



Meet Colorado Farm to School Champion Ian Chamberlain!

The Basics:

Name: Ian Chamberlain

Organization: Owner and Sole Operator of [Farm-I](#)

Title: Producer and Manager of [Sunnyside Meats](#)

School District: [Durango School District 9-R](#)

Interview Date: April 4, 2012



Questions and Answers:

First, tell us about what you do!

I get land to farm on and a place to live working for Sunnyside Farms. I'm a manager for Sunnyside Meats, the local processing plant, so I do veggies but I'm also involved with Farm to School and getting meat into the school as well.

Firstly regarding Farm-I: I farm, selling to local restaurants, grocery stores, institutions, and schools in southwest Colorado. When I was living in New Mexico I mostly did canopy farmers markets, a pretty well-established outlet for producers. Then I relocated to Durango where I grew up and found that in combination with our short growing season and a lower population density than Santa Fe, there's a lot more complications in market gardening. Farmers markets are a great source for producers to get their product out there, but they didn't have half the volume that I was accustomed to, so I started looking for other outlets and found out through another farmer friend of mine about Farm to School and that they were interested in local produce so I made a call, and I think it was five years ago now. I've been working with Farm to School pretty much ever since, and ended up kind of being one of the forerunners on a lot of panels and committees with producers and all the different service directors in our region, developing the program from contacting the school to see if they wanted food, to now Durango having a formal bid process where the school will release quantities of what they're looking for in the upcoming year and producers submitting bids.

It's really interesting to be involved from the inception of Farm to School in Colorado, all the way to where we are now, where most of the people in the community have heard of it. It's really kind of a growing movement and it's cool to think that kids are going to the same schools that I went to for elementary and middle school in Durango, but now they're getting good food. From a business point of view, there are 15 different kitchens that serve 3,500 kids every day, just in my district, so you know that's a pretty good captive audience to capitalize on because the kids have to eat whatever gets put in front of them.



And having been a student here and remembering, just like every kid that went to school here, that hot lunch was not a very good thing, and especially when you're serving the kids tator tots and chicken nuggets. So it's really neat to participate in Farm to School. For example, on Colorado Proud day, we serve a meal at least once a year where we try to get all the food on the menu from local sources. It's pretty cool that rather than eating tator tots the kids are eating a roasted root vegetable medley and they like it.

So I think Farm to School is really breaking down a lot of those misperceptions of what kids will eat and what kids won't eat. Good food is good food, it doesn't have to be breaded and battered and fried in order to be palatable. And now I've gotten to a point where I pretty much focus on Farm to School. I used to use it as an outlet at the end of my season to offload excess food, and now I pretty much grow specific to Farm to School, because it just turned into such a reliable outlet.

Regarding Farm to School--because of the rural nature of southwest Colorado, there are about six different school districts that have gotten together to do their vegetable and some of their meat purchasing as well. So I work with six different food service directors throughout southwest Colorado, but mostly 9-R. If I could just slip in a plug for 9-R and Krista Garand, the food services director and head of food nutrition for the district--if anyone should be nominated for a Colorado Farm to School Champion, it should be her, because she has just been such an advocate to get this going, and just really, really pulled for the local farmers. She's really involved, she gets out and does the farm tours for all the different farmers that produce for the schools, and it's just really cool to see someone take such an interest. I mean, she's not a farmer, she doesn't have much experience with agriculture, but she knows how important it is to get good, fresh food into the schools. So she's pretty much been the driving force for getting it together in southwest Colorado. Without Krista, I don't think any of this would have happened, so I just want to send a shout-out to her, she's pretty much the driving force behind it all.

What has been your primary focus or involvement in helping to get more local foods into schools?

I'm probably the biggest producer of food for Farm to School here in Durango, and also I manage the local meat processing plant. We've been encouraging all the local meat producers to get involved with the local beef bids and getting local meats into the schools. This year we're taking it a step further, and we're actually partnering with some other farms to try and get enough beef to fill the requested amount in the school for the whole year.

In the past, we've come up with maybe 20-25% of the requested amount of meat that's local, and this year we're really trying to make a push to fulfill that whole amount. I think it's taken someone that's willing to step up and coordinate amongst the producers and then maybe just go look under a few rocks and see who's out there. Some of these producers are not involved in these markets or might not be aware of these markets, or they just might not be interested in getting involved on that level. So instead of taking their livestock to the auctions, we offer them the opportunity to just sell it direct to us, and then we make sure that meat gets to the schools so that we know where everything comes from. So it's just making connections in the community.

