

The Value of Organics

How are chefs incorporating organics into their menu mix?

By Katie Ayoub

In foodservice, the moral compass is decidedly pointed toward sustainability. Sourcing local and going green—two of sustainability's largest paradigms—are not only movements, but effective branding tools. But where does that leave organics? Have local and sustainable trumped yesterday's golden child? Should they? Or are they all part of that great cosmic community that puts flavor and sound stewardship above the bottom line?

It seems there's been a national shaking off of our collective coat. So many food-

related directives, initiatives and values were lathered on. After the reflexive shimmy, like a dog escaping its bath, we're left with ones that have real sticking power.

So, although local and sustainable are working their way onto the public's radar, organics is firmly established there. More tangible than a handful of statistics about how organics is thriving is a simple look at supply and demand. Take a walk through the grocery store and look at the real estate given over to organic product. It's become such a big player that now

agribusiness is slicing into that fat, wholesome pie, too.

But what drives chefs to menu organics? Ask five chefs that very question, and chances are, you'll get five distinct answers.

Superior flavor and ethical imperative were two of the most common answers

These complimentary radishes, served with a shaker of salt at Michael's Genuine Food & Drink, are sourced locally, but are not organic. The organic radishes are too cost prohibitive and scarce.



we received from chefs interviewed for this article. Surprisingly, branding the restaurant as organic was actually avoided by many. We purposefully did not speak to chefs such as Nora Pouillon of Restaurant Nora and Asia Nora in Washington, D.C., or Jeff Hyland of Ukiah Brewing Co. in Ukiah, Calif. Both helm certified-organic restaurants, and brand their restaurants accordingly. Our goal was to gain the perspective of chefs who incorporate organic product into their menu mix, but pick and choose prudently to make it work for their concept and their bottom line.

John Elkhay

Citron Wine Bar & Bistro in Providence, R.I., is chef/owner John Elkhay's latest concept, which joins 10 Prime Steak & Sushi, XO Steakhouse and Big Fish. (Two more restaurants, Chinese Laundry and Rick's Roadhouse, are slated to open this fall.)

Citron features "new millennium" cuisine, and serves all-natural meats, free-range poultry and locally grown, organic produce and grains whenever possible. That "whenever possible" is key.

"We used organic salt and pepper when we opened [in August 2006]," says Elkhay. "But we couldn't get our cost below 40%, so we toned that down. For main components of a dish, we fight for it to be organic. If it's a background ingredient, like lemongrass in a broth or shallot in a sauce, then maybe not."

Branding of Citron doesn't tout a commitment to organics. Indeed, the

restaurant's pledge to organics and locally sourced foods is very much used as a secondary marketing tool.

"I was so nervous about relaying what Citron is," Elkhay says. "I understand what restaurants are—they have a vibe. I wanted people to fall in love with the food, and then tell people about the commitment to organic. You want word of mouth. I don't think people understand what organic is. I didn't want them thinking Citron was a hippy-dippy restaurant."

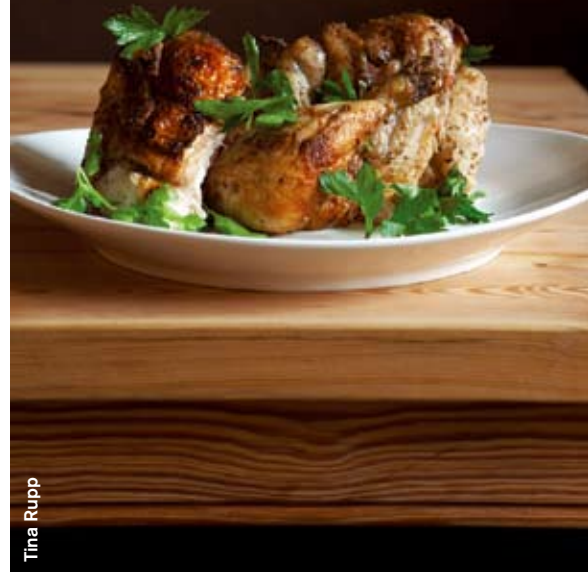
Apart from word-on-the-street tactics, Citron conveys its passion for organics and sustainability with table tents and menu language. Although some menu items call out "organic," others that are organic don't boast that distinction.

"You have to make menu language rhythmic and poetic," says Elkhay. "We're in the entertainment business. If you call out all of your ingredients or components on a plate, then it becomes redundant."

Some organic items are prohibitively expensive. "Organic meats are crazy expensive, but we found a great alternative," he says. "All our meats are all-natural. We won't compromise there."

There's also a tolerance for what diners will pay. "You have to respect that price ceiling. People just don't want to pay \$19 for a sandwich. You don't want to alienate your customer," says Elkhay.

There are items that he says must be



Tina Rupp

This local, free-range half rotisserie chicken with a Back Forty spice rub showcases tavern fare with sustainable flair.

organic. "Organic coffee is like floating on air—such great flavor," he says. "Organic, local milk is another must for us here."

How does he balance cost? "We're working on that. That's the \$99 question." Portion control is one part of that equation. Another is familiar to most successful restaurateurs—good menu mix. "We make smart choices for organics, where we get the most bang for our buck—eggs, coffee, tomatoes, for example," says Elkhay. "I may not buy organic parsley if the local parsley is beautiful. We sell a lot of cocktails—that helps offset the cost. We use secondary cuts of meat and local seafood when we can."

