# FOOD for THOUGHT

By Amelia Levin

## How to Make Your Menu Satisfy Your Guests' Palate and Conscience

### TAKE-HOME POINTS

By the time you've finished reading this article, you should be able to:

- ✓ Describe ways to absorb the often additional cost of local, humane and sustainable food sourcing on your menu.
- ✓ Explain what "humanely treated" farm animals really means.
- ✓ Identify sources of education on sustainable seafood.

A few years ago it was "green" this, "local" that, and "sustainable, sustainable, sustainable." For many of us, these were vague terms that meant something about saving the Earth. But underlying what might appear to be no more than a subconscious appeal to our inner hippie is in fact a shift in the way business will be done going forward. Whether it is based on concern about the environment, health and/or food quality, all indications show that an increasing number of U.S. consumers from all backgrounds are thinking about where their food originated and how it was produced. This is not simply a fad.

Whether their focus is supporting farms in their area committed to sustainable agriculture and fair labor practices, buying from meat producers who have raised their animals with good husbandry practices, or sourcing seafood in a way that won't encourage continued overfishing, these consumers are no longer a fringe demographic. They are a growing market force.

One of the challenges for you is to educate yourself and your chefs to get beyond the hype, and learn the facts.

Oran Hesterman, president and chief executive officer of Fair Food Network, recently released a book touching on this concept of creating a more sustainable food system. In "Fair Food," Hesterman writes about the importance of reforming our food system where all residents can have access to healthy, sustainably produced food at fair prices. We shouldn't have to pay extra for this type of food and neither should restaurants, he writes.

"I've had almost 40 years of perspective as a businessman, foundation program director, farmer, scientist — what I was reading about improving our nation's food system was largely written by journalists and celebrity chefs, but I wasn't seeing enough about solutions and what regular people and businesses can do," Hesterman says. "We need many more voices in the policies that drive our systems, including restaurants and the people who go to restaurants."

In the meantime, before those policies and proper funding are in place to make those prices fairer for all, how do you create a more sustainable business while also continuing to make a profit? It's a lot easier than it would seem.

## Local and Seasonal Food

For many restaurants, sourcing foods as close to home as possible, and choosing sustainable farms is more than just a trend or a fad. It's a way of doing business, both to reduce your restaurant's "carbon footprint" and ensure better-quality, better-tasting food for customers. Sourcing local food, aside from cutting down on the need for cross-country trucking, also supports small businesses, including sustainable farmers who are doing their part to protect the Earth and land for future generations.

And, choosing foods grown in accordance with their proper seasons, like squash in the fall and asparagus in the spring, rather than ordering mealy, flavorless tomatoes in the dead of winter, frankly means you're getting better-tasting food. All produce and meats were living things at one time. The longer the time they travel from source to plate, by definition, the more their freshness wanes.

This is Chef Michael Blomberg's sentiment exactly. The executive chef of Lucia at the Gold LEED- (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design-) certified Hotel Andaluz in Albuquerque, New Mexico, has been sourcing locally grown produce and locally produced cheeses, meats and other foods for a decade, starting when he was the chef at Seasons, another area restaurant focused on seasonal New Mexican cuisine.

"Supporting the local community is a big one for us," Blomberg says. "I can get a mass-produced tomato from a distributor that can beat anyone's price, but it's more fun to be a part of our community and experiment with the different foods being grown here."

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The trick, Blomberg says, is to stay organized. That's because sourcing locally can also mean more frequent deliveries and more varied purchase orders. Smaller farms may not always have the transactional systems in place like a larger distributor, so you have to do your part to make sure you can keep good records.

"Make sure all of your invoices have a number, a total, and a signature, make sure they've filled out a W-9, and have good, proper paperwork," Blomberg says.

Blomberg works with more than seven different vendors, including ABQ Produce, a local distributor, for extra fruits and veggies. He receives deliveries twice a week, and on weekends Blomberg will go by the farmers market to see what's in season, get ideas, and pick up a few additional items.