That's one of Sunnyside Meats' big pushes. They're this multi-generation agricultural family and they opened this processing plant because they saw that there was nowhere for livestock producers to take their animals where it would get back into the food system at the local level. Instead animals were leaving on semis and going somewhere else, and it's silly, we were sending beef out and bringing beef in, but we could close the loop. And it turns out, you probably hear this from a lot of folks you interview, but you start out just wanting to get some dirt under your fingernails and wanting to grow some food, but you end up being more of a food activist. You end up being an educator and a cheerleader, trying to help people understand why this is so important, why we want to see cows out in the field instead of on trailers.

It kind of jumps back and forth. I'd probably be happier out on a tractor, pulling weeds, but you end up in the classroom talking to kids, you end up sitting on panels, speaking at forums, just trying to get the community involved with why this is so important. It's not just about the kids' health; it's about way of life for Americans. There are a lot less farmers and ranchers than there used to be and now our food is controlled by a handful of corporations and not a lot of people understand the seriousness of the situation, where we're really losing a piece of what's made these communities. Durango used to be a really vibrant agricultural community and now unfortunately a lot of those people are checking groceries at the grocery store or working at Wal-Mart or having to pack up and leave. What we're pushing at Sunnyside is to really offer an outlet for the community to be sustainable, so I feel like I have to have a dual role with Farm to School. My heart is in it because I love growing food, I love farming, I love agriculture and advocating to the community, and then at the same time it kind of has to be an "all for one" attitude, it can't just be one farmer that feeds all these kids. It's the community that's going to feed all these kids and so it's kind of nice to see this cycle begin again of people growing food and the community eating the food. I feel like we're just starting to peel the first layer off this onion before we're going to see what the next layer's going to be because we're just scratching the surface of the

iceberg for the whole community. I know on the front range they're doing a lot of really amazing things with the amount of volume that they're able to produce, and we have such a shorter growing season here at almost 7,000 feet in Durango, so there are different obstacles that we might face, but there's a way to do it. We just got done building a nice place that's going to have a commercial kitchen, 500 ft² root cellar, walk in cooler, and walk-in freezer, so we're finally getting that infrastructure where we can step up to the next level, and start preserving these foods we've grown all summer for the off-season which is the school year. We have this inverted season where we grow all summer long when the kids are off, and the kids go back to school and it freezes and we are all out of business. So we're really looking for a way to extend the season and do some preservation to get food out there when schools need it.

How long have you been involved?

I started in about 1998, living on a farm, doing market gardening, farmers market, and community supported agriculture. Through the years I've dipped my toes into a lot of different areas of agriculture. I've worked on an organic flower and herb farm and at a wool mill where we raised sheep and goats and we processed that into fiber. I just come from a background of food. You know food is something that everybody needs and hopefully three times a day they're getting a good meal and everybody eats--you don't choose to eat. It's tough making it as a farmer, especially in communities like Durango where we have a small amount of people who have expendable income who are able to buy produce at a price that farmers like me need to sell at. So Farm to School, whether you're a rich or poor kid everybody gets the same lunch and you



want it to be whole foods. I found that when I was doing farmers markets and stuff, and I noticed my clientele, minus a few markets that are doing great things with WIC and food stamps, most of the clientele are upper-middle-class who have the luxury of coming to the market and they have the expendable income to do that. So there's this huge segment of the community that's being left out. They're getting shafted having to shop at Wal-Mart or even the local grocery store and not having the best selection of local or at least consciously grown food. That's one of my big drives is how to get this food out to the people that want it and need it. Farm to school is probably the best outlet currently that's there because they're pretty unbiased, that tray goes in front of every kid.

What first interested you in local foods or Farm to School?

Well it definitely feels good to take in your produce. All of the food service directors that I've worked with, and I've even delivered to individual kitchens or quote unquote lunch ladies, and they're all so excited that they get good fresh food and that they get to meet the person who grew it. It's just a really nice connection to feel rather than just pulling up to a generic grocery store and just dropping off your food where it gets put on the shelf just like everyone else's. It's kind of nice to get the nod that we're trying to do something special here, something different, where it's not easy and we're not going to get rich doing it but we feel like it's the right thing to do.

