

# WE ARE WHAT WE EAT

## FOOD IN SAN DIEGO COUNTY

BY LAUREN DUFFY

“Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are,” Anthelme Brillat-Savarin proclaimed in 1826. Nearly 200 years later we tend to paraphrase that as “you are what you eat.”

But to identify what we eat these days isn't easy. Food is often flown in from thousands of miles away, products are often packaged misleadingly and industrial processing often means that one product involves ingredients from dozens of unidentifiable sources.

To truly be able to know what we eat – and, it would follow, to know what we are – we have to establish a connection with our food.

With that goal in mind, I set out to find myself.

“The most important question is, what's to eat? Everything flows from that,” Barry Logan tells me one morning at the Hillcrest Farmers' Market. Logan is the owner of La Milpa Organica, a fruit and vegetable farm in Escondido. I look over at the customers ogling his leafy greens and other organically grown produce. He sees my gaze, and explains. “They have a bite of food off our table and their eyes light up in surprise: ‘I didn't know food could be like this.’”

“On the farm, when we are harvesting cilantro you can smell the cilantro from half the farm away,” he explains, as if the greens on the table are nothing in comparison. “Living food has a certain life force. Every step away from the garden . . . you lose some of this.”

To sample some of Logan's greens is to experience something unrivaled. If I buy a bag of his salad mix on a Sunday, I will crave it again by the end of the week. “The thing about this food,” he tells



me, “it has a high nutrition density. We feed the soil very well.”

I catch up with Jay Porter, who owns The Linkery restaurant in North Park. The Linkery is, in Porter's words, a “neighborhood place, but also committed to real agriculture – real food by real people.” The restaurant's commitment to transparency and sustainability is evident on its menus, which display not only the day's offerings but a list of the sources of the dishes' ingredients, in a section called “Meet Your Meal.” The menus, Porter explains, aim to tell customers “here's who made your meal, and that's not just the chef's name.”

Porter is one of a growing number of area restaurateurs who make a conscious effort to bring awareness to the sources of their ingredi-

ents, and to help patrons connect to their food. Porter personally spends a good amount of time seeking out new ingredient sources, often learning as he goes. His online blog “Casing the Joint” chronicles his efforts (it can be found at [Porterx.com/blog](http://Porterx.com/blog)).

There is a “fundamental/essential difference in food that is cared about from soil to plate,” he tells me. For lack of a better term, he calls this “Vitamin K,” likening it to a vitamin that is inherent in natural sources but that “doesn't grow in foods that are just a commodity.”

Nancy Casady, general manager of People's Organic Foods Market in Ocean Beach, the only food co-op in San Diego, feels similarly. She explains that the goal of People's is to “offer food that is most nutritious, which is organic and consciously grown.” The co-op sources “from people paying attention to whole ecosystems.” When I wonder whether that is a hard standard to main-

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*Barry Logan of La Milpa Organica*

tain, Casady assures me it is not: “There’s no shortage of food of this quality.”

If there is no shortage of this food, I wonder, why isn’t it everywhere?

Mel Lions, co-founder of San Diego Roots Sustainable Food Project, remembers growing up in San Diego when Mission Valley was farmland. The fertile valley was “where we feed the city.” Now, he compares, we are “sourcing food from elsewhere.” He remembers the shift: “My friend the farmer called me to say, ‘They’re selling the land my farm is on.’ It made it personal for me.” He continues, “It’s not just one farm. It’s a trend. Farmers can’t afford to farm.”

Barry Logan remembers trying to save Good Faith Farm, an organic farm that ended up losing its lease because property values skyrocketed. Seven years ago, the owners of the land sold to developers and the farmers left San Diego. They moved to Northern California. That’s when Logan began to farm. “I inherited a legacy from them,” he explains.

Mary Hillebrecht, manager of the Pacific Beach Farmers’ Market, the second-oldest farmers’ market in San Diego, notices the trend as well. She describes the differences between now and when the market started in 1988. “We’ve lost several good farmers. Some quit farming. Some quit going to market.” She cites issues such as the cost of fuel and the fewer families who are getting into farming. “It’s nearly impossible to replace them.”

It’s a startling realization. Mel Lions points out the disconnect we have with our current food sources. “Most of what we grow is shipped out and most of what we eat is shipped in.” He points out the danger of this situation by citing the Rodney King riots in Los

Angeles, when shipping was shut down for several days and Southern California got a glimpse of what would happen if a similar situation were to occur in the future. If we can’t grow food ourselves, he suggests, “Our survivability is on a frayed string. We need to amplify the importance of growing food locally.”

