

# More Than a Meal

## Eating is a political act, and the choices you make have consequences beyond the table

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By MARTHA SHERIDAN / The Dallas Morning News

An intense interest in food isn't just for foodies anymore. Along with meals, consumers can get a back story, a mission, even a manifesto. Consumers devour details about where produce is grown and how the animals fared on the way to the table.

During tomato season, J.T. and Carolyn Lemley's stall at the Dallas Farmers Market is a magnet for cooks craving the homegrown, sun-ripened gifts of a Canton farm. Farmer's markets used to be the one place to meet the okra grower, but some grocery stores now feature farmers with seasonal produce.

The Chipotle Mexican Grill restaurant chain touts its "Food With Integrity Manifesto," which "means working back along the food chain ... going beyond distributors to discover how the vegetables are grown, how the pigs and chickens are raised, where the best spices come from." Chipotle's carnitas are made with pork from Niman Ranch, a co-op of Midwestern farmers that raise free-range pigs.

Alice Waters, whose restaurant Chez Panisse in Berkeley, Calif., has been serving meals made with locally grown organic foods for more than 30 years, credits the book *Fast Food Nation* by Eric Schlosser (Houghton Mifflin, 2001) with "awakening people to what's going on and how our food is being produced."

Chris Dittrich of Dallas and her husband, Darren, make an effort to know the provenance of foods. Feeding their 16-month-old twins healthful foods increased Ms. Dittrich's awareness of foods and labeling. "I figure they're this little, their brains are growing, and I want everything I give them to be the best it can." For Spencer and Rylie, that means meals made of organic foods and their mom's homemade whole-grain porridge with applesauce.

Many consumers are nostalgic for true flavor, says Michael Cox, general manager of Central Market Plano. The flavors that can unlock memories usually have one thing in common: freshness. "People are searching to find the things they tasted as children – an apple with crunch, with freshness and flavor."

### Restaurant fare

McCormick & Schmick's, a seafood chain with a Dallas location in NorthPark Center, updates the menu regularly. Specific sources are listed to "explain the freshness of the product," says Scott Clement, general manager. A recent menu included Biloxi, Miss., catfish; Seadrift, Texas, blue crab; Washington Sunset Beach oysters; and Idaho rainbow trout.

"People will see Manila clams on the menu, and people from the Northwest will crave those. They'll remember getting those with their dad from a store in Oregon. It brings back memories. You can't really get that with steak," Mr. Clement says.

When Ms. Waters opened her restaurant, she was on a quest for the flavors she experienced in France. "What I found on this search was that the organic farmers who lived close to Chez Panisse were growing the best-tasting food in a way that was consistent with my set of values.

"I wasn't looking for that, but that is what I found."

Today, Ms. Waters considers eating a political act. "Every choice that we make about the food we eat has consequences," she says. "There are people who are growing food in a wonderful way that takes care of the land for future generations. When you buy from sustainable organic farmers, you're making a contribution to the future, to the health of our land. When you buy from that sort of fast-food nation, you're destroying natural resources around the world."

More mainstream grocery stores and restaurants are describing the provenance of food "because people have concerns about the safety of what they eat," she says.

### **Back to basic groceries**

Grocery stores such as Central Market and Whole Foods Market get more specific than the standard supermarket labels for Hawaiian pineapple or Washington apples. This fall, Central Market has Texas sweet potatoes and mums from the farm of Pamela and Frank Aronsky in Blanco. Have a craving for Manila clams? Check Central Market. At Whole Foods' Greenville Avenue store, three Texas farms are featured in the produce section with large photos and stories. Labels make it easy to find farms on the Web to learn more about where and how the food was grown.

Providing details has been part of Whole Foods' mission since the outset, says spokeswoman Kate Monteilh. The company was founded in Austin in 1980.

Food choices have environmental implications, says Angela Wotton, assistant director of Slow Food USA. "I think people are so used to getting strawberries in December that they don't really think of the actual environmental cost of getting those strawberries to, say, Maine, from California."