"We get raspberry-ginger jam from Heidi's and peach ham from Nathan's," he says. "We also source produce from Vie de Verde Farms, locally foraged mushrooms from The Mushroom Guy, peppers, squash, cucumbers, beans, sesame seeds, squash blossoms, rattlesnake beans, beats, turnips, carrots, tomatoes, eggplant, melons, and red and green chilies from Cecilia's farm. We get lamb and beef; and sometimes okra, arugula and eggs from Albert and Connie from El Rancho de las Rosas; and certified, organic chickens from Pollo Real."

ABQ sources a lot of produce from farms in the South Valley, where temperatures are slightly hotter and can grow beautiful patty pan squashes, edible flowers, celery root, fennel, leeks, broccoli rabe, radishes, even artichokes. From Old Windmill Dairy nearby, Blomberg will buy goat cheese and mozzarella curd for making and stretching his own creamy, mozzarella cheese. Making more foods by scratch, on top of using local product, only adds to the intrigue for customers, almost like a marketing tool. Showcasing the farms used on menus and on a website also helps develop that image.

We can all talk the local game, but sometimes it's hard to walk it. In Albuquerque, farms are only 20 minutes away so it's not such an issue for farms to drop off their products directly to restaurants. But in bigger cities like Chicago and New York, farms are farther away. Many rely on small distributors to get their product to the restaurant doors, or chefs arrange for larger pickups at the weekly farmers markets. ABQ Produce in Albuquerque works that way — picking up product from area farms and distributing them to restaurants in the city.

Some larger distributors, like Sysco, have been slowly incorporating local farm pickups in their plans, but if that's not available, look for smaller, boutique distributors and ask the farms directly at the farmers market. Or, simply call them up and work out your own system. To get even more local, some restaurants grow some of their own vegetables using indoor hydroponic gardens, or backyard or rooftop gardens. Also in Albuquerque, Golden Crown Panaderia has an indoor hydroponic system for growing tomatoes, crisp peppers and fresh greens for the menu's salads and pizza toppers.

At a slightly higher cost, sourcing locally can be off-putting to some restaurants. But pairing down your menu to include fewer, higher-quality items, and shrinking the portion sizes slightly can help bring back profits. Changing up a menu with the seasons, for Blomberg, is also fun, and a way to keep customers excited to come back. He's found they'll also pay a premium for better-tasting ingredients.

## Humanely Treated Animals

Sourcing animals that have been treated humanely and selecting ranchers with good animal husbandry practices isn't just the right thing to do from a moral and ethical standpoint. It's also the delicious thing to do.

"We just want to serve good food that's raised right, " says Isaac Mogannam, of BurgerMeister, a better-burger chain started by his father Paul in 1999 with seven locations throughout San Francisco and the Bay Area, from kiosks to quick-serve and full-service (Mogannam is also owner of Phat Philly in San Francisco). Since Day 1, Mogannam has been sourcing humanely raised meat for both an ethical and taste standpoint. "We can hem and haw about ethically raised food, but if it tasted like garbage no one would buy it. At the end of the day, this type of food just tastes better."

First, a quick recap on what humanely raised means. There are several animal welfare organizations out there, and some certify certain products as humanely raised. Notable ones include Certified Humane, American Humane Certified, and Animal Welfare Approved.

Humane treatment at its core means providing the animal with adequate access to fresh air, water and nutritious food, and allowing it to exhibit its natural behaviors. According to Kathi Brock, director of strategic partnerships for American Humane Certified, for cows that means access to pasture and the ability to graze, get exercise and stay within its herd. For pigs, that means the ability to root and socialize with other pigs of its age group in an outdoor environment, among other requirements. Chickens need to be able to perch to get away from other chickens, and for sleeping. That means they can't be in cages, pigs can't be in small pens, and cows need room to roam.

Some organizations have stricter requirements than others. Animal Welfare Approved, for example, doesn't allow any form of confinement. All animals must be pastured to be designated humane by their standards. That goes for poultry, pork and beef. Even "enrichment colonies," which are open rooms for birds to flock and perch and considered "cage-free" by marketing and labeling standards but may have limited access to the outdoors.

