.”

Cy Bearer, who produces local honey, agreed with Schwitters. Bearer Farms uses Twitter, though, he said, “for a large part of the winter, as you’ll notice, that account has been fallow.” Managing a social media presence is what Bearer calls a “shiny problem” for him and others: The time or staff may not be available, even though the rewards are lucrative, and that is where he sees Relay Foods stepping in.

As a service that delivers both conventional and local foods, Layton and Smith say the mission at Relay Foods is to promote sustainability without being intimidating or bombarding customers with too many choices.

To achieve that goal, Relay Foods must become a leader in food labeling, Smith stated. “Through tags and user preferences, you can, for example, have access to your own gluten-free store—all unrelated products won’t be visible,” he said, before rattling off a list of diets and food fetishes.

Relay Foods may have set itself an ambitious goal by combining trendy tags with encyclopedic food profiles. One reason is because the science behind a dietary restriction does not always jibe with how a food is labeled. Maureen Joyner, owner of Mimi’s Whole Grain, mills local wheat in a way that makes it suitable for some gluten-intolerant individuals. Still, she likes that the groceries are categorized.

This strategy of connecting a high tech platform with locavore evangelism was anticipated by a merger last year, Layton revealed. At that time, he was president of a company called Arganica. “Relay acquired Arganica in July 2012—they had amazing tech and distribution, we had a great brand, a hold on the D.C. and Baltimore markets plus strong local credentials with the sustainable agriculture community,” he said.

As for pushing into the Richmond market and what that ultimately means for its local vendors, Joyner said, “Relay’s use of all these channels can only help.” She conceded that, even with a new site, challenges will remain. “Of course, they have to stay diligent.”