

Biodiversity-friendly menus: Connecting kitchens and ecosystems

In partnership with the Wild Farm Alliance

Setting food within its context

Could broccoli and the Clean Air Act have much in common? Grilled hanger steak and clean water? How about risotto and habitat conservation? The extent to which they are tied might surprise you.

Chefs Collaborative has partnered with Wild Farm Alliance (WFA) to help make the links between cuisine and our environment more explicit for our members. WFA works to communicate the ways in which farming relies on and supports wild Nature. They argue that agriculture need not exist at the expense of degrading the surrounding ecosystems. Taking the long view, WFA believes that food production cannot endure apart from a healthy landscape.

By further understanding the ways that food and ecosystems are connected, Collaborative members will deepen their ability to make informed purchasing decisions. And by adding this perspective to the national dialogue about the U.S. food system, our members will continue to influence the public's food choices.

In the field: Farming with the wild

Conservation-based farming is based on the idea that an interconnected relationship between agriculture, native species, and wild habitats like grasslands, forests, and wetlands will broadly benefit our ecosystem as well as our food system. **Farming with the wild works to:**

Restore ecosystem function: By looking at the larger ecological landscape, we can more clearly see nature work to support agriculture: raptors keep rodent populations under control; native habitat supports wild bees and predatory insects; riverine habitats filter and provide clean water; and an army of microbes rebuilds soil fertility.

Encourage conservation and restoration: Understanding the benefits of biodiversity—including protection from pest outbreaks and invasive organisms, detoxification of pollutants, and the prevention of erosion—encourages farmers to restore elements of wildness to their farms. This might take the form of planting a diverse pasture of native grasses, engaging in streamside habitat rehabilitation, or leaving marginal areas of the farm uncultivated.

Protect soils: F.D.R. once said, "A nation that destroys its soils destroys itself." Cultivating land too steep or wet, or sowing the same crops in the same place for multiple seasons significantly contributes to soil erosion, compaction, and depletion. Farming practices that leave marginally productive lands for wildlife habitat, and use cover crops and compost to feed the soil, help to protect and improve rather than deplete this irreplaceable asset.

Clean up our water and air (and ease climate change): According to the EPA, agriculture is responsible for 70% of the pollution entering our country's waterways. But altering farm management practices like maintaining native vegetation can improve water quality through the filtering action of grasses and other plant matter. The presence of permanent vegetation on farms can also aid the fight against global warming as those plants extract carbon from the air and sequester it in the soil.

Prioritizing purchasing decisions:

When sourcing products for their kitchens, chefs can work directly with local farmers and ask them about their stewardship practices or refer to a range of eco-labels to help guide their choices.

Salmon Safe: This Northwest label certifies farms based on their use of practices that safeguard local waterways. The focus on native salmon reflects a broader concern for the restoration of urban and agricultural watersheds on which this species relies.

www.salmonsafe.org

Predator Friendly: To achieve this certification, cattle and sheep producers sign an affidavit pledging not to use any methods of lethal control (i.e. shooting, trapping, poisoning) to protect their stock against native predators.

www.predatorfriendly.com

Bird Friendly: The Audubon label authenticates that coffee was grown on farms providing a canopy of trees as habitat for birds, ensuring the long-term survival of many of our visiting migrants. The coffee, also referred to as shade grown, is managed organically.

www.auduboncoffeeclub.com

Organic: Currently, organic certification verifies that the farmer does not rely on external inputs like petroleum-derived fertilizers and pesticides to produce crops. It also guarantees that no added hormones or genetic engineering went into the food.

www.ams.usda.gov/nop

Looking ahead: Promoting resilient ecosystems

With the majority of our land tied up in agriculture, the way we grow our food can play a vital role in large-scale conservation plans. Under industrial agriculture, efficiency and productivity are often defined in terms of immediate profit. Instead, farming with the wild takes a long-term approach to land stewardship, one with benefits that can last for generations. **This long-term approach works to:**

