

# Leslie Bosse



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## Entry details

Entry Name: Mountains to Coast: Increasing Sustainable Purchasing by Supporting North Carolina Farmers

Institution Name: Elon Dining

Entry Completed By (*name and position*): Leslie Bosse, Sustainability Manager

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## Essay:

### Introduction

With 29% of residential dining hall spend on food coming from dozens of vendors within 150 miles or within the state of North Carolina in 2025, Elon Dining proudly supports local farmers and businesses. Achieving 29% local spend- a 4% increase from 2024- was possible due to longstanding partnerships with small farms, new partnerships with sustainable, local vendors, and a strengthened relationship with NC-based food hub, Farmer Foodshare. In 2025 specifically, Elon Dining built two stand-out partnerships that covered opposite ends of the state: fresh fruit from local orchards in Western North Carolina, and sustainably sourced seafood from the North Carolina Coast.

### Mountains: Grade B Produce with Farmer Foodshare

Elon Dining works with Farmer Foodshare, a local food hub, to help facilitate relationships with small, local farms exclusively based in North Carolina. Farmer Foodshare, based in Raleigh, North Carolina, is a non-profit food hub "on a mission to increase access to fresh, local food for all while supporting the viability of marginalized farmers to create an equitable food system," according to Athan Barkoukis, Executive Director.

In Fall 2024, Hurricane Helene hit Western North Carolina and completely devastated the community, including many of the farms located in the area. In response, Elon Dining and Farmer Foodshare travelled together to visit

three of these farms including Deal Orchards, Perry Lowe Orchards, and Old Mountain Berry in Summer 2025 to check in with our partners and find ways to help support. Elon Dining team members including operational leadership, culinary leadership, Chefs de Cuisine, and the Sustainability Manager alongside leadership from Farmer Foodshare met the farmers, toured their farms, tasted the fruit, and talked through partnership opportunities to bring their local produce to campus.

Due to the extreme damage from Hurricane Helene, there was a high prevalence of Grade B produce- produce that is perfectly usable and delicious, but due to visible imperfections from hail damage, was not “pretty” enough to sell as Grade A produce. In a typical year with a lower volume of damaged fruit, the farms were able to find outlets to sell the produce at 50% of the original price so that it didn’t just go to waste, but with such a high volume, the farms were struggling to find customers for the Grade B fruits. In response, Elon Dining committed to purchasing varieties of apples, peaches, and pears from the farms through Farmer Foodshare, providing an outlet for the local farms having trouble selling product, strengthening the collaborative relationship with small farms, Farmer Foodshare, and Elon Dining, and bringing a new source of fresh, delicious, local produce to Elon University at half price, providing a significant price decrease from typical produce. Through these tours, Elon Dining also got to taste test packaged goods made at the farms including apple chips and sparkling apple cider, which were so delicious that Elon Dining worked with Farmer Foodshare to stock these products. Now, Elon Dining features apple chips and both sparkling and still apple cider in campus convenience stores and at catered events.

Not only was purchasing Grade B produce a smart decision for increasing local options in the all-you-can-eat dining halls, it was also a financially responsible decision because the produce was being sold at half-price. Originally, to mitigate risk, the plan was to use the damaged fruit in cooked or prepared methods only, including recipes like breakfast compotes or desserts, however upon arrival to campus, Elon Dining decided to start offering the fruit as whole hand fruit because the damage was so minor. This was a risk, considering most people are used to choosing the best looking, damage-free fruit. To mitigate the risk, chalkboard signage was put up at the hand fruit stations explaining where the fruit came from and why it might have minor damage. The change to the Grade B fruit had no negative impact in how much hand fruit was consumed at the dining halls. Students had no negative feedback, and instead were excited to be able to provide additional support to local farms that were struggling to build back after the hurricane.

In addition to supporting local North Carolina farms through the Grade B produce program, Elon Dining has featured local products sourced from Farmer Foodshare in a new “What’s in Season” program launched in Spring 2025. Each month, the three dining halls on campus highlights a different local and seasonal produce item on the menu. Chalkboards and digital screens are used to share what the item is and what local farm it came from. Lakeside Dining hall features items like spinach, bell peppers, and lettuce mix on the salad bar, McEwen Food Hall features roasted vegetables including beets, turnips, and rutabaga on the Mediterranean bar, and Clohan Dining Hall serves up a specialty pizza on Wednesdays featuring things like apples, peaches, pears, and fresh-sliced tomatoes. While many of these produce items are highly acceptable, risk was taken to try feature unique items like rutabaga and try recipes like a pear, blue cheese, and prosciutto pizza. Students were receptive to the interesting options and with the signage explaining why the items were being featured, they were more willing to try them out.

