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FOOD ARTS

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GASTRONOMIC
HIGHS AT SEA

PHENOMENAL
REBIRTH IN PHILLY

CHEFS' NEW RULES
FOR GAME

GREAT ASIAN LOOKS
FOR THE TABLE

CULINARY CAMP-OUT

A growing group of chefs sets out to change the way Americans eat. Julie Mautner reports.

We all want safe, delicious, reasonably priced food. But in late June, more than 100 chefs took time off work, bought airline tickets to San Francisco, spent two hours on a bus getting up to Hopland, paid a \$290 conference registration fee, slept outdoors squished into tiny tents, washed up in communal bathrooms, and sweated through two 90-degree days to find out how we can get it.

The Chefs Collaborative 2000 conference, held on the grounds of Fetzer Vineyard's Valley Oaks Food & Wine Center (and organized by the Boston-based nonprofit Oldways Preservation & Exchange Trust), set out to clarify the issues concerning sustainable agriculture (organic farming, biodiversity, etc.) and lay down a plan of action for chefs who want to get involved.

Of those in attendance, many were already active in the organic farming movement. Some had convened in Hawaii the summer before to draft the founding charter of the Chefs Collaborative, which pledges to "encourage sustainable food choices, good health, environmental conservation, and cultural diversity."

According to Oldways director **Greg Drescher**, who also served as director of the conference, "Chefs Collaborative represents the first time a charter has been written that integrates into one cohesive statement the broad range of concerns that chefs have about the future of food. This gives chefs, collectively, a stronger voice and a unified platform from which to work for better food choices."

One powerful message, repeated over and over in different ways, had an exhilarating effect on the chefs: that they can be a powerful force for change, and that they can, indeed, have an impact on the way food is grown, sold, distributed, and consumed in this country.

A host of health, environmental, and agricultural experts were on hand for panel discussions, but the informal, outdoor setting and the structure of the conference were clearly designed for two-way communication. According to **Dr. Marion Nestle**, head of New York University's Department of Nutrition, Food, and Hotel Management, "Oldways always brings



Top: Fetzer's tent colony. Above: Chefs help themselves to a lunch buffet prepared by culinary director John Ash and his crew, with the bounty of Fetzer's five-acre, organic garden. Photos by George Rose.

together two types of people: those with a theoretical understanding and those with a practical understanding. This was an example of Oldways at its best, and it was one of the best conferences I've ever attended."

To set the tone, keynote speaker **Fred Kirschenmann** of Kirschenmann Family Farms (a 3,000-acre organic grain and livestock operation in North Dakota), gave the group a highly simplified but informative—if one sided—crash course in opposing agribusiness philosophies by dividing them into two "paths": the industrial approach and the sustainable approach.

On path one, the one we've been on since the turn of the century, food is treated as a commodity. Conglomerates, Kirschenmann claims, have almost completely replaced family farms. The focus is on labor efficiency, at the expense of energy efficiency and long-term land efficiency. Food is consumed far from where it's grown—an estimated 1,300 miles on average—using systems that erode the soil and drain aquifers faster than they can recharge themselves. This "industrial" approach to agriculture utilizes a mere 150 of the 80,000 plants available, with 90 percent of all the manufactured foods sold in U.S. grocery

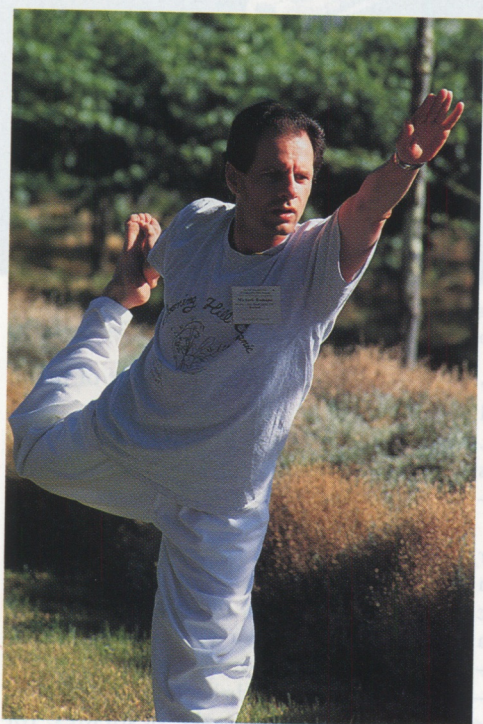
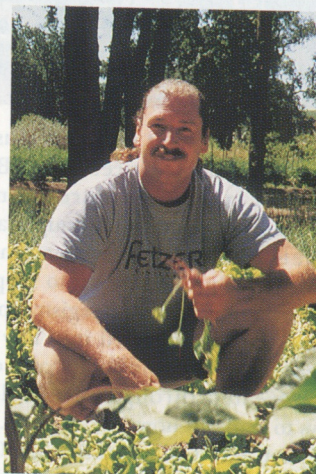
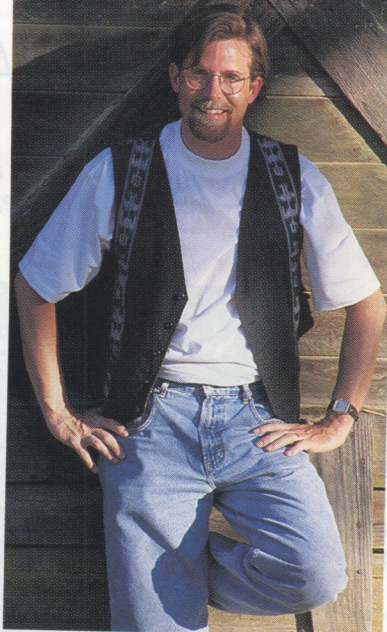
stores derived from just four of them: rice, wheat, soybeans, and corn.