Mogannam has been sourcing from Niman Ranch since Day 1 when his father opened shop. Niman Ranch, though large, works as the antithesis of a large, commodity meat producer — sourcing from a network of small, sustainable family farms across the country and using only the highest-quality gene pool possible for breeding. Niman Ranch started with beef, but has since expanded into pork products thanks to Paul Willis in Iowa and his growing network of small, sustainable pork farms.

Willis strayed from the beaten path when he got into the pork business decades ago. More than 90 percent of the pork produced in the United States comes from pigs raised indoors, in confinement feeding operations scattered throughout Iowa, mainly. These confinement operations became necessary, Willis said during a trip to his farm outside of Des Moines, mainly in the '80s when consumer demand for leaner meat drove breeders to breed out most of the fat in their pork.

Pigs, which were raised outdoors at the time, lost their fatback, which keeps them warm in the colder months and also acts as their sweat glands in the summer. Without the fat, the pigs couldn't stand the extreme temperatures and had to be moved indoors to controlled environments. Over time, those buildings grew and have been under fire by environmentalists and the federal government for polluting groundwater and causing other harm to the land.

The main barrier to sourcing humanely raised meat, among restaurants, tends to be a fear that the products will cost much more than conventionally raised meat. But, Mogannam shows that it's possible to work within those boundaries with some creativity, strategic planning and collaboration with your purveyor.

Number one, simplify the protein offerings on your menu, Mogannam said. Do you really need three different types of meat, or seven different proteins? The key is to carefully monitor what sells and what doesn't and get rid of the latter, he says. Buying in bulk and being creative in the kitchen helps too. That might mean buying one type of roast beef and using that as a base to make your own pastrami or corned beef. "It's not that hard," Mogannam says. Plus, it can be a great marketing tool to position yourself as a place for artisan, homemade foods, which are catch phrases among consumers right now.

Then there's portion control. "None of us need an 18-ounce steak, or a 16-ounce sandwich," Mogannam says. Most of the time, serving a sandwich piled with extra meat only ends up in the garbage (or in BurgerMeister's case, in the compost bin) because most people can't finish the thing, nor do they want to take it home.

Serve a little less, enough to satisfy, and charge the same amount. You'll save dollars on the backend, Mogannam says.

Beyond portion control, look at different cuts. Mogannam will source Niman Ranch's bacon ends and chop them up for salad and soup toppers. At $5 a pound for center-cut bacon, there's no need to use the beautiful cuts for a chopped salad, he says.

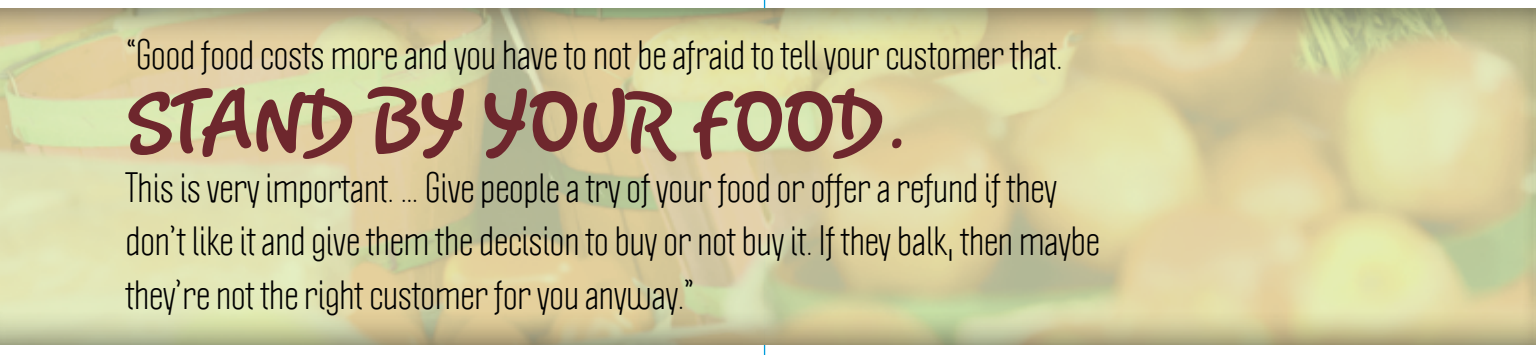
Mogannam uses the same cost-cutting technique for his free-range, pastured chicken from Petaluma Poultry. He's worked with the producer to take those random breast pieces, left over from specific 5-ounce cuts specified by other restaurants, and use those for skewers and salads.

