

The Concepts of Sustainable Cuisine

“...harmony with nature is possible only if we abandon the idea of superiority over the natural world.”

— BILL MOLLISON, *Introduction to Permaculture*

FOOD IS A BASIC NECESSITY. It's something all of us deal with in some form every day. The majority of us have become removed from involvement and participation with the food we buy, cook and consume. We rarely, if ever, sit around the dinner table discussing who grew our vegetables or how our meat was raised. But we feel that this should be part of our conversation and our awareness. Our choices and those of the retailers and wholesalers we buy from affect the environment, the economy and everyone's quality of life. We believe it is important to be aware of and concerned about where our food comes from.

Everything we do, either individually or collectively, has an impact on our environment and its future. In this light, we believe we should align our choice of ingredients with the natural cycle of the seasons. Food that is in season is at the peak of nutrition and flavor. In season, ingredients are bountiful, making them more available, cheaper and at their peak of perfection. It is also a fundamental fact of cooking that no cook, however creative and capable, can produce a dish better than the quality of the raw ingredients he or she uses. We should all try to shorten the route from the farm to our table. The results can be seen both in the quality of the food you cook, as well as far beyond your dining table.

The Sustainable Kitchen is about responsible and sustainable eating. When it comes to food, we can talk about environmental, economic and social sustainability.

By eating sustainably we can have a huge impact on the environment. Small farms that produce a wide variety of crops allow for greater biodiversity than do massive monocultures. By buying locally, we lessen the environmental costs associated with the transportation of food — costs such as increased air pollution, the use of fossil fuels, and damage to roadways and the oceans. Refrigeration of food that needs to be transported a long way uses energy and can involve the use



of ozone-depleting gases that ultimately affect the whole planet. None of these environmental costs are recognized by most consumers or accounted for in the price of food.

Environmental sustainability also relates to protecting our imperiled seafood supply. To ensure the health of our oceans and a diverse supply of seafood for the future, all nations must provide better, integrated management over the procuring and processing of seafood. Our personal belief is that a majority of fish-farming or fish aquaculture systems actually promote ecological destruction and further protein loss in the ocean ecosystem. Consumers, along with chefs, need to ask the same questions that the Chefs Collaborative “Fish Pick” raises when they purchase fish: Is it farmed or is it wild? If it was farmed, was it raised with an appropriate vegetarian diet and according to environmentally sound methods? If wild, where was it caught? How was it caught? Should it be caught, or protected because the species is threatened? Does it have a high bycatch percentage that adversely impacts other marine animals?

Similarly, we need to ask questions about where our meat comes from and how the animals were raised and slaughtered. Livestock needs to be humanely treated, fed the purest natural feeds (with no animal by products or waste), never given growth hormones or sub-therapeutic antibiotics, and raised on land cared for as a sustainable resource.

For our own cooking guidelines, we support “polyculture,” a system long practiced in China and Japan. Becky Goldberg, a senior scientist with Environmental Defense, a nonprofit organization dedicated to solving urgent environmental problems, states that “polyculture is the farming of many species of plants and animals together in one system in order to make optimum use of water and nutrients and to minimize farm wastes.” When the home cook begins to question the food chain and demand appropriate answers, then we will all be on the way to preserving the food supply for future generations.

Sustainability goes far beyond environmental effects. Economic sustainability, another goal of responsible eating, refers to the principle of keeping food dollars in the local community so they can contribute to the maintenance and development of regional food production and the local economy. Local farmers and citizens often achieve this by setting up Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) groups in their communities. CSAs are a system of local agriculture whose roots reach back 30 years to Japan, where a group of women, concerned about an increase of food imports and the corresponding decrease in the farming population, initiated a direct growing and purchasing relationship between their community group and local farms. This arrangement is called “teikei” in Japanese, meaning “putting the farmers’ faces on food.”

The CSA concept traveled to Europe and eventually to the U.S., where in 1985, Indian Line Farm in the Berkshire foothills of eastern Massachusetts was established as the first Community Supported Agriculture farm in North America. Today, there are over 1,000 CSA farms across the US and Canada with members and growers sharing the costs, risks and bounty of growing food. Membership ranges from 15 to 150 families per farm, each making a financial commitment to support the farm throughout the year by signing up and purchasing shares, either in one lump

sum before the seeds are sown in early spring, or in several installments throughout the growing season. In return for their investment, CSA members receive fresh, locally grown, usually organic produce once a week from late spring through early autumn from “their” farm.