Folks on the kinder, gentler path view food as nourishment, not as a commodity. It's grown and raised closer to where it's consumed and is often traded directly between producer and consumer. Local and regional farms grow a diversity of foods appropriate to the particular ecoclimate, in sync with nature's normal cycles.

So who wouldn't choose path two? The folks who make pesticides, for one. Some multinational food corporations, for another. Furthermore, Kirschenmann lectured, there's simply a lack of infrastructure for sustainable agriculture, as well as a lack of research. And yet, in terms of economic performance, sustainable farms are holding their own.

"Path two could revolutionize the food system," Kirschenmann concluded. "U.S. chefs are leaders of an industry with \$275 billion worth of food-buying clout, and farmers always respond to market incentives."

Next, **Ellen Haas**, the assistant secretary of Food and Consumer Services at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, outlined her agency's efforts to bring nutritious, good-tasting meals to schools nationwide through the four-



Top: Mary Sue Milliken (chef/co-owner, Border Grill, Santa Monica) chats with Jimmy Schmidt; he runs five restaurants and chairs the Chefs Collaborative. Chicago chef Rick Bayless was an event co-chair. *Photos by George Rose. Fetzer's garden director Jeff Dawson. Photo by Julie Mautner.*

Center: Michael Romano (Union Square Cafe, NYC) does his morning yoga. Alice Waters doubled as an expert and a concerned chef/owner. (Her Chez Panisse chef, Catherine Brandel, was an event co-chair.) *Photos by George Rose.*

Bottom: Theo Hoffman was the youngest foodie present; he slept in a playpen outside his parents' tent. They own Savoy (NYC). *Photo by Jon Fox. Jeffrey Alford travels the world shooting food-related photos; his book, Flatbreads & Flavors, will be published this winter. Photo by George Rose.*



part School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children. She went on to discuss the ways in which chefs are helping the U.S.D.A. attain its goals. A series of regional roundtables, for instance, bring chefs and food pros together with local school foodservice directors, and Haas is currently at work on a food-source network that would further these partnerships.

A central theme of the conference was what's being called "the new Center of the Plate," which is to say the heightened presence of fruits, vegetables, grains, legumes, beans, nuts, and seeds in restaurant entrées. "Restaurants have traditionally offered two options," said Drescher. "The meat, fish, or poultry option, and the vegetarian option. We want a third option: dishes that utilize an ounce or two of meat, fish, or poultry with mounds of vegetables, grains, and other plant-based foods."

Drescher emphasized, however, that this in no way needs to mean a loss of flavor. "Look internationally, and to your own ethnic traditions, for culinary models that combine healthfulness with good taste," he suggested. "In India, China, Latin America, the Mediterranean . . . generations of home cooks have developed techniques to transform fruits, vegetables, and grains—and small amounts of meat, fish, and poultry—into spectacular meals."

Other sessions looked at a wide range of related topics: the efforts of various research and public policy groups; the 1995 farm bill; how green markets have revitalized urban areas.

Kenny Ausubel, of the heirloom seed company Seeds of Change (Santa Fe), explained why organic foods are invariably more nutrient-rich than nonorganic. **Ken Cook**, of the Environmental Working Group (Washington, D.C.), cited studies showing that, by age five, kids in the United States have consumed more pesticides than are safe for a lifetime. **Kathleen Merrigan**, of The Henry A. Wallace Institute for Alternative Agriculture (Greenbelt, MD), railed against government concessions to large agrochemical companies and other groups resistant to sustainable growing methods. She implored the chefs to take action. "There are dark forces out there, and I'm really angry," she said. "People are working hard, but bad decisions are still being made. We need to build our machine and get politically active. Chefs Collaborative is the first step."