Having full time employment at Sunnyside gives me the luxury of not having to make money at farming, I have to make X amount of dollars each year. So it's more of a passion than anything else. I guess I just feel like this is the right thing to do. For years and years it was just kind of like "What's going on, we're not really making ends meet by doing this?" And then last year and this year it's really developing where I think Farm to School could be someone's livelihood. You could grow for Farm to School and make a living doing it. It's really cool to see something from the ground floor grow up to the point where people are going to be able to make a living doing it and not only that, it's for a good cause, it's for a benefit to the community. Krista [Garand] does great stuff, if you brought in a lot of food for a certain week or a certain meal, they do a poster and they'll throw your picture up on there. My wife and I have been walking downtown and the kids will come up and say "Hey I know you, you're the farmer!" and it's kind of neat. They're really trying to make the connections, and our place is open door policy where we take a lot of tours. It's neat to see the look on a kid's face when you pull the carrot out of the ground, and they have no idea that's where carrots come from, except for maybe Bugs Bunny cartoons. It's neat to go into the classroom and ask kids where food comes from, like "Where do you get an apple?" and they'll say the grocery store. Most of them have never picked an apple off of a tree unfortunately, so it's kind of neat to open the kids' eyes. And then later I work with local interns to come farm and work with me and it's neat to see these older kids getting interested in this as a livelihood, acknowledging that this is an alternative to being a bank teller or something, that farming's not dead yet.

What else motivated you or provided that "spark" to get involved? What made it possible or easier for you to get involved?

There are three factors that really helped keep me involved with Farm to School. Number one is definitely Krista Garand, the food service director for 9-R. She's so passionate about this movement, she's just so good at what she does and just so good at getting people fired up about this cause. And then the people whose land I farm on, the Zink family, I couldn't do it without them because they gave me the opportunity to use this land in a productive way. And then my wife of course for putting up with all my early mornings and late nights and not really seeing much in the bank account to show for it. When that little kid comes up to us on Main Street and says "Hey I know you, you're the one who grew my tomatoes!" it makes it all worthwhile. It's not just the community support, but there are certain individuals who have really gone to bat for Farm to School.

Were there specific tools, models, partners, programs, or resources that really helped you to get involved? What about them was so helpful?

I'd always been interested in institutional sales because rather than go to a farmers market and have to sell to 100 different families, you could sell to one entity. I've always known those opportunities were out there, but "How would a little farmer like me get involved?" In Durango we don't have too many outlets that are as big and as consistent as the schools, so it had always been a dream of mine to, instead of having to make 15 deliveries on my delivery day, to make one stop. And I knew that it was possible and that it had to be feasible, and you think about hospitals, colleges, and even the jail, where all these captive populations are, and the local school district is one of them. I came into it pretty green, not knowing how much it would take to grow that much volume, so I really didn't have anywhere to draw from. I've definitely had a lot of trial and error and a lot of "rewind and let's try again" and I guess that's why it's taken 5 years to really get that feeling that Farm to School is a viable, sustainable outlet. Farm to School is a really unique opportunity for the schools and the producers.

Are there other factors that have contributed to the on-going success or sustainability of your efforts? What specifically?



I can definitely say that Krista [Garand] is the driving force. Not only is she a really optimistic and positive person to work with, but she's really just kind of a no-nonsense gal. She understands how hard we work to do what we do and she doesn't try to nickel and dime anyone down on the prices or anything, so she's just been so supportive. I also work with our local extension agency office, which works really closely with Krista on making those connections with a lot of the people that are farming. And then

like I said, I can't take credit for what they're doing for the community, or Sunnyside letting me live and farm where I live, and having the meat plant job. And then my family, from thinking farming is just a phase I'm going through, and "I'm sure he'll get a real job soon," and now my mom is saying, "You're going to sit on a panel with Senator Bennet?" So they've all stood behind me and said "If this is what you feel is important, then let's do it" and fortunately I've had work full time down at the processing plant, but that means I don't have as much time as I'd like to dedicate to farming, so that's also probably why it's been such a long road, because I have multiple irons in the fire. If I could just focus on Farm to School I'd probably be a lot further along, but then I wouldn't have diesel to put in my tractor. So it's been an interesting transition going from market gardening where you have this hyper diverse garden where you want to have as many different varieties to get people to come to your booth or to offer to a restaurant or grocery store versus one variety in

carrot, 5000 pounds. It's definitely a different growing style, and I like it. It allows me to focus on the quality of my product a lot more than when I was doing the hyper diversity.

Where do you see your efforts going and growing? What do you see as the next steps?