Many CSAs are expanding their offerings to include such foods as honey, fruit, meats, poultry and eggs, thereby increasing their viability. Networks of CSA farms are also forming to develop associative economies by growing and providing a greater range of products in a cooperative fashion and to protect the future of the small to medium-size farm.

Our food choices also have a large impact on our society and on our communities. Through eating sustainably we can promote the physical, spiritual, cultural and economic health of farm families and communities. To do this we need to educate people of all generations about the benefits of locally grown food; for small farms to continue, we need to educate people on how to grow food. Many CSA farms offer and require apprenticeships. For some farms they are an integral component of a successful operation. Apprenticeships offer valuable hands-on education and continue the back-to-the-land movement. This concept also teaches future generations that “food” comes from the land, not from the grocery store. Early exposure to caring for the Earth will enable children to better nourish themselves and others. Home gardens, wherever possible, along with school gardens, should be a required part of school education.

Sustainability is a long-term goal. Modern factory-farm-style American agriculture has produced high crop yields, but at what cost? Sustainable and seasonal cuisine, on the other hand, brings many benefits, not the least of which is great taste. It is also great fun to know that you are cooking and eating great food grown or harvested by local people. Just as we have developed relationships with the farmers in our valley, we believe all consumers must develop relationships with the people who are growing, farming and raising the products they eat and enjoy. Farmers are the people who should be driving your diet and what’s on your dinner table. Think “outside the box” and be open to the moment when you go to the market, even if it’s the neighborhood supermarket. The traditional Italian cook understands this philosophy. You do not go to the market looking for red snapper or cod. You go seeking the fish that looks the best and you choose that fish for dinner. A particular group of products or vegetables may be at its best the very day you’re shopping — and maybe you never imagined that particular combination — but when you let the flavors of seasonal produce and raw ingredients speak for themselves and inspire your cooking, the flavor will always be outstanding.

Robert Weir of the Grateful Dead said that music and cooking are very similar: they’re all about blending and taste. For us, great cooking is akin to a *cappella* music. The blending of voices or ingredients is more

Principles of Sustainability

- Celebrate the joys of local, seasonal and artisanal ingredients.
- Understand the source of the ingredients — the way they have been grown, raised or caught.
- Support sustainable agriculture and aquaculture, humane animal husbandry practices and well-managed fisheries.
- Purchase from purveyors whose conservation practices lessen our impact on the environment.
- Choosing sustainable food products is about more than helping the environment. It’s about sustaining the heritage and the economy of whole communities. Respecting local economies, traditions and habitats are important parts of participating in a sustainable food system.

than the sum of their parts. Good cooking is not about how tall you can make the plate, but about what tastes best and what flavors complement and marry well with each other. Of course, we also have a wonderful time in the process of discovering and inventing these partnerships and blending their voices. We want to encourage you to discover and enjoy that spirit of playfulness in the kitchen.

Translating Sustainability to Action

It's not enough to discuss the concepts and philosophy of responsible, sustainable eating. It's equally important to act. In the following pages of *The Sustainable Kitchen* we give practical recommendations that anyone can follow to become involved and participate fully in a lifestyle of sustainable cooking. And for those who are already aware and appreciate the values of sustainable cooking, we offer our experience and recipes as further inspiration.

- Cook seasonally; do not buy fruits and vegetables out of season.
- Always buy locally whenever possible and buy directly from the grower or from a source as close as possible to where the product is grown.
- Join a CSA or work with a local farmer who will supply you with seasonal produce of your choosing.
- Support farmers' markets and farm stands.
- The next time you are in your supermarket talk to the produce manager. Tell the manager of your concern about pesticides and let him or her know you would prefer to buy local or regional produce and certified organic food if possible.
- Ask your grocers and suppliers about the farms where the meat and poultry they sell is raised and how it is raised. If they do not know, ask them to find out. Support grocers and butchers who get their supplies from farmers who do not use factory-farming techniques.
- Ask how the fish you buy is caught, either by using sustainable practices or by practices damaging to the environment, and whether it is wild or farm raised.
- Learn which fish species are endangered from over fishing.
- Read labels; find out what ingredients or additives are in the food you are eating.
- Plant a garden and/or help set up a school or a community garden.
- Complete the cycle by composting and recycling.
- Educate yourself about food, understand the issues, and let your legislators know how you feel about food management issues and which rules and regulations are important to you.