Alice Waters, Fetzer president **Paul Dolan**, and others challenged the group, however, to be positive, suggesting that a positive health-and-environmental-responsibility message was ultimately more compelling than a negative one.

CARE AND FEEDING OF CHEFS

All panels and meals were held on Fetzer's great lawn, under a huge white canopy. And **John Ash**, the company's culinary director, amazed the group with his meals designed to illustrate the "eat more plants" theme. His larder was Fetzer's five-acre organic garden, a paradisaical spread luxuriant with more than 1,000 varieties of fruits, vegetables, herbs, and edible flowers.

At one lunch buffet, participants fell on the make-your-own focaccia sandwiches, stuffing them full of grilled eggplants and peppers, cheeses, pestos, and just-picked lettuces, then piling plates high from a dazzling buffet of salads: olives baked with garlic and herbs; roasted *cipollini*; cinnamon couscous with grilled squash and roasted corn; tomatoes with basil and bocconcini. The flavors, the freshness—and the pure beauty of the food—blew the group away, and this was not an easy audience.

"I was stunned by the effort and thought that went into the meal," said Nestle. "The lunch illustrated perfectly that healthy food can taste great. I was thrilled by the whole thing."

The first evening after dinner, the group was treated to a magnificent slide show featuring the travel and food photography of Toronto-based conference participant **Jeffrey Alford**. The second evening was spent at a lakeside barbecue, with live Zydeco music and a roaring bonfire.

As the conference came to a close, co-chair **Rick Bayless** urged everyone to go home and spread the word. And while the Chefs Collaborative will continue to work on a national agenda, Bayless reminded the group that all politics are essentially local. "What may be right in one city might not be right for another," he cautioned. The chefs were asked to keep notes on their efforts and share them through the Chefs Collaborative newsletter, which will debut in the next few months.

Meanwhile, the charter has been signed by more than 500 chefs in over a dozen cities. Those not yet involved are encouraged to plan a signing. For more info on the charter or future Chefs Collaborative activities, contact Sarah Powers at Oldways: (617)695-2300, fax (617)426-7696.

WHAT YOU CAN DO, NOW

Want to get involved? Here are some ideas suggested by Oldways and those who participated in Chefs Collaborative 2000.

IN YOUR RESTAURANT

- Realign your menu to reflect current nutritional guidelines. Include more plant-based entrées made with fruits, vegetables, grains, beans, legumes, nuts, and seeds.
- Commit to using organic and sustainable products whenever possible. Explain (verbally, on your menu, on table tents, or on posters) why you use these products.
- Promote biodiversity by asking your farmer to grow lesser-known produce varieties according to your specifications.
- Stage special meals and tastings to familiarize your patrons with new ingredients and techniques.
- Mention your farm's name on your menu.
- Suggest that your customers request organic and sustainable products at their local grocery stores.

IN THE POLITICAL ARENA

- Familiarize yourself with the 1995 farm bill, which represents the next major opportunity to affect agriculture policy. (Farm policy is reviewed every five years). Working with Chefs Collaborative, Oldways will be developing background materials and a position statement on key provisions of the bill.
- Together with chefs in your area contact your senator and/or congressman and ask them to inform you, as a group of community leaders, about their positions on the farm bill and other agricultural issues. Remember your collective purchasing power and clout.
- Promote the new Center of the Plate principles with various agricultural boards and commodity groups. Offer to develop recipes. A list of these groups can be obtained from IFEC: (914)452-4345, fax (914)452-0532.
- Contact these groups for more info on current agricultural issues and ask how you can get involved: Environmental Working Group (202/667-6982); Public Voice (202/371-1840); Mothers and Others for a Livable Planet (212/242-0010); the Wallace Institute for Alternative Agriculture (301/441-8777).

IN YOUR COMMUNITY

- When you find a supplier that you like, share his name with other chefs.
- Band together with other chefs to buy sustainable produce in larger quantities.
- At benefit appearances, choose dishes that illustrate the Center of the Plate principles and make healthy cooking "hot."
- Support school and municipal gardens.
- Help organize a local farmers' market: in a park, in your backyard, in your parking lot.
- Offer to develop recipes that farmers can hand out at green markets and farm stands.
- Offer to do cooking demos at your green market or grocery store.
- Write—and talk—about sustainable agriculture in the media. Don't wait for reporters to come to you.