Another way to offset higher costs for higher-quality meat? Plan menu price increases in small, consistent increments year after year, rather than waiting three years and bumping the prices up threefold. "We have a price increase every year, rain or shine," Mogannam says.

That way, BurgerMeister can raise its prices 25 or 50 cents at a time, and sometimes only on specific items, rather than adopt a full dollar or more raise on all items across the board every three years.

"Good food costs more and you have to not be afraid to tell your customer that," he says. "Stand by your food. This is very important. For $9, we serve a half-pound burger made from humanely raised Niman Ranch beef and good-quality cheese with hand-cut fries for $9. I know people who have spent not much less at fast-food restaurants on commodity meat. Give people a try of your food or offer a refund if they don't like it and give them the decision to buy or not buy it. If they balk, then maybe they're not the right customer for you anyway."

Part of getting the right customers and creating value in their mind is education, too. Quick and easy-to-read signage about how you source humanely raised meat can be effective, Mogannam says. BurgerMeister posts messages like that on the main menu board, on takeout menus, and in other signage throughout the stores as well as online.




Beyond humanely raised meat, consider cheese too. How were the dairy cows treated in the process? BurgerMeister in particular goes for Tillamook because they can vouch for the milk farmers' animal husbandry practices and because the company offers a vegetarian option, using vegetarian rennet to make the cheese (rennet is often a byproduct of calves used in veal production).

It's up to you how far you want to take animal welfare. But at the very least, meat from humanely raised animals tends to be of higher quality than commodity meat, even if it costs a little more upfront.

## Sustainable Seafood

Studies have shown the world's seafood supply is dwindling. A United Nations (UN) study predicted that unless we start working to save our supplies through sustainable fishing techniques, nearly all commercial fisheries will be producing at a rate that's 10 percent lower than their normal. As it is, 30 percent of the world's fish stocks are in trouble. This comes at the same time as a demand for more seafood. According to the UN, annual seafood demand will continue to rise to at least 150 million metric tons by 2030.

Aquariums and organizations have been fighting to educate fisheries and work to both preserve and enhance those supplies.

"Chefs can really do their part to help us sustain our seafood supplies," says Kassia Perpich, sustainable seafood manager at Shedd Aquarium in Chicago. "I would encourage any restaurateur interested in sourcing sustainable seafood to look into conservation groups in their region, because more than likely there is an aquarium or environmental nonprofit that can help them select the right fish."

The Blue Ocean Institute on the East Coast, Monterey Bay Aquarium on the West Coast, and the Marine Stewardship Council are just a few examples. In the Midwest, the Shedd Aquarium offers an educational and support program specifically for chefs and restaurants called Right Bite. The program allows restaurants to "join" as members, provided that they commit to offering at least two sustainable seafood options on their menu at all times as well as staff training in seafood sourcing.

In return, Shedd will help restaurants fulfill those requirements by educating them on which species are safe choices and which are potentially risky or very risky. Shedd also offers staff training for restaurants at the aquarium.

Other organizations around the country have programs specifically for chefs and restaurants similar to Shedd's Right Bite program. In addition, many offer on-the-go educational resources, such as handbooks and even text messaging services to indicate whether a particular species is in the "green" zone or risky "red" zone — a safe choice or a risky one. The Marine Stewardship Council certifies certain fish as sustainable.

