# Bringing scientific evidence into any beat: food, restaurants, and agriculture

*Science reporting quick tips from SciLine and The Open Notebook*

**While some might view the food beat as only recipes and reviews, there are plenty of opportunities to flavor these stories with scientific evidence and voices.**

## Five ideas for adding science to food, restaurants, and agriculture stories

| If you're reporting on... | Search for relevant research on... |
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| Agriculture | ■ Effects of climate change on crop yields and disease resistance<br>■ Soil, water, and resource management<br>■ Agricultural waste management |
| Resutaurants | ■ Supply chain operations<br>■ Environmental impacts of food waste<br>■ Practices to prevent infectious disease spread |
| Food insecurity | ■ Interventions for food deserts<br>■ Evidence backing community health and nutrition programs<br>■ Effects of cuts to federal and state programs |
| Grocery stores | ■ Commodity pricing and inflation<br>■ Evidence behind soda taxes and other regulations<br>■ Effects of climate change on produce availability |
| Labor practices | ■ Employee wages and worker unionization<br>■ Technology and labor automation<br>■ Health and safety in the food and restaurant industry |

## Inform your food reporting with data

**Here are some data sources you can use to bolster your reporting with evidence. Whenever you're using data, ask experts how those data are gathered and what their limitations are.**

- National Agriculture Statistics Service (U.S. Department of Agriculture): Publishes regular reports on nearly every aspect of the agricultural industry, such as egg production, farm labor, and chemical use.
  - The Census of Agriculture (every 5 years) features detailed data on farm size, livestock inventory, producer demographics, and more for every U.S. state and county.
  - Quick Stats allows you to search for data by year, region, and commodity, such as specific fruits and vegetables or livestock.
- Occupational Safety and Health Administration data: Databases of workplace inspections, injuries, fatalities, and chemical exposures in every U.S. state and territory. Search for data from agriculture or food service industries.

- Feeding America's Map the Meal Gap study: Estimates U.S. county-level food insecurity rates, eligibility for assistance programs, and average meal costs.
- Sustainable Management of Food Dashboard (EPA): Publishes data and reports on food waste, such as consumer costs, methane emissions from food in landfills, and sources of excess food.
- The Consumer Price Index (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics): Tracks fluctuations in the price of services and goods, including specific foods, over time.
- National Restaurant Association's Research and Statistics: Publishes state-level and national statistics using data from federal agencies. It also releases annual reports and economic analysis on the state of the restaurant industry.

## Common pitfalls to avoid

**1. Using the wrong data points:** Make sure you understand the data and how it relates to your story. For example, the retail price for eggs is not the same as the wholesale price.

**2. Repeating others' talking points:** Watch out for science-related claims from lobbying organizations, including the American Farm Bureau Federation and Consumer Brands Association. State-level farm bureau leaders will often just repeat the national platform. Vet claims from elected officials and organization leaders with relevant experts.

**3. Extrapolating research:** Agricultural research is place- and crop-specific, so avoid generalizing study findings. To find research relevant to your area, contact experts at your state's agricultural extension service or regional USDA Agricultural Research Service.

## Types of experts to contact and questions to ask.

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| **Ask agricultural researchers about:**<br>- Seed genetics<br>- Water and resource management<br>- Drones and emerging technology<br>- Farm labor<br>- Chemical runoff | **Ask food scientists about:**<br>- Forever chemicals<br>- Labeling and additives<br>- Food processing technologies<br>- Nutrition and micronutrients<br>- How "new foods" come to be |
| **Ask hospitality researchers about:**<br>- Supply chains and ingredient sourcing<br>- Health and safety regulations<br>- Delivery apps and automation<br>- Waste reduction<br>- Trends such as plant-based menus and mocktails | **Ask economists about:**<br>- Consumer spending trends<br>- Tariffs and trade disputes<br>- Labor demand & shortages<br>- Farm profitability & bankruptcies<br>- Crop prices and impact on local/regional economies |

## Real stories including scientific evidence and experts

- Can grocery stores keep rural Kansas communities vibrant? (The Beacon News, 2025)
- Ranches Cover A Fifth Of Hawai'i. Extreme Drought Is Clouding Their Future (Honolulu Civil Beat, 2025)
- Bay Area restaurants call this cooking style a 'secret ingredient.' Neighbors say it's a health risk (San Francisco Chronicle, 2025)

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