“I do this out of service to feed people. Our system is so broke and unhealthy,” says Logan, who got into farming just seven years ago. “I’m in awe of this whole process. It takes a village, you know? I’m just part of this process.”

It isn’t the income that keeps him farming, Logan says. “We don’t make any money. This doesn’t pay health care. This doesn’t pay minimum wage. This doesn’t provide security for when we get old. It provides a great lifestyle. A great relationship – with Gaia, with plants, with customers. But there is no reward in

capitalism, in the marketplace.” His farm, he says, makes enough to sustain itself but not to provide for anything else. “It’s not an easy dance.”

Despite increasing problems for farmers, eaters are becoming more aware. All around us are San Diegans who care about their food. They are people of all types and backgrounds—business owners, chefs, farmers, teachers, others. They have all come to find food important in different ways.

Some have come for taste. Mel Lions remembers when he realized that “the best-tasting food is close to home.” He also stresses that “eating is an environmental act.”

Some have come through botany. Julia Dashe, Lions’ co-founder of San Diego Roots and an organic gardening teacher, explains that she “came to love food through gardening, through the educational aspect.”

Still others have come from a moral or ethical perspective. Porter’s interest is a “classic simple story.” He started with a basic interest in food and a desire to learn. The more he learned, the more demanding he became, until he was committed to fully sustainable, ethical sources. It became a mission for not just him but for the restaurant. “Being told it couldn’t be done was good inspiration.”

Logan thinks we are collectively starting to have a consciousness about our food. “We are starting to ask, what does *organic* mean? What does *sustainable* mean? What are *food miles*? Where does our food come from? Where does our water come from?”

Greg Koch, owner of Stone Brewery and World Bistro and Gardens, agrees that there is a responsibility to seek out good ingredients. “It stems from the basic tenet: ‘What if you knew?’ And then it’s implied, ‘What would you do?’” As the owner of a



*Jay Porter of The Linkery*

business that serves food, Greg feels “a moral obligation to learn about food” before he serves it to his customers.

Jeff Jackson, executive chef at A.R. Valentien at The Lodge at Torrey Pines and chef liaison for the San Diego Slow Food Convivium, thinks that seeking out good food is “the logical thing to do. We’re nothing without the ingredients.” He stresses the importance of using the ingredients around us: “You have to cook within the means of your environment. That’s how cuisines are developed.”

At A.R. Valentien, Jackson has spent years developing a cooking style according to what’s available. “Food tells us what to do with it,” he explains, adding that rather than starting with a recipe and searching for ingredients, his priorities are to “get ingredients, then put it together.”

Mel Lions tells me, “San Diego is really blessed—we can grow almost anything.”

“We’re in an area with variety,” Jeff Jackson observes.

They’re right. According to the 2006 San Diego County crop report, San Diego is home to 6,565 farms, across 315,296 acres of farmland. We have the second-highest number of farms per county in all of the United States. We grow nearly 200 agricultural products, in over 30 microclimates. In 2006 we grew 121,150 tons of avocados, \$36,396,428 worth of strawberries, \$88,378,386 of tomatoes and \$23,609,334 worth of mushrooms.

We’re not just about quantity, though. The county has 317 registered organic growers with over 140 organic crops; 92 percent of farms are family owned and 63 percent are under nine acres; 77

percent of farmers live on their land.

And our food doesn’t always come from farmers. San Diego County has at least 20 community gardens, as well as countless other edible landscapes. Factor in herbs on windowsills, fruit trees lining yards, and rooftop, balcony and patio planters, and we start to sound rich.

Where do we find it all?

Farmers’ markets are a great place to start. There are 26 certified farmers’ markets in San Diego County, many of which are open year round. Shopping at markets allows consumers to directly communicate with the growers who are producing their food. And farmers are eager to get into conversations with clients.

Mary Hillebrecht started the Pacific Beach Farmers’ Market back in 1988. It was the second San Diego area farmers’ market, after Valley Center and before Hillcrest. Many of the farmers at the Pacific Beach market – which now also goes to Coronado on Tuesdays and Downtown on Thursdays (May–November), have been with her since day one. “Every Saturday morning for

20 years,” she says with a smile.

According to Hillebrecht, many farmers “are cognizant that they have to do a lot of educating, a lot of talking.”