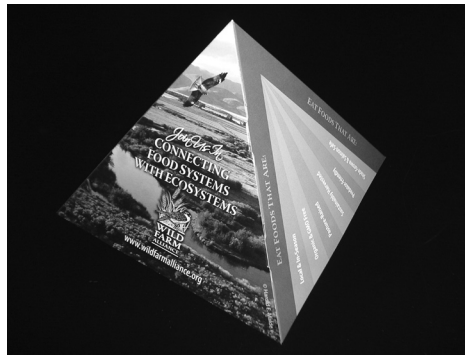
Aid the biodiversity crisis

Though industrial agriculture has been to blame for about 40% of all U.S. protected species being listed, it also has the opportunity to protect rare species and habitats. Unused areas of the farm can serve as habitat for native plants and animals. Even modest efforts like installing a native plant hedgerow along a fence line can increase a farm's diversity quota. Larger endeavors, like setting aside portions of farmland in conservation easements, can ensure available habitat for the large percentage of threatened and endangered species that rely on privately held land for sustenance and shelter.

For many farmers who incorporate elements of wild Nature into their operations, these practices have become second nature. "I respect the web of life present on our farm," says Judy Low of Molino Creek Farming Collective in Davenport, California. "There's an interdependent relationship between plants and insects that's part of a balance, and that's something I value."

Improve wildlife conservation efforts

The wild plants and animals living on and around farms have much to gain or lose, depending on the direction of management decisions. With only around 10% of the continental U.S. in protected areas, the needs of predators and others must be met outside these fragmented reserves. Wildlife corridors provide 'paths to freedom' through farmlands, offering safe passage between areas of undisturbed habitat and ensuring a healthy exchange of genetic material between populations. Farmers can discourage predators from taking livestock by grazing large animals with small ones, using electric fences, and using guard dogs. After coyotes



CC and WFA have developed a chef's toolkit for use in restaurants based on the WFA food pyramid above. To request a toolkit and find out more about WFA, visit: www.wildfarmalliance.org/chefstoolkit.htm

kept taking his chickens, Jim Dunlop of TLC Ranch in Watsonville, California got a dog to guard the livestock. "Since then, I don't really have predator issues," says Dunlop. "Sure, I lose a hen here and there, but to me it's just a cost of doing business."

Enhance food security

Ireland's potato blight and famine taught a painful lesson on the dangers of monoculture. Similarly, the Dust Bowl left us reeling from the fallout of miscomprehending ecological processes. These experiences demonstrated that simplifying the landscape to rows upon rows of one crop increases risk and vulnerability. Smaller-scale, diversified farm systems have the built-in safety net that comes with diversity, where losses in one corner do not mean devastation across the board.

Preparing and consuming food produced regionally, in addition to defraying a number of environmental costs, makes for a safe and secure food supply. Problems with contamination are easier to track and simpler to prevent. In addition, cultivating a relationship between a farmer and an end user restores a human element to a process often brokered by industry. Procuring food directly from the farmer who grew it can ensure a safe and accountable food supply more than buying produce examined by a fleet of food safety inspectors.

Chefs and consumers: In support of conservation-based agriculture

Farming methods that incorporate the essentials of healthy soil, clean water, biodiversity, pollination, and pest control foster societal health and

make good economic sense. When we realize the connections to wild Nature that are necessary for turning seed to fruit, we see beyond the food in front of us—the food that wouldn't be here without the support of birds and bees and countless soil microorganisms. Hardly an isolated entity, agriculture functions within and interacts with the surrounding ecosystem.

As chefs and consumers continue to identify the links between food production and ecosystem functions, they will recognize that food can't be manufactured in a vacuum. By understanding the value of farming with the wild, chefs can help support a long-term relationship between food preparation and healthy land.

By extending those values to the kitchen, chefs translate their support for ecologically attentive farmers and vibrant farms into higher-quality food in their restaurants. "Sustainability and biodiversity should be the goal of everyone: businesses, farmers, and consumers," say Paul and Cindy Geise of Ristorante Avanti in Santa Cruz, California.

For the shared values of Chefs Collaborative and Wild Farm Alliance to gain momentum, responsible farmers and responsible patrons should remain committed to supporting good land stewardship and sustainable purchasing decisions. Chefs, with their influential voice in the food production conversation, can spark dialogue towards a food harvest that preserves ecosystems in all their marvelous complexity.

Chefs Collaborative communiqués: Information to promote sustainable restaurant operations.

To receive these and other educational tools, become a member and supporter of:

Chefs Collaborative

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Or join online at:
www.chefscollaborative.org

We welcome your comments and suggestions. Please send ideas to info@chefscollaborative.org