In separate interviews, Ms. Waters, Ms. Wotton, Mr. Cox and Ms. Dittrich volunteer similar feelings about peaches. A fresh peach eaten out of hand drips down the forearm, teasing the senses with a hint of the Garden of Eden. But tastebuds recoil from a hard, woody peach picked early for efficient shipping across the country. Enjoying peaches at the peak of ripeness makes it easier to be patient and wait for peach season to come around again. "Once they're gone, they're gone," Ms. Waters says. "When you don't have something year-round, like tomatoes, you find other things to cook with."

For many consumers, price is the first consideration. But even if locally grown food seems to cost a little more, "it's worth it because if you live in that community, you have a relationship with what you are buying," says Ms. Wotton. "You're helping to support your local farmer. You know where the food comes from." Slow Food proponents "want people to stop and think, 'Where did this carrot come from?'"

The Slow Food movement started in the mid-'80s in protest of a McDonald's restaurant moving into a historic Italian *piazza*. Slow Food proponents relish the pleasures of the table over the fast-food lifestyle. The Web site, [www.slowfood.com](http://www.slowfood.com), has information about chapters in the United States; the Dallas chapter, or *convivium*, is just getting started.

### **What price flavor?**

What drives consumers to think beyond price and develop an interest in a food's back story? Ms. Wotton offers a personal theory: "Maybe it's the whole urban sprawl with fast-food chains everywhere. One day people woke up and thought, 'Is this all there is?' Maybe they just want to taste again."

People who want details that connect them with the source of what they're eating get satisfaction from the packaging of Beppino Occelli butter from Italy, available at Central Market. A quote from the package: "My butter is made as it was in the past, with fresh skimmed cream obtained from milk collected daily. It is

pale yellow in the spring and summer when the cows are fed with grass from mountain pastures, whiter in the winter when they are hay-fed."

Local supermarket managers sourcing foods is an outgrowth of the farmer's market renaissance, says Barbara Fairchild, editor-in-chief of *Bon Appetit* magazine. "Supermarkets are being very smart in featuring the growers in the produce aisles to put a more human face on the ingredients they are selling." People like knowing that the food comes from a specific grower, not a large conglomerate, she says.

Food grown for the convenience of packaging and shipping typically sacrifices flavor, says Mr. Cox. And shopping with only price in mind misses the real point: value and usability. Apples selling for 49 cents a pound are not a better value than the ones selling for \$1.29 if they don't have the flavor and texture of fresh apples, he says.

If you have a family to feed, Ms. Fairchild says, take 10 to 15 minutes a day "to sit by yourself and think about what you'll be eating the next couple of nights." Think about how to add seasonal foods, which typically go on sale, to the menu.

Cooking fresh foods "is not as much work as you think it is," says Ms. Dittrich. "If you're going to make pasta sauce, it's not that much work to cut everything up yourself and make sure it's fresh. And that makes it so much better. I haven't opened a box in a very long time."

With twins to raise, how does she find the time to prepare fresh foods with organic produce? "We just figure it's worth taking the time to do," Ms. Dittrich says. "My mother-in-law is big into organic food. She got me started on looking to see what is in my food. It makes you wonder what it does to your body when you get all those chemicals" in processed foods.

Ms. Dittrich says the family does break from the "all-healthy foods" routine. "I don't go crazy making sure everything is organic and slow, but I do try as much as I can."

Instead of buying hot dogs for her kids, she buys antibiotic- and hormone-free kielbasa from Pederson's Natural Farms in Hamilton, Texas. The label sold her on the product. "I looked at the ingredients and it wasn't a mile long. I could recognize everything on the list. Everything sounded like food, nothing sounded like chemicals," she says.

