

The Hotel Yearbook 2023  
The Uncertainty New Normal



HY8



**UAE's Local  
Produce: From  
Import  
Dependence to  
Sustainable  
Agriculture**

**Atul Chopra**

*Founder & CEO - Fresh on Table*

### Synopsis

Dubai-based serial entrepreneur Atul Chopra writes that the use of locally sourced produce in the UAE has been on the rise in recent years, with an increased focus on sustainability and the reduction of carbon footprint. Currently, only 20% of fruits and vegetables consumed in the UAE are grown locally, but this is changing as the local agricultural industry is increasing its contribution to the market. The UAE has more than 30,000 farms, and initiatives like hyper-local sourcing reduce the carbon footprint, improve the freshness of produce, reduce kitchen waste and increase the awareness of local produce. The hospitality industry is also playing a role in promoting local sourcing, with global hospitality chains like Hilton sourcing over 446 tons of local produce, resulting in a saving of CO<sub>2</sub>. Independent restaurants are more agile in implementing these changes, while larger chains are educating guests and improving their procurement methods. Climate change has brought attention to the need for food security and the importance of sustainable development goals.

The decision to commit to a sustainable strategy is a huge undertaking, for restaurant owners, chefs and operators; but we all have to start somewhere.

### LOCAL PROVENANCE POTENTIAL

Currently, only 20 per cent of fruits and vegetables consumed in the UAE are grown locally, the rest are imported from around the world. According to the Abu Dhabi and Dubai Statistics Centres, the combined 2019 local production of crops, fruits, and vegetables amounted to 523,297 tonnes. In value terms, UAE imports almost USD 3.5 bn of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Fruits and vegetables grown around the world need to be stored for days and have lengthy transport time before they reach the kitchen. This means reduced freshness and a higher carbon footprint.

The UAE's agricultural industry has been gradually increasing its contribution to the local market in recent years, in line with the National Food Security Strategy 2018. The pandemic has triggered a significant momentum for local production, increased the number of health-conscious consumers looking for fresh produce, and raised awareness on climate change and sustainability.

In 2019, when I came to the UAE to set up Fresh on Table, I was aghast that there was virtually no awareness about local farms and local produce. Today, there are around 2,000 SKUs grown at and available from farms across the Emirates.

For us, as a digital marketplace that was established to promote locally-sourced produce and unite buyers and local sellers – with sustainability at our core – this affirms that we can look towards a sustainable future, on the food side at least.

Food supply chains are incredibly complex, and food is often labeled as 'fresh' and 'local', but food fraud is a real issue with one of the main challenges of mislabelling. This is where buyers can leverage IoT and blockchain technologies and implement 'track and trace' capabilities. Our own system allows us to share a detailed view of the product journey as well as verify its sustainable and ethical production; thus, contributing towards waste elimination.

### HYPER LOCAL, A VIABLE SOLUTION

Hyper local sourcing cuts down the carbon footprint, has a huge positive impact on the freshness quotient, eliminates the need to carry inventory, and results in less waste due to reduced travel time and temperature variation.

When people say that there's no locally grown food available here in the UAE, I point out that there are more than 1,000 farms registered under Silal, the Abu Dhabi headquartered agricultural technology developer, and around 30,000 farms across the UAE.

The lack of awareness of this amazing bounty on our doorstep is also due to the fact that many small-scale local farmers often sell their entire yield to private homes, so the word is not getting out there.

By producing and supplying fresh produce locally, just one farm – Elite Agro, saved 13,258 tonnes of carbon emissions from tomatoes when compared to airfreight imports from Holland and Spain. It also saved 1,501 tonnes of carbon emissions for equivalent airfreight imports of blueberries from the US and is set to save at least 425 tonnes of carbon emissions for equivalent sea freight imports of potatoes from Egypt this year.

The Fish Farm, which has a current annual production of 550 tons of organic salmon, intends to increase it to over 10,000 tons over the next few years, in line with growing demand.

In 2020, the UAE Cabinet approved a national system for sustainable agriculture. This includes improving the efficiency of farms and increasing self-sufficiency of the targeted agricultural crops by five percent. It also aims to reduce the amount of water used for irrigation by 15 percent annually and drive industry-wide adoption of sustainable agri-tech.