Finding the right menu mix and balancing cost at Citron is an ongoing process. "We're taking what we're learning from

Citron, and retrofitting it into our other restaurants," he says. "We use some organics at XO, but we don't talk about it. It's such a hip-hop spot, we don't want to change its brand."

"At Citron, organics are a part of a bigger puzzle, a bigger obligation to sustainability. To green. To local. It all works together," says Elkhay.

Gilbert Langlois

Chalkboard is a small, family-owned restaurant in a Chicago neighborhood. All of its meats and poultry are 100% organic, and its overall menu is approximately 50% organic.

"We're trying to raise our child with food that contains no growth hormones," says Gilbert Langlois, chef/owner of this 62-seat upscale restaurant that serves American food. "We're in a neighborhood with lots of new families, lots of children. Our customers don't mind paying a little extra for that organic product. If people trust where it comes from, then they don't mind paying for it."

Indeed, one of the most popular items on the menu is a fried chicken breast served with fresh collard greens, mashed potatoes and white-sausage gravy. "We charge 23 dollars, which seems steep to me, but people don't have a problem with it because they know it's a clean protein," he says. "The only way to keep yourself alive when you use organic or natural foods is to charge appropriately."

Smart menu design still plays a role though. "In the summer months, prices come down, and in the winter months, we serve a lot of braised secondary cuts of meat," says Langlois.

The ever-rotating menu is displayed on, of course, a chalkboard. The language reflects the restaurant's value system—calling out terms such as "wild caught" and "organic food co-ops."

Chalkboard's clientele seems to be in tune with such phrases, and places high value on them. "Even though I have a savvy clientele, there is so much confusion out there as to what's good and what's bad," Langlois says. "They can come here and trust that they're doing the right thing."

Peter Hoffman

The Back Forty in New York opened in October 2007. With a brand-spanking-new

Peter Davis at Henrietta's Table in Cambridge, Mass., sources some of his produce from this organic farm on Martha's Vineyard, Mass.

perspective, its business model marries casual dining with conscientious purchasing.

Although this neighborhood tavern is new, its chef/owner is a well-established restaurateur and advocate of sustainable cooking. Peter Hoffman is also chef/owner of Savoy Restaurant, operating now for 17 years in Manhattan. He also served as the national chair from 2000 to 2006 for Boston-based Chefs Collaborative, an organization dedicated to the promotion of sustainability.

Although organics is part of the concept's value system, it's not the be all and end all. "We look to buy from local farmers and producers," says Hoffman. "Some of them are certified organic, some of them aren't. But we learn where our food comes from. We learn about the values of the person raising that food."

Although establishing relationships with local purveyors is the best way to ensure that the growing practices reflect your values, that can't always happen. "But if it's not local, we have a direct buying relationship with the purveyor," he says.

The Back Forty uses citrus products on the menu, but can't source them locally. "We have a relationship with a citrus orchard," says Hoffman. "They happen to be organic, but we know that they pick the fruit at their peak. You've never tasted anything like it, and that's worth it to us."

But organics isn't always the highest value for Hoffman. "The legal definition



is so narrow. In dairy, organic milk can be produced by cows fed an organic grain, but they never leave the barn. That's not best practices to me."

He follows a value system of local, seasonal and best-management practices. "But to follow that value system, the rubric of 30% food cost just doesn't apply," he says. "We're going to run a higher food-cost percentage than other taverns and burger joints, but we believe overall the whole package is going to be a profitable one."

Hoffman is careful in how he conveys that commitment to his clientele. "People don't come to the restaurant to have a lecture in food-and-ag policy," he says. "But through stories that get written about the restaurant, they get a sense of our purchasing values. That has a draw for some."

Peter Davis

Personal relationships with farmers is the foundation of food purchasing at Henrietta's Table in Cambridge, Mass. Although committed to the best regionally grown and organically grown product, certified organic doesn't hold much sway.

"That's why the relationship is so important. I buy from both certified-organic and those who use organic practices," says chef/owner Peter Davis. "Some farmers may not have the time or money to get certified, but they implement sound, sustainable methods on their land."

Davis also weighs the value of organics versus ecological footprint. "Something

sustainable grown here has to be better for the environment than an organic something flown in from California," he says.

He believes customers do see value in organic and sustainable and local. "Those words carry a lot more clout than they used to," says Davis. "People are more aware, or want to be more aware, of how food is grown. They do understand the bigger picture."

Michael Schwartz

At Michael's Genuine Food & Drink in Miami, organics play a supporting role, but again, the star is local and sustainable. "You won't see the word "organic" on my menu," says chef/owner Michael Schwartz. "I don't think people care that much in Miami—it's more about what's trendy than organic, and I don't want to force organics down anyone's throat."

Schwartz offsets the cost of local and organic product by going to farmers' markets regularly instead of having product delivered through vendors.

"Buying local, I know I'm getting fresh product," he says.

Organic product is menued at Michael's Genuine when it makes sense to Schwartz. "I encourage organics for the right reasons: better flavor, good practices." So, for his complimentary bar snack of radishes served with salt? Local, but not organic. "It would be too expensive, and the farmer just wouldn't have enough for me," he says. But for a



Simon Hare

Michael Schwartz's crispy sweet and spicy glazed pork belly with kimchi and crushed peanuts is garnished with organic pea shoots.

salad of homestead organic avocados? He garnishes with organic radish sprouts and dresses the salad with a champagne vinaigrette made with local honey.

"Our philosophy is to buy right, and treat the products with respect. We're great shoppers and skilled cooks."

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