### **In the freezer**

In the frozen-foods aisles of most grocery stores, vegetarian-food companies use their back stories as a selling tool. For instance, Gardenburger's package boils down the Oregon company's 20-year history. It boasts that no focus-group research was done to redesign package backs: "We decided to just use our own wits and true personality." Consumers are encouraged to e-mail with feedback. "Our continued objective is to develop products that are timely, yet futuristic – made with compassion and a caring consciousness for the earth's fragile resources."

Focus groups were not a factor in designing new packaging for Rich Chicken Stock from Copper Stockpot. Cheryl Binnie, president of the Dallas company, "sat down with her new partners to write copy that explains how good and clean the product is. We really want it to be approachable and fun instead of so serious."

"Our uncompromised quality and enthusiasm for full, fresh flavor borders on obsession," the package notes. Perhaps such statements help sway consumers who are reluctant to spend up to \$4 on a package that makes 2 to 3 cups of stock.

"Stock is not incredibly difficult to make," Ms. Binnie says. "But it takes a lot of time. I'm well aware that you can make it really cheap if you've got a couple of days. And I encourage people to do so. Making stock is enormously satisfying." A lazy winter afternoon with stock simmering on the stove sounds like a Slow Food kind of day. "But then there's real life, where you need chicken stock to make dinner that night and you don't have it," she says.

Fun frozen treats like ice cream and frozen yogurt can make a serious statement about a food issue. Ben & Jerry, the well-known ice cream guys from Vermont, make room on the 2Twisted frozen yogurt container for a word about growth hormones: "We oppose Recombinant Bovine Growth Hormone." Ben & Jerry's milk and cream suppliers must pledge not to treat their cows with it, but not all suppliers of other ingredients can promise the milk that they use is from untreated cows, the container notes. Bovine growth hormones are used to increase milk production; questions have been raised about the effects on the human body and whether the hormones hasten puberty in girls.

## **The big picture**

In an era of fast food and packaged convenience products, people are removed from planting, harvesting and cooking. From a time-starved vantage point on the food chain, it's easy to forget that human choices have ramifications on the natural world.

In the May/June issue of *Utne magazine*, writer Jeremiah Creedon explains what's really bothering Tony Soprano on HBO's series *The Sopranos*: ecological alienation. Mr. Creedon makes the case that man's troubled relationship with nature is a recurring theme on the show. We have become conditioned, he writes, "to take the degraded state of the natural world for granted." This separation from nature results in poor mental health.

Sarah Conn, Ph.D., a lecturer on psychology at the Harvard Medical School, Cambridge Hospital, teaches a course that focuses on ecopsychology and health. Dr. Conn and her husband, Lane Conn, Ph.D., are founders of the Ecopsychology Institute of The Center for Psychology and Social Change ([www.centerchange.org/eco](http://www.centerchange.org/eco)) based in Cambridge, Mass. "Perhaps the most accessible definition of ecopsychology would be: The study of the human place within the living earth, the exploration of the interconnectedness of human experience and the nonhuman natural world," she says.

How does learning the provenance of food intersect with the emerging field of ecopsychology?

"An aspect of knowing ourselves as part of the earth – our ecological selves – is connecting with the source of our food and clothing, becoming aware of the community of people and other living beings who sustain us. Knowing the farmer, the process of farming used, the route from the farm to the table – all of this definitely contributes to the experience of interconnectedness that is so crucial to humans in these times of severe ecological stress."

In addition to the political, environmental and financial impact of what humans choose to eat, there are cultural factors to consider.

"When you're buying from the fast-food nation, you're talking about a monoculture, you're talking about supporting the ideas of disposability, uniformity, the whole idea of food that is fast, cheap and easy," Ms. Waters says. "You're supporting the whole idea of the mall, which is really taking over every aspect of our lives, including architecture and the beauty of our landscapes. It's even taking over our educational system."

"We have to be aware that what seem like innocent enough personal decisions about food are really about the way we want to live our lives as a culture and how we relate to other people on the planet."

