

Hitting close to home

The movement toward sourcing locally has gone nationwide, attracting devoted chefs and consumers who crave fresh ingredients grown nearby

By M. SHARON BAKER

Seattle restaurateur Tom Douglas went to a local meat purveyor last month to buy chicken and was stunned at the \$54 tab for two organically grown birds.

"I had no idea what they cost, or I would have never bought them," he says, "and the people behind me were quite upset that they couldn't buy these \$27 chickens. These were 2-pound chickens. It was pretty stunning.

"It certainly puts a real monetary value on organic, sustainable and local," says Douglas, who opened his first Seattle restaurant, Dahlia Lounge, in 1989 with the vision of featuring fresh, locally grown ingredients. "I'm still thinking about how much I spent on those two chickens."

Those high-priced birds show just how much demand has increased for local products thanks to the national recognition the local-food movement gained in 2007. While independent chefs like Douglas have been shopping at farmers markets and dishing up local foods for nearly three decades, consumers only recently have begun seeking out such foods. The movement made the cover of *Time* magazine in March 2007, and "locavore" was named word of the year in November by the *New Oxford American Dictionary*. Meanwhile, more independent operators seek out locally grown food, which they contend tastes better.

Alice Waters started preparing local dishes back in the 1970s at a time when foodies still were looking abroad, heralding the availability of exotic imports like South Pacific fish and Latin American fruits. Consumers, meanwhile, were falling in love with Asian flavors, and French cuisine was still thought to be the ultimate in luxury dining.

Only a few chefs — such as Waters in Berkeley, Calif., and Douglas in Seattle, along with Lucia Watson in Chicago and Claire Criscuolo of Claire's Corner Copia in New Haven, Conn. — were visiting what few farmers markets existed and trying to source ingredients locally. Some food historians say American chefs started looking at regional cuisine and local ingredients only after Paul Prudhomme started cooking Cajun in the late 1970s at the Brennan family's Commander's Palace in New Orleans.

Chefs like Criscuolo, who has tended a restaurant garden since 1980, were rare, as was one of Seattle's most celebrated restaurants, The Herbfarm, which began



Above: Sourcing local ingredients for restaurants like Blue Hill at Stone Barns in New York, above, can prove challenging.

Right: Josiah Citrin, right, chef-owner of Melisse in Los Angeles, shops for produce at the Santa Monica Farmer's Market every week.

offering a six-course lunch made from ingredients grown on the farm in 1986. The local movement gained a little steam in the early 1990s. Author Wendell Berry wrote an essay called "The Pleasures of Eating," which suggested that people become more active participants in food production. Groups such as Chefs Collaborative, which matches farmers and restaurants for mutual benefit, and Food Routes Network, a national nonprofit that created the Buy Local program and helps connect farmers and restaurateurs, were formed.

But the nation's culinary consciousness was slow to change. Industry observers say a confluence of issues merged in the past few years to bring the local and sustainable food movements to center stage in 2007. Stepped-up land preservation efforts, food safety fears in 2006, environmental concerns, the sustainable-agriculture movement and the desire to help small farmers survive all contributed to America's new love affair with local food.

Today, local food is found on the menus of many restaurants, such as North Pond in Chicago, Mixt Greens in San Francisco, Blue Hill and Savoy, both in New York, and Early Girl Eatery in Asheville, N.C..

Entrepreneurs have founded restaurants devoted solely to organic foods, such as Sterling Café in Seattle and Restaurant Nora in Washington, D.C. Some restaurants, such as Parkway Grill in Pasadena, Calif.; Park Ave in Stanton, Calif.; and SugarSnap in Burlington, Vt., cultivate their

own ingredients right outside the restaurants' doors. Even though it's located in chilly Maine, Primo of Rockland is nearly self-sustaining.

Dining with farmers has become a special event at many restaurants, such as Sebastian's Interactive Kitchen in Boston and Melisse in Los Angeles.

Even growers have gotten into the act, offering dinners on their farms. Maverick Farms in Valle Crucis, N.C., has hosted more than six community dinners in the past two years.

Serious devotees to the local cause are pledging to source a large portion of their ingredients within a specific distance. Tod Murphy, creator of The Farmer's Diner, made national headlines by pledging to source as many ingredients as he could from within 70 miles of Quechee Gorge Village, Vt., where the diner is located.

One of the biggest challenges for operators seeking to buy local ingredients lies on the road between the farm and the restaurant, and connecting the two. Another looming hurdle is the rising cost of some ingredients, mostly those labeled organic, as Douglas found out. Availability of some items also depends upon the weather.

While the U.S. Department of Agriculture says the number of farmers markets

has grown significantly, rising from about 2,800 in 2000 to more than 4,500 today, knowing where to find local ingredients isn't easy, says Bruce Sherman, chef and partner in Chicago's North Pond.

"It's not like calling up your industrial vegetable purveyor and ordering everything from asparagus to zucchini at any time of year and knowing it's going to show up the next day," he says. "It takes thought about what's in season and where to get it, and often it means getting up and going to the market to find it."

Many farming-based groups have sprung up to help make the connections between farmers and chefs, including Chefs Collaborative, which claims to have more than 1,000 food professional members, and Farmer-Chef Connection, a resource for putting food producers and food buyers together. Several states also have created matching services, and some restaurants are buying shares in community-supported agriculture ventures, which are formed by farmers who sell annual shares in their various crops.

Increased awareness of local food also has increased demand, and in some places, increased prices.

Traditionally, chefs try to keep the cost of food at 30 percent or less of the total cost of

a menu item. At \$27 a chicken, Douglas faced a loss on his two chickens. Douglas tells the chefs of his various restaurants to buy organic ingredients if they are within 10 percent of regular prices.

"I still have to be competitive with the restaurant across the street," he says.

Chef Josiah Citrin, owner of Melisse restaurant in Los Angeles, shops for produce weekly at the Santa Monica Farmer's Market. Prices have gone up, he says, and he has had to raise

prices accordingly. But as the owner of one of the most expensive restaurants in L.A., he can do that.

"Seventy percent of making good food is having great ingredients," he says. "[Patrons] go to restaurants to get the best meal they can get, and I have to charge what I have to to be in business."

North Pond's Sherman buys local in the spring, summer and fall, but not everything he needs is grown in the Midwest. The member of the board of Chefs Collaborative says that the local food movement still has to conform to the conventional rules of commerce.

"It's not about buying local at all costs," Sherman says. "Chefs need to buy local because it's a better product and it is the right thing to do. But I'm not going to spend on something just because it is local — especially if it's inappropriately priced or the quality isn't good." ■



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