The next step would be trying to have more of an impact--to try and be on the menu every week instead of every month. To try and have not just my food but to get other growers involved, and to focus on the quality because that's what can really set us apart, that our food is better. Not just because it's fresher, but for lack of a better term, because we put more love into this. And the scale of most agriculture in Durango is small farms, really small farms compared with the rest of the agricultural world. But it's amazing how much food you can grow in just a small area if you put your mind to it. So utilizing some of those intensive gardening techniques, and I'm certified organic so we don't use any synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, or herbicides, and I think that really plays into the quality of the food. I'm hoping in five years if I could find momentum in the direction I'm going with produce to school, I think we'd be making more of an impact, seeing more people involved, and hopefully some of the kids I started feeding five years ago will be working on my farm, and maybe they'll be the next generation of farmers. Even if it's just one or two kids whose eyes I'm opening to the fact that they don't have to sit in front of the computer for the rest of their lives, these are actual viable solutions for a livelihood. Fifty to one hundred years ago, every single person had a connection to someone in agriculture. Whether it was your mom or dad or brother or you knew somebody or you went to a farm and got food, now in such a short period of time we've become so disconnected from where our food comes from and what it takes to grow it that it's really devalued what food is. Food is fuel for our body, and you only get out what you put into it so I think it's important to educate on a nutritional level but also for the health of your community and for the health of your whole life.

What do you think others can learn from or model from what you have done? What would you suggest to others in your role who want to do similar work?

I guess I would say don't give up, and anything that has a good reward in the end is probably going to require sacrifice, so you just have to keep pushing and recognize the potential. It's kind of like a switch I decided to make from retail to produce for wholesale. I decided that I could sell enough where I didn't need to get that hundred percent markup, so I would say to someone who wanted to get into it, I would just be thoughtful if they do, and really sit down and think about, "How can I make ends meet and how am I going to be happy doing that?" I had several seasons even before Farm to School where I didn't break even but I felt good at the end of my season so that was worth something to me. So looking at something beyond the value of the dollar of what you're doing so that you can pay it forward, in a certain amount of time it will come back to you. I never thought that anyone would suggest that I be given any accolades for what I'm doing, and it's really, really nice. So even if you know you're not going to gain monetarily from it, there's still a reward at the end. And I feel like if you keep pushing it, it will be sustainable on a financial level as well. Make sure you're doing it because you like it and because you believe in what you're doing, and the rest is going to all fall into place.



What else would you like to see happen in the state of CO that would help advance your efforts?

It's hard to say because I am in such a small world of Farm to School, but I would say, all the attention, where even people without kids are aware of these types of programs, is helpful and the more people are aware of what's going on, the more they think "Why is this going on? What's wrong with the rest of the food that we're feeding people?" So it's good to make people think. Stuff exactly like what you're doing, getting the word out through great websites or events with the school and stuff.

I feel like there's tons of policy changes that could be made, such as cutting subsidies for some of these factory farms that might make it a little bit more of a level playing field for the small guy. I think leveling the playing field from the Cargills and the Swifts these huge, huge growers, that get massive subsidies and tax breaks, and it just kind of stacks the cards against the little guy. I'd like to see additional resources for small farmers. It's kind of a daunting task thinking "How am I getting get my food into the grocery store or somewhere and they might have insurance liability requirements or certain food safety certification requirements?" It seems like growing the food is hard enough, so having resources for farmers and ranchers to jump through some of those hoops. Being certified organic is a great example where it doesn't cost that much but it's just enough of the bureaucratic red tape that it turns people off. And now it's turned the opposite direction where some of the only people getting certified organic are these big corporations and these big entities that are kind of trying to use the word organic as a marketing ploy, and it takes the wind out of our sails, with people that are really trying to be a part of this movement setting themselves apart through selling certified organic and allowing the consumer to meet me face to face and look into my eyes and hear how passionate I am about growing food. I think that if there were some more assistance for people to move in those directions, if they want to be certified. A lot of communities are doing a local certification where there might be an entity that goes and looks at your farm and lets you know if you're doing your farming in a sustainable, conscious way. So I don't know, I just think there needs to be more resources to help us turn the tables. I feel like in the last few years we've really lost the battle with factory farms and big-time agriculture and unfortunately there aren't too many people hand weeding out there on those farms, so it's not like it's a boon to the communities that have these huge farms. There are a lot of people that work on these farms that operate equipment and make chemicals. I'd like to see it go back where we actually have the opportunity for small farmers to make an impact in your community. It's still a little bit that way in Durango, where a lot of small farms are retirees or independently wealthy folks who want to do something that feels good. It would be great to see the community embrace agriculture again to the point that we could sustain ourselves a little bit.