To be true partners rather than just purchasers, it is important that the relationship between the small local farms, Farmer Foodshare, and Elon Dining is mutually beneficial. On social media, Elon Dining has featured and tagged Farmer Foodshare for our Grade B produce and What’s in Season initiatives, which Farmer Foodshare has then been able to repost to share the success of their relationship with universities. Farmer Foodshare has also been featured in Elon Dining’s largest campus events of the year, including Mardi Gras, Earth Fest, and our State Fair Takeover. Representatives from Farmer Foodshare even came to visit the State Fair Takeover to see the local apples purchased from them in action at a caramel apple dipping station. They took a full tour of campus, seeing all the ways their work is supporting local NC produce at Elon and were able to speak with students about what they do to bring fresh, local produce to campus. Members from Elon Dining were also invited to Farmer Foodshare’s “Friends of the Foodshare Fall Reception.” At the event, Elon Dining team members were able to connect with the Farmer Foodshare team, other purchasers, local farmers, and representatives of the organizations receiving produce from Farmer Foodshare’s nonprofit work. As the new Executive Director of Farmer Foodshare, Athan Barkoukis gave a speech sharing the good work Farmer Foodshare had done that year, specifically highlighting the Elon Dining farms

tours and commitments with Grade B produce as one of their best partnerships of the year. Sharing social media content and visiting each other's locations to see how the work each group does impacts the other has made an incredible difference in community building and mutual support which in turn makes the Elon students, faculty, and staff have an even better experience supporting local partners and enjoying the freshest local produce.

Students love this relationship so much that in their "Best of 2026" edition of campus newspaper "The Pendulum" where students vote on the things they appreciate most about Elon from the year before, they voted "Locally Sourced Produce" as the best campus initiative specifically because of the partnership with Farmer Foodshare. A student employee from The Pendulum interviewed Elon Dining Sustainability Manager Leslie Bosse about the impact of local produce and a feature article was written in the magazine to highlight this work. Bosse expressed how important these partnerships are to the Dining team and how incredible it is that students care about the local partners too.

Supporting small, local farms in North Carolina, especially when they need a little extra help, is a continuously growing program that is thriving because of the thoughtful and mutualistic partnership with Farmer Foodshare and Elon Dining.

#### Coast: Fresh Caught Fish with Southern Breeze Seafood

North Carolina is lucky to be geographically diverse with mountains, plains, and coastline. Through an existing coastal connection with Tidewater Grains, the only NC-local rice farm, Elon Dining was introduced to Captain John Mallette, owner of Southern Breeze Seafood. Captain John is a sustainability-minded fisherman based in Jacksonville, NC catching seafood right off the North Carolina Coast. He prioritizes responsibly fishing and champions BIPOC leadership in the fishing community as an African American fisher himself. He serves on the North Carolina Governor appointed Marine Fisheries Commission, a group of commercial and recreational fisherman, commercial and sport fishing industry representatives, and scientists that come together to establish plans and regulations for maintaining sustainability for North Carolina. Previously, local and sustainably sourced seafood had been an untapped market for Elon Dining, but through meeting Captain John, a plan was devised to start featuring his local fish in the campus dining halls in January 2025 with results of bringing in over 9,000 pounds of local fish in 2025.

The primary focus to start was to bring in shrimp and catfish, two of Captain John's biggest volume catches, to feature in location. Elon Dining converted all shrimp and catfish to the seafood caught by Captain John. These items were featured regularly on our menus, with catfish being highlighted specifically on "Fish Fridays," a standing tradition at Elon Dining. Elon Dining also started featuring Southern Breeze Seafood's very own seafood breader, made with scraps from the Tidewater Grains local Carolina Gold rice program. The breader, perfect for coating fish or chicken, is also free of the top 9 allergens, allowing us to make allergen-friendly fried protein options. Signage was created on chalkboards and digital screens as well as promotional material on social media to advertise Captain John's delicious local seafood. Culinary Director Brandon Rudisill hosted two pop-ups to highlight the seafood, one featuring shrimp and one featuring grouper, purchased from Captain John because it was available bycatch, to give students, faculty, and staff a taste of just how fresh this local seafood was to encourage them to try it in the dining halls.

Due to the fishing process, Captain John often has fish caught in smaller quantities or caught as bycatch, often offered at incredibly reasonable and competitive prices, making this a cost-effective way to feature sustainable seafood on Elon's campus. To help find uses for these items, Elon Dining has purchased and utilized whole fish for Chef Takeovers in the dining halls, pop-ups, and for massive campus events like Mardi Gras and Earth Fest. Captain John even joined in at both large events, with a special role at Earth Fest, an event that is attended by 1,500 students, breaking down a fresh-caught whole tuna in front of students to feature in a poke bowl for guests to enjoy.

Due to the success of the program in residential and lack of diverse protein options at Billy D's, Elon Dining's local-focused fried chicken retail restaurant, a limited-time-only trial of wraps featuring the classic local fried chicken or local Captain John-caught shrimp were made available at the location. Executive Chef Danny Sartyoungkul hosted a

pop up outside of the location giving out samples of the shrimp wraps, highlighting that the shrimp was coming from the North Carolina coast and allowing students try out the new wraps before ordering. These limited-time-offers sold so well that Captain John shrimp was added to the menu permanently, selling over 1,000 orders in 2025.

