

How Green Is Our Valley

Networks of local food growers, restaurants, and farmers' markets promote the joys of regional cuisine: flavor, prosperity, and the family farm.

by Gary Paul Nabhan

One recent Sunday, I ate dinner at a community center on a Navajo reservation in Leupp, Arizona, not far from the Grand Falls of the Little Colorado River. A heavy fog had settled over the Painted Desert, but as we sat down to our meal, the fog lifted, revealing the dusty soil from which the foods we were about to eat had been grown and harvested. We relished a savory posole stew of hominy mixed with Navajo-Churro lamb that had grazed on native herbs and was imbued with the distinctive taste of wild sage. The stew was served with moist, flavorful blue corn bread and a delectable baked Blue Hubbard squash, a local heirloom pumpkin.

The makings of our feast included some of the 700 "heritage foods" traditionally cultivated across the North American continent: foods that, until recently, had nearly vanished. Now many are being put back on the tables of restaurants and banquet halls near where they are grown and are being used to create distinctive regional cuisines. Our Navajo meal was not an isolated event or some exotic, faddish happening. It was part of a concerted effort to conserve regionally adapted seeds and animal breeds and to renew native and immigrant food traditions here and around the country, from the waters of the Louisiana bayous to the maple forests of Vermont's Green Mountains.

In northern Arizona, where I live, a coalition of conservation and agriculture groups called Renewing America's Food Traditions has been funding events like the Navajo banquet for the past two years. Promoting foods that reflect the region's history and environment is part of a larger goal of encouraging sustainable farming, fostering land preservation, and boosting economic vitality.

Regional culinary treasures -- sometimes called place-based foods -- have found their way into high-end restaurants in Santa Fe, Los Angeles, New York, and other cosmopolitan centers. But on that foggy Sunday night at the Navajo reservation, in an area where poverty rates are more than twice the national average (due in part to a crippling seven-year drought), we sat on folding chairs and ate off card tables in a wind-battered community center. If locally grown foods can bring environmental and economic benefits to this struggling region -- and that is happening -- they can do the same for the rest of the country.

In theory, purchasing food from local producers should be simple. It once was. But today's factory farms funnel their products into a global transportation network that carries the food we eat an average distance of 1,200 miles from the field to the supermarket shelf. These days, we're shipping and flying more and more of our food from overseas. In 2002, for the first time in history, the United States -- long considered the breadbasket to the world -- imported more food than it exported. Despite this troubling trend, it is not easy to persuade grocery store managers and restaurant chefs to change their ingrained buying habits.

Canyon Country Fresh, a campaign that I helped launch as director of the Center for Sustainable Environments at Northern Arizona University, was designed to help overcome this resistance. Our staff seeks out ranchers willing to direct-market their meat and connects them with small-scale slaughterhouses, butcher shops, market managers, caterers, and restaurant chefs. We give restaurants incentives to serve local foods by helping them figure out how to get goods delivered from the farm to their door, by educating their customers about the added value of these foods, and by publicizing their efforts (for free) in regional food directories. In Arizona, John Sharpe of the Turquoise Room in Winslow, and Richard Fernandez of Pesto Brothers Piazza in Flagstaff,

are among more than a dozen restaurant owners and chefs who have created menus using meats and produce from farms located within a few hundred miles of their establishments. Canyon Country Fresh also organizes community gatherings where chefs speak with farmers about freshness and quality assurance -- the things that keep their restaurant patrons coming back for more.

Local food networks yield numerous environmental benefits. Limiting the distance food travels from producer to consumer significantly reduces transportation costs, fossil fuel consumption, and carbon emissions. Smaller, family-run farms tend to adopt sustainable farming practices more readily than do large operations. I raise Navajo-Churro sheep near Winona, Arizona, where most ranchers graze their animals in summer pastures and feed them supplemental hay in the winter, avoiding the nitrate pollution and antibiotic use associated with feedlots. Much of the grass-fed meat raised in our area is not officially certified as organic under the United States Department of Agriculture's new standards, but producers tell me that their animals are raised without any genetically engineered grains in their feed and without growth hormones. My Navajo neighbors know the history of the Churro breed and its importance to their culture. They know each and every one of their sheep by name.

Is there a real market for place-based foods, one that would make this model economically viable? Absolutely. It's already taking shape. Four years ago, the amount of food grown in northern Arizona and marketed in the Flagstaff area generated less than \$20,000 in retail sales annually. In 2004, farmers and ranchers living within 150 miles of the city sold nearly \$500,000 worth of food to our community. Since 1994, the number of farmers' markets in the United States has doubled, to more than 3,700. The natural foods industry -- a vague term that includes local and organic products -- is growing at a healthy rate of about 24 percent a year. Although the "buy local" movement is not ready to eclipse Wal-Mart -- the world's largest food retailer raked in about \$66 billion in food sales in 2004 -- its growth is nonetheless significant.

In northern Arizona, the economic benefits of these initiatives ripple through the community, generating more local wealth (the opposite of the Wal-Mart effect). Several years ago, I invited Francisco Perez, a renowned Spanish chef who had "retired" to the area, to lead a cooking demonstration at the Flagstaff Community Farmers' Market. Consumers raved about his pestos made from wild, locally cultivated heirloom greens and asked him to offer them at the market regularly. He now sells his pestos and sauces in area stores as well. Perez often caters "wild foods" dinners with as many as 200 attendees, exposing the uninitiated to a variety of greens, berries, and grains harvested within a 50-mile range. Perez can't do this alone: He hires at least a dozen local residents to collect his wild-food ingredients.

Not everyone can achieve Perez's success; there is no standard recipe that's guaranteed to work. Ranchers in the Southwest, lobstermen in Maine, and growers of Cracker cattle (a relative of the Texas longhorn) in the Florida swamplands all face different challenges. Gilfeather turnip farmers in Vermont face climatic constraints unlike those that affect producers of pasture-raised heritage turkeys in New Mexico. Each region has to develop a strategy suited to its geography and culinary traditions. The Vermont Fresh Network, for instance, helps restaurants create seasonal menus that feature more root crops and aged cheeses in the winter, and more fresh greens and fruits in the summer. And the Pacific Northwest's Salmon-Safe organization works to connect grocery store managers with salmon suppliers who harvest their fish in ways that reduce stream pollution and foster the resurgence of wild salmon in the Columbia River watershed.

What might this forward-looking food network look like in 10 years? First, many more local foods will be grown, sold, and eaten. Markets in each part of the country will be stocked with cheeses, wines, fruits, and vegetables naturally infused with distinctive flavors unique to that place. Each local food network will celebrate its own version of what the French call *terroir*: the special geographic, geological, climatic, and environmental attributes that affect the very growth, flavor, and fragrance of heritage products. And stronger, more prosperous regional food cooperatives

across the United States will trade with one another for those specialty items -- maple syrup, mesquite flour, smoked salmon, or spices, for example -- that simply can't be produced in other climates.

Most important, we will see a larger portion of every consumer dollar returning to farmers or ranchers rather than to middlemen, allowing producers to reinvest in rural land conservation and restoration. The mayor of Burlington, Vermont, has pledged that 10 percent of city food purchases will come from local sources within the next five years.

Of course, the very best part of such a green future is that it will taste much better and be far more memorable than one in which every meal -- from New York to Los Angeles -- tastes like every other meal. It is unfortunate that it has taken us so long to realize that truly pleasurable eating is so intimately linked with a stronger sense of food democracy. Americans can once again take control of their food future, rather than remain victims of a globalized food system that offers fewer choices and imposes a costly environmental and social burden.