Beyond that, Perpich recommends developing an excellent relationship with your seafood purveyor. "Let them know sustainability is a priority," she says. "Make sure the purveyor is someone you can trust and ask important questions, such as if a fish has been wild-caught or farmed, and also how it was caught."

Perpich says she often recommends starting with shellfish because the overwhelming majority is farmed in sustainable, environmentally friendly ways. Beyond that, typically wild-caught offers the most sustainable choices and it's safer to choose domestic over imported seafood because the United States has more stringent fishing regulations (e.g., Thailand has come under fire for problematic and illegal shrimp fishing).

"I also recommend that restaurants become familiar with basic types of fishing gear."

Dwindling seafood supplies can be attributed to a few key problems, Perpich says. For one, overfishing, illegal fishing and oil spills are major problems, but so are certain types of nets used. Bottom trolling, often used in shrimp fishing, is the worst net on the list of gear because the nets scrape along the ocean floor, catching all sorts of other types of fish, which can threaten those supplies and damage the natural ecosystem.

Purse seining, on the other hand, is a relatively safe technique used to catch schools of fish without scraping along an ocean floor, Perpich says. This type of fishing uses a long, rectangular net with a weighted bottom and top floated by cork that's run around a school of fish to contain it. At that point, a line along the bottom edge of the net is hauled in, creating a "purse" that captures the school of fish. Any accidental bycatch is thrown back.

Hook and line is another safe choice. Think recreational type fishing but on a commercial level. American Tuna in San Diego uses this technique to catch Albacore tuna. It's labor-intensive, but the most sustainable because there is no bycatch and not all the fish are caught. Trap net fishing is generally safe as well; the technique uses a series of lines to guide fish along or upward to a caged-in trap.

Watch out for certain farmed fish, Perpich says. While there are sustainable fish farms out there, and farmed fish in general helps alleviate pressure on ocean supplies, make sure you're sourcing from a closed-system farm, rather than from a farm set in the ocean in a netted fish pen. The latter type of "farms" often causes fish waste to leach back into the ocean, causing overfertilization and excess algae which, again, throws off natural ecosystems. Studies have linked this type of fishing to an increase in predatory species that feed off algae and also other species of fish.

Salmon, in particular, get into the "red" zone when it's farmed because, historically, most salmon farms are using the less sustainable, ocean-farming method. That's because salmon are born in rivers and swim out to the oceans where they spawn and are easier to net or catch. So many farms have set up their closed systems right in the ocean, which is the least preferred fishing method.

"Alaskan wild-caught salmon is still the best choice right now," Perpich says.

When it comes to salmon, you may have heard a little about genetic modification. Genetically modified salmon, and fish and other food, in general, is still being looked at by the FDA from a food safety standpoint, Perpich says. But from an environmental standpoint, genetic modification can cause problems.

"Basically the concern is a company on the East Coast has developed genetically modified salmon eggs that are a cross between a Chinook king salmon, which is the most prized, big delicious salmon and an Alaskan ocean pout, which is known for having genes that cause continual growth. So by combining both, you're getting large, beautiful salmon with a growth gene that allows the fish to grow and never stop."

That cuts the harvest time in half because where regular salmon take three years to reach their ideal harvest size, now it only takes a year and a half. The environmental concern here is that these fish are always farm-raised, for one, and while in the farm it's very possible for fish to escape and start breeding with wild salmon, thereby affecting the gene pool and threatening natural ecosystems. This fishery has also been accused of sending the salmon to Panama for growing and harvesting, which is beyond the strict U.S. regulations for sustainable fishing.

## Do Your Homework

If you're looking to do your part in saving the world's seafood supplies, do your research. Ask questions, read online, talk to the experts at conservatories and aquariums, and talk to other restaurants that are doing a good job at it. The sustainable selection process becomes that much easier. If a massive chain like McDonald's, which sources 50,000 metric tons of fish per year, can do that research to select the right sources, so can, and should, independents with much smaller production needs. **RS&G**