*Local production in UAE*

### HYPER LOCAL SOURCING IN PLAY

Hyper local is more nutritious, and fresh and reduces kitchen waste. Here, chefs and restaurant owners need to lead the change and look at responsible sourcing. If the chef isn't on board, then change won't happen, and you also need them to champion the local concept. The only caveat, and rightfully so, is the consistency of product availability.

It's definitely easier for independent restaurants to implement these grassroots changes because there isn't the whole corporate mechanism to navigate, and decision-making is more agile. With food cost typically at up to 30 percent for a fine dining establishment, there is always room to play by implementing responsible sourcing.

The big global hospitality chains are also beginning to assume their role in supporting the zero-waste goal. Several of our global hospitality brand partners are leveraging their networks and voice to enshrine the idea of sustainably grown local produce, both internally as well as by educating their guests.

Hilton has recently published some startling data in partnership with Fresh on Table. In 2022, the Group sourced over 446 tons of local produce, resulting in a saving of approx. 8.9 mm Kgs of CO2e or getting almost 1,937 fossil fuel vehicles of the road for a year.

At the Future Hospitality Summit in Dubai last September, the hosting venue – Jumeirah Group, saved 44,168 food miles and 288 kgs of CO2e by consciously adopting maximum usage of local produce during the event.

These initiatives have gone viral and prompted calls from other large, well-known brands eager to sit down and rethink their procurement.

### THE WAY FORWARD

Climate change has accentuated the need for focussing on food security. This is no longer a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) that can be ignored even by the historically agrarian economies. The floods and draughts being witnessed by even a country like Australia are an epic testament to this.

Technology now enables almost anything to be grown anywhere, optimally utilising scarce resources. Supporting local farms that adopt agri/ crop tech will ensure they invest more. This investment will lead to higher production which will then address the challenge of price and consistency in product availability.

### CHANGE IS A COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

A lifestyle decision for a growing number of consumers, the idea that our favorite restaurants can champion the concept of sustainability is one we all need to support, and lend our voice to in terms of spreading awareness and educating the wider community.

It's not just a question of investment on the part of the restaurant and on cost to the consumer. The chefs and restaurant managers I work with understand that in order to get local produce at a good price, they need to commit to repeating orders and volume. In this way, producers can scale up and costs come down. And that translates to consumer value for money on the plate.

In this era of 'storytelling', I feel that consumers are becoming increasingly relatively price insensitive - as long as the message is conveyed honestly and passionately- and with an emphasis on key elements like sustainability and traceability, this can only continue to gain momentum.

If we look at the bigger picture, the legislation also has a critical role to play in creating the right ecosystem. The UAE is committed to a net zero timeline of 2050 and, as a nation that imports 90 percent of its produce, this cannot be accomplished without recognising the urgency of action, whether it's waste management or mitigating carbon footprint.

The UAE may be at the beginning of its sustainable restaurant journey, but I am both excited and hopeful. I've seen first-hand the growing importance placed on responsible sourcing and the desire to remove plastics by the top levels of leadership in the hotel, restaurant, and catering industry.

Dubai is a country where the impossible is possible. When we decide to do something – we do it. Healthier businesses are healthier for the planet; we have no choice but to make this a reality.



#### Atul Chopra — Founder & CEO - Fresh on Table

Atul Chopra is the founder and CEO of Fresh On Table, a company that aims to boost sustainability in the food industry by reducing the travel times and distances of produce and improving transparency and traceability. Chopra has worked with several hotels and restaurants in Dubai, including Hilton, Marriott, Zuma, and Jones the Grocer, to promote local ingredients and cut down on carbon footprints and waste. His vision is to grow across the region and establish a center of excellence for chefs to experiment with local ingredients. Chopra's collaboration with Hilton on the Growth of the UAE menu is a testament to his contributions to the country's dining scene and his commitment to food security and sustainability.

#### FreshOnTable — [freshontable.com](https://www.freshontable.com)

Fresh On Table is a catalyst with a mission to promote local farms, sustainability and to assist the UAE's food security mission. Our mission is to reduce carbon footprint by keeping the source of production and consumption closest to each other. FOT is working towards its vision to complete the circular economy sustainability loop by recycling food/farm waste. For more information visit [www.freshontable.com](https://www.freshontable.com).



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