

# STRAIGHT TALK FOR CHEFS

## ON SUSTAINABLE FOOD, PART II

A pioneer in sustainable agriculture talks with Chris Koetke, Kendall College School of Culinary Arts.



**LAST MONTH,** I began a conversation with Dr. Fred Kirschenmann, a distinguished fellow with the Leopold Center at Iowa State University and nationally renowned authority on sustainable agriculture. This month, we'll explore the locavore movement, Dr. Kirschenmann's view of the future, and how we, as chefs, can make a difference, not only in our own kitchens, but in society as a whole.

**CHRIS:** Until now, our conversation has centered on organic, biodynamic and sustainable food, but what about local? Particularly among chefs, this is very popular and has become the latest buzz word.

**FRED:** That term has its own complexities. One of the primary benefits is that local food is much more likely to be fresh, and nutritionists have long agreed about the health benefits of eating fresh food. The presumption with local, however, is that it has a smaller eco-footprint, which is not necessarily true. For example, some data indicates that if an individual farmer puts a crate of vegetables in the back of his truck and drives it 40 miles to the farmers market, that footprint could be larger than that of a large truck that hauls a full load of produce in from California.

One of the issues that we really have to include in our thinking is transaction costs. Our industrial food system has been quite good at reducing transaction costs, and that includes both economic and environmental costs. A term that I prefer is "foodshed," because if you look at local, it's not terribly practical. It necessitates drawing a boundary, and in my opinion, you can't legitimately call something local

that comes from more than 150 miles away. There are people who do, but it's another instance of greenwashing. I had a friend in Iowa who went into the local supermarket and saw cherries that were labeled "local." Knowing that cherries weren't grown anywhere near the location of the grocery store, he spoke to the store manager. The manager informed him that the cherries came from Texas, and his store considers anything that's produced in the United States as "local."

That's why I prefer the term "foodshed." Take an area like New York City, with about 30 million people in the city and surrounding suburbs. Are you going to feed 30 million people with food produced within a 150-mile radius? Probably not. Then you take a state such as North Dakota, where we have a total population of about of 630,000. If we all ate within 150 miles of where live, about 90 percent of the farm land in our area would go idle. So, local doesn't work for me on a very practical basis.

**CHRIS:** So what exactly is a foodshed?

**FRED:** The term "foodshed" is a metaphor for watershed, and while foodsheds may differ in size, they are appropriate for their place. The foodshed concept has been around since 1929, but it never caught on until the food crisis of 2008, and now it's become part of the literature. It's a community concept—whatever size the community is, it's up to the members to decide what they want to include. Farmers and non-farmers alike become food citizens and actively engage in determining what kind of food systems make the most sense and provide the kind food they want, and how they can bring it into



being. To me, that kind of concept is more attractive, and there can be local notes within that foodshed, if that's what people want.

**CHRIS:** Tell me about the food crisis of 2008.

**FRED:** When oil hit \$147 a barrel and the price of food went up 15-20 percent, particularly in resource-poor countries, there were actually food riots in the streets. That was a wake-up call for a lot of politicians. People like Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer began to realize that what we were experiencing globally could also become a serious problem for New York City, because it has its own "food deserts." He became a radical advocate for a NYC foodshed, has conducted several food conferences, and engaged various food activist groups in the NYC metro area to put together a manifesto of what their system should look like. He wrote an article about the food crisis of 2008 in *The New York Times* and an op-ed in *The Huffington Post* where he advocated for the foodshed concept. He made the point that NYC spends \$438 million of public funds annually on food for the public school system. Suppose it mandated that 20 percent of that money go to beginning and local farmers to provide 30 percent of the food for NYC? That would be an \$85 million investment in the next generation of farmers. When politicians start thinking like that, I think there are some real possibilities to bring about changes in the food system.

**CHRIS:** From a chef's perspective, what should I do? I'm a chef and have many drains on my time, but I want to do what's best for the environment, too. What would that be?

**FRED:** One of the things customers want is authenticity. As a chef, if you use clear and simple language about what you're serving your customers, that it has absolute authenticity (i.e., verifiable and transparent) and that what you're doing, to the best of your knowledge, meets requirements for ecological resilience, etc., you're on the right track. Then explain to your customers, in simple terms, why what they eat is important, and while they're enjoying healthy, delicious food, they're also making a contribution to their grandchildren. I think that's what people are increasingly looking for.