The partnership with Captain John is innovative and unique, offering students the opportunity to enjoy the freshest seafood caught sustainably and supporting a small business led by a BIPOC fisherman. Creating a new focus on seafood diverts menus from using other higher-cost proteins like beef, ultimately decreasing the overall carbon footprint of menus and adding variety for guests.

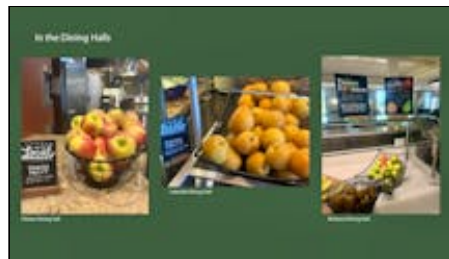
### Conclusion

From the NC mountains to the coast, Elon Dining increased our local partnerships strategically and thoughtfully throughout 2025, bringing the best of North Carolina to campus and supporting small farmers along the way. The partnerships are dynamic and collaborative, leading to cost-effective and sustainable solutions with long-term plans and benefits for all parties involved.

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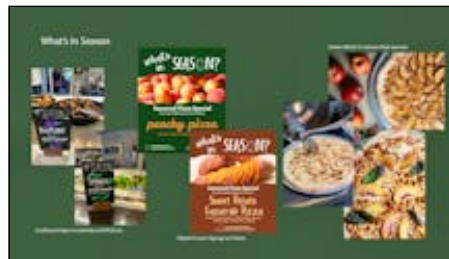
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Mountains 4.jpg 271 KiB



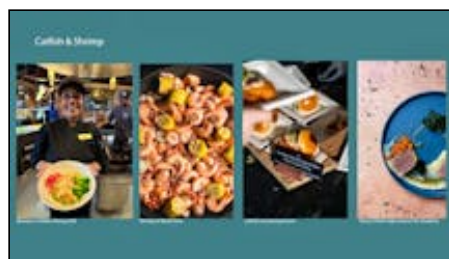
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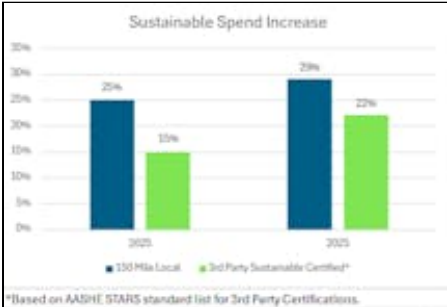
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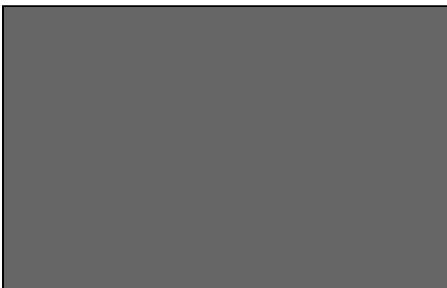
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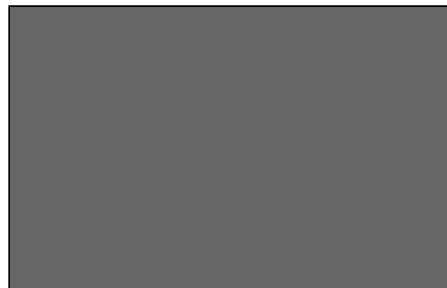


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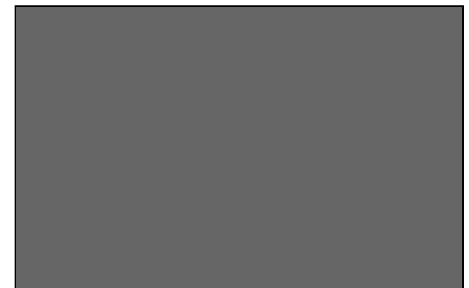
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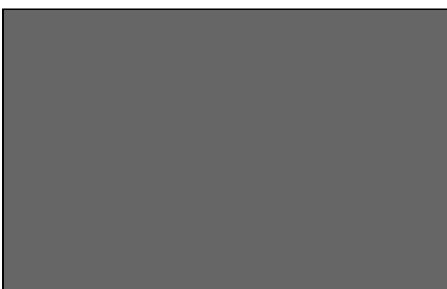
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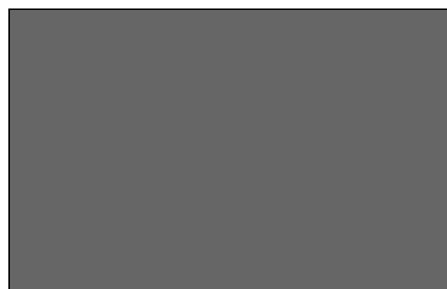
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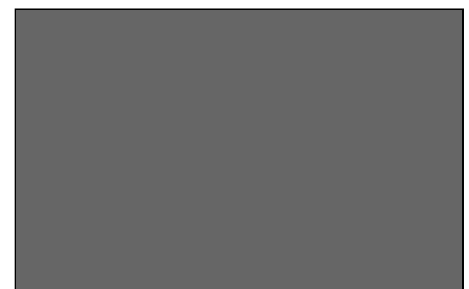
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