

Farmer's Fridge: A vending machine you actually should eat from



*Farmer's Fridge salads, snacks, and breakfast items come in these recyclable containers.
(Photo: Farmer's Fridge)*

A new food company called [Farmer's Fridge](#) has just launched a product that might simultaneously make your brow furrow in confusion and your stomach rumble in appreciation—it's a vending machine for salads.

The innovative brand, which set up its first automated, refrigerated kiosk six weeks ago at [Garvey Food Court](#), in downtown Chicago, appears to be onto something. The success of the Loop location has been such that the company is opening its second location, at the commuter-friendly Lake Forest Tollway, today. And founder Luke Saunders already has New York and beyond in his sights. (Which is good news, because we foresee office managers getting a ton of requests to swap this machine for their Snickers-filled one!)

The concept is quirky but simple: Farmer's Fridge prepares gourmet salads, snacks, and breakfast foods daily with organic, as-local-possible, nutrient-dense ingredients each morning, seals them in recyclable plastic jars, and delivers them to a vending machine—though the company prefers the term “automated kiosk”—by 10:00 a.m. Cutting back on counter-service costs means they're able to sell the salads for as little as \$6.99.

And its health credentials are the real deal. Farmer' Fridge partnered with **SPE Certified** to make sure its meal options have third-party validation of their merits: They're sourced and prepared carefully, and contain smart balances of whole grains, vegetables and lean proteins.



And they're delicious. The High Protein Salad contains spinach, corn, peas, pumpkin seeds, figs, broccoli, chickpeas, shredded Parmesan, and quinoa with lemon tahini dressing, and the Detox Salad is made with fennel, pineapple, sprouts, blueberry, quinoa, and white beans, with lemon-cider dressing. (Tuna, chicken, or salmon can be added.)

We caught up with Saunders to find out where this healthy vending-machine idea came from, and why it might just be the future of fast food.

So getting your salad from vending machines sounds a little out-there. Where did the idea come from?

I've been in the manufacturing industry since I graduated from college. I worked in Queens and New Jersey, and there were never good food options in those manufacturing neighborhoods. It was worse when I traveled. Being in manufacturing industry, seeing machines do things, I thought it could work with food. You can't set up a whole full-service restaurant, but you can put a machine that would serve people good food.

How did you choose your first location?

We picked a food court in the middle of downtown Chicago. I wouldn't say it was an underserved neighborhood or a "food desert" but that food court didn't have *any* healthy food. We're trying to put up kiosks near people who really need fresh food, but first we needed to have a machine that was making money to make sure it was a viable business.

Got it. So how does it work delivery-wise? How fresh is everything?

At 5 a.m. every Monday to Friday, we cut everything and make the salads, and then a driver takes the food to the machine and loads it at 9 a.m. Anything that doesn't sell is donated to charity the next morning. The most challenging part has been managing inventory.

How has the healthy vending machine concept gone over?

The response has been overwhelming. We weren't sure at all what was going to happen. We're competing with six or seven restaurants in this location. We thought we'd have to fight harder to get people to be conceptually okay, to understand that this was made this morning, this is fresh. We've had a great response on the packaging and what we do for sustainability. We worried if organic ingredients would be worth it, but it's really resonating. —*Ann Abel*

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