A friend who's a retired CEO at Sysco said to me in 2003 that their market is on the "growing-edge of memory, romance and trust." I asked him, "So what happened to fast, convenient and cheap?" He said that's still there, and it's a major part of the market, but the other side is growing. Chefs want product that when their customers eat it, it's so good, they say, "That's wonderful, and how do I get it again?" That's creating a memory. They also want a good story that's authentic—that the animals are treated right, there's environment stewardship from farm to table, and they want to know who the farmer is—so you have all those story components, and that's the romance. Perhaps most importantly, they want a trusting relationship, and that's where authenticity comes in. As a chef, if you use that as your mantra and make sure the way in which your food is produced meets these true sustainability requirements, building the resilience into the system, and restoring the biological health of our soil, you're on the right track. You'll be successful from a business



perspective and will also be doing the right thing for the environment.

**CHRIS:** How would I know if someone is pursuing that kind of agriculture?

**FRED:** It probably comes down to the relationship we talked about. Chef Dan Barber at Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture says he has to spend time with farmers that he connects with to verify that they're doing what they say. He also says that, in part, you can tell the first time you take the product in. If it doesn't have the taste quality, then something's probably not right.

**CHRIS:** Are there third-party entities, outside of organic, when it comes to biodynamic, sustainable or even local that can provide some kind of verification?

**FRED:** To some extent, yes, but for the kinds of things we're talking about, like quality, I don't know of any third party that can give you that kind of assurance. One of the organizations I have respect for is Food Alliance, Portland, Ore., and they do certify sustainability, but even they don't say they're the standard of sustainability, only that the food meets their standards. With them, farmers can use some pesticides, but they must continually reduce that use over time. There's a place for Food Alliance, and they're doing good things, but as a chef, I'm not sure that simply using Food Alliance certified products is adequate. The same thing is true for certified organic. It really requires developing a relationship with a group of farmers who are making those extra efforts. Too, as energy costs go up, we'll find that more and more farmers will be doing it right because they won't have the cheap energy.

**CHRIS:** Many times, I've spoken with people about how we change things from a chicken-and-egg perspective. When it comes to how people eat and the food choices they're making, do chefs, especially given the rock-star status we currently enjoy, have the ability and a responsibility to society to help form opinions about food and food choices? Do you believe that chefs are perhaps the catalyst that will lead to larger societal change?

**FRED:** It's interesting that you raise that question, because here at Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture, we've talked exactly about that issue. As it turns out, I'm in the middle of reading a book called *Smart World: Breakthrough Creativity and the New Science of Ideas* (Harvard Business School Press, 2007) by Richard Ogle. His basic thesis is that we come out of a culture and science that assumes things happen in a linear fashion with specific cause/effect relationships, a view of the world that dates back to the 17th century. We're still somewhat stuck in that model, and we assume that it requires an individual of extraordinary genius to bring about these changes while the rest of us are just struggling and can't make things happen. Ogle points out that in the new science of networks, that's not how the world works. In fact, the world is a very complex, constantly emerging entity, so genius is something that's a shared phenomenon that takes place in "idea spaces," which is why he calls it a smart world and not smart people. For example, in the early 20th century, Picasso is credited with creating cubism in art, but it was actually the result of many things going on in the world of art that he drew from, using his individual genius, and created those first paintings that ultimately revolutionized the art world. The same



thing is true of Einstein and the theory of relativity. To apply that to food, I think you can make a case for idea spaces around food today that are poised to spark a real transformation in the industrial food system. People such as Michael Pollan are starting to articulate some of this for us. In Ogle's view, this enables us to see ourselves as something larger than we are individually and can help create this revolution.

**CHRIS:** Yours is a wonderful, long-term perspective. Many times, we feel we're waging an uphill battle, but I think you're right and the playing field is changing beneath our feet. In fact, there are a lot of things that lead up to change, and then something breaks and it seems very dramatic, but to your point, it's really a confluence of things that make that break happen. Thank you so much for taking time to share your knowledge with us. I know the information will be of great value to chefs and educators alike as they ponder the complex issues surrounding our food supply.

### RECOMMENDED READING

Diamond, Jared. *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (Penguin, 2005)

Diamond, Jared. *Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2005.)

Gladwell, Malcolm. *Outliers: The Story of Success* (Little, Brown & Company, 2008.)

Ogle, Richard. *Smart World: Breakthrough Creativity and the New Science of Ideas* (Harvard Business School Press, 2007)

