
ECO-GASTRONOMY, A REVOLUTION IN COOKING AND EATING

BY CHERYL BEERS

“Loving food is the most personal and least abstract way to be an environmentalist.”—Alice Waters

Your kitchen is another opportunity for you to practice living “green.” You may feel pretty good about your efforts to recycle; you drive a low-emission/high MPG car and you may even grow a vegetable garden and practice composting. But is that enough? Have you thought about the environmental impact of the foods you purchase?

This is where *eco-gastronomy* comes in. Eco-gastronomy promotes values-based consumerism representing a fusion of pleasure and principles. The focus is on positive, thoughtful living where every little bit counts.

Last October, Slow Food International’s Terra Madre Conference included not only food producers from around the world but also 1,000 chefs from around the world. The chefs were challenged to embrace eco-gastronomy as a philosophy for their restaurants. Berkeley-based chef/restaurant and local/seasonal food pioneer Alice Waters and Carlo Petrini, founder of Slow Food International, also asked chefs to recognize the opportunity they have to become links between consumers (or, as Slow Food prefers, *co-producers*) and food producers. In other words, what we are served in restaurants influences our purchases outside restaurants. With Americans currently spending 50% of their food dollars in restaurants, this is a very important responsibility.

So how have professional chefs responded to this challenge? The Culinary Institute of America (CIA) is hoping to positively influence the way Americans eat. The CIA has several programs in the works, largely at Greystone in Napa, California:

In 2005 Greystone added the Ventura Foods

Center for Menu and Research Development to help food-service industries improve in a number of areas including health and wellness.

The Williams Center for Flavor Discovery, founded to increase knowledge of world cuisines associated with healthy diets.

Harvard School of Public Health in partnership with the Williams Center has co-hosted “Worlds of Healthy Flavors Conferences” to help industry leaders incorporate good nutrition into their business.

The CIA is developing a book for consumers that will focus on techniques and flavors for healthier eating.

The CIA is working with Harvard Medical School to develop a Healthier Lifestyle program. The goal of this program is to find effective messages and methods to change behavior. Recognizing that doctors lack training in nutrition and are often at a loss as to how to communicate positive health messages, a continuing-education program is being developed to train doctors to be more pro-active with their patients in areas of health and nutrition.



Photograph by Carole Topalian

The CIA's vice president for continuing education, Mark Erickson, believes that ultimately the consumer is responsible for eating right. However, chefs do have a responsibility to offer healthy choices. In the next five years he hopes to see real progress in terms of understanding that health and wellness applies to the whole menu, not just a few items that are flagged with health messages (that nobody orders!)

Some encouraging signs in the marketplace: the number of Farmers' Markets in the United States has doubled in the past 10 years and sales of organic products have increased 20% per year since 1990.

With the Worldwatch Institute estimating that the average food item now travels between 1,500 and 2,500 miles before we eat it, burning fossil fuels the whole way, it's not hard to understand why buying a peach from Chile in January should be, in political correctness terms, on a par with wearing fur!

The editor of *Eating Well* magazine recently compared the miles traveled and the cost of two chicken dinners for four, one sourced locally and the other from mass-market sources. Results: the locally sourced dinner items traveled 153 total miles while the mass-market dinner items traveled 14,483 miles! The mass-market dinner cost \$2.16 less than the locally sourced; no mention was made of which dinner tasted better (my bet would be on the locally sourced dinner).

Adding more locally grown or produced food items to your family menus = practicing eco-gastronomy. To quote Brian Halweil, author of *Eat Here: Reclaiming Homegrown Pleasures in a Global Supermarket*: "Long-distance food habits devour tremendous amounts of oil, reduce food quality by necessitating the use of chemical preservatives and make us vulnerable to accidental or malicious disruptions to our food supply." Of course, buying everything locally produced would be not only challenging, but probably impossible. We can, however, strive to *eat locally, season globally*.

Ojai's Locally Grown The Farmer and the Cook: Practicing Eco-Gastronomy

Olivia Chase started The Farmer and the Cook restaurant/market with Steve Sprinkle in 2001. Their goal was to support organic farmers by buying their products. After selling City Bakery in Ventura and taking three years "off" to teach home economics at Ventura High School, Olivia and Steve took over the building on El Roblar in Meiners Oaks that her mother owned and began the restaurant/market. Olivia is a registered dietitian with a master's degree who worked in public health for approximately eight years before realizing she missed cooking; she began baking bread for neighbors when she was 16 years old. She believes that food is very personal while she acknowledges the role she plays as restaurant/market owner in shaping the choices her customers make.

Olivia estimates that approximately 60% of the produce sold or used at The Farmer and the Cook is local (much of it grown by Steve). All products sold are 100% organic.

The café was recently renovated and Olivia plans to increase service and add more specialty items. Even if you're not a vegetarian, stop by for a chance to enjoy a "flexitarian" meal.

The Farmer and the Cook Market and Cafe
339 West El Roblar Drive
Meiners Oaks
(805) 640-9608

How you can practice eco-gastronomy:

- Join a local Slow Food convivium—we have one in Ojai (www.slowfoodusa.org)
- Trace your food sources
- Visit/shop at a certified Farmers' market
- Join a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture)—any Ojai farmers interested in resurrecting a local CSA?
- Plant a vegetable garden or even a few pots of lettuce and herbs
- Buy local, seasonal produce
- Support local restaurants serving local products—any local restaurants interested in planning an *Eat Local Challenge?* (www.eatlocalchallenge.com)

For more information on farmers' markets and the politics of organic and sustainable agriculture, check out these websites: www.ams.usda.gov, www.localharvest.org, www.organicconsumers.org

Also highly recommended reading: Marion Nestle's *Food Politics* and/or *What to Eat: An Aisle-by-Aisle Guide to Savvy Food Choices and Good Eating*.