Peter Schaner, owner of Schaner farms in Valley Center and one of the original vendors at the Pacific Beach market, says his favorite part about selling at a market is interacting with those for whom he grows food. He likes that “people come and ask questions,” and that he can not only share good produce but can be “teaching people about different things. Telling them how to use it.”

“Supporting farmers within 100 miles is the whole circle: I grow, I give you, you eat, you tell me.” The loop circles back on itself when Schaner uses customer feedback to help decide what to grow the following season. It’s a cycle that goes missing from our lives when we adopt big-box grocery store habits.

Julia Dashe, who volunteers at the Hillcrest Farmers’ Market, also emphasizes the connection at farmers’ markets: “It’s all there: farm, people, community, food.”

Barry Logan points out that buying directly from a farmer is all about “trust. Can you trust who’s growing your food?” Logan is so open with his customers that he eagerly proclaims, “I want my customers to put their hands in my soil.”

Perhaps the best way to get close to your food is to visit where it’s grown. Logan’s farm, La Milpa Organica, hosts a potluck and a movie on the third Saturday of each month. “Last week we had 55 people. I’m really in awe of this whole process.”

Dashe hopes that San Diegans will look around and see their options. “Look and see where we live. Find out if there’s a garden,

or land, a vacant lot, someone's yard. Shop at farmers' markets. Adopt a farmer. Go check out a farm. Get a garden started at your school. And of course, cook – become intimate with your food.”

Many restaurants, too, are encouraging consumers to forge a connection. “There is a strong educational component to what we do,” explains Porter of The Linkery. “When I go to a farm, I am a proxy for all the people who eat here. I learn as much as possible so I can share.”

Jeff Jackson too, sees his role in showing clients they can get closer to their food. Celebrate the Craft, an annual event hosted at The Lodge at Torrey Pines, was founded to “introduce clientele to the sources of their food.” Jackson and his staff invite farmers from nearby, put them up in the hotel, and in exchange ask them to bring whatever they are growing that season. The event then pairs a single chef with a farmer to spin the farmer's goods into an inspired meal. It is as intimate a relationship as you can demonstrate between soil and plate.

So what *will* are we striving toward?

“An urban core surrounded by rural area – this is the model,” explains Porter. “Independent processors, integrated farms.” And not just for produce. He wants to see the return of meat and dairy to San Diego.

As for produce, Lions thinks growing food doesn't have to be pushed to the city limits. “People have yards – you can grow a lot of food in a yard.”

Community gardens, too, are attractive. Lions paints a picture of a future where growing food is a communal act. He would like to see one lot on every block become the block's shared property: “Our approach to urban development should be converting vacant lots to community gardens, supporting the concept of sustainability as a community goal.”

And he thinks anyone can do it. “The information to grow food is in the seed.” Much of farming is “getting out of the way. Not overdoing it.”

Logan echoes this: “Plants are a lot smarter than we give credit. Anybody can be successful in growing. A seed has all the information it needs. We just need to nurture it.”

He, too, would like to see “fully sustainable permaculture and edible landscapes.” “Everybody should be growing something, and to share part of what they grow with their neighbors.”

He knows we can do this. During World War II, our government started the Victory Garden program, which encouraged households to grow their own food to allow more of the industrial food supply to be sent overseas to troops. American gardeners supplied 40 percent of the country's produce – and we could do it again, Logan believes.

His advice is simple, really: “The thing about San Diego is you can grow just about anything here. It's less important what you grow, just grow something. Then share it. It's always important to share what you grow. That's how you build communities. That's how you know your neighbors.”

“It's about more than eating. It's about social networks and relationships.”

Mary Hillebrecht's vision of the future depends on these relationships: “If we can generate local support, I think we'll be fine. If not, we won't.” She would like to see farmers be able to “build a base of people who will support us.”

Right now, she explains, it's “nice to be part of a community. We know each other; we help each other. If we can keep these type of ties going, we will still have markets.”

It seems to be the echoing message: community.

It looks like that's what Brillat-Savarin would say we are: community. To be able to eat the food we create around us, we have to be the food. We have to support it, to nurture it, to see that it survives into the future. We have to work together, to ensure that the land we need to grow our food is being used to do just that. We have to buy from the farmers who are working to keep us fed, and the farmers, in turn, have to listen, to help grow what we need. As Peter Shaner explains, it is a whole circle. We are what we eat.

*Lauren Duffy is a San Diego based writer and editor who has had a passion for food almost as long as she has had a passion for words. She celebrates the pleasures of both on her website, [www.shootingstarsofthought.com](http://www.shootingstarsofthought.com)*

