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Palo Alto Online News

Uploaded: Thursday, April 26, 2007, 4:33 PM

Eco-friendly eating

Two Palo Altans serve up 'The Global Warming Diet'

by Janet Silver Ghent



Photos



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With local strawberries and cheeses on a granite slab, fresh vegetables and a condiment plate on the counter, and informative charts on a screen, two Palo Altans put a palatable spin on a planetary problem.

During a recent class at Whole Foods Market in Mountain View, they advised their audience to tackle the environmental crisis of climate change by starting at home, in the kitchen: Think globally, eat locally. That's the thesis behind "The Global Warming Diet," a book-in-progress that chef-caterer Laura Stec and San Jose State meteorology professor Eugene Cordero are writing together.

Cordero, who calls himself an atmospheric scientist, rather than a meteorologist, projects the cold statistics on the screen: Your dinner is warming the planet -- and it's not just the oven, microwave and refrigerator that are raising greenhouse gases to perilous levels. It's factory farming, processing, packaging, landfill, water and soil depletion, overeating, waste, pesticides and soil depletion, he says. Not to mention the long journey from farm to table.

"The average dinner travels 1,600 miles before it gets to your plate," Stec says.

Because it reportedly takes 10 times more energy to produce a calorie of meat than a calorie of plant-based food -- livestock consume tons of grain, pollute the water, erode soil and produce huge amounts of noxious wastes -- Cordero recommends cutting down on "carbs," as in carbon emissions.

Cut down on animal products, he says. Eat foods grown close to home, preferably organic; eat more whole grains and vegetables; go to farmers' markets or grow your own; eat less; bring your own bags to the grocery store; compost.

Following Cordero's presentation at Whole Foods, Stec's cooking class provides pointers on how to reduce farm-to-table mileage. Rather than starting with a recipe and driving all over town for the ingredients, students should improvise, she says, creating simple, tasty dishes from what's in season. "Stir-fries help you stay away from recipes," she says, nonetheless handing out a few.

The secret is in the mix. Not the chemical-laden stuff in a box, but the impromptu symphony of the unexpected: brown rice with barley, made in the pressure cooker; grass-fed beef with arugula and green peppercorns; tofu stir-fry with a green tea sauce.

Performing with the elan of a TV aerobics instructor, Stec demonstrates how to prepare "high-vibe foods." She introduces students to the supporting players, including such grains as buckwheat, millet, amaranth and quinoa. Her condiments, the essential extras, are displayed on a plate: soy sauce, umeboshi plum vinegar and flax seed, among others. Meat plays a bit part, as a flavoring agent.

The vegetables on the cutting board get star treatment, as she slices carrots and onions with the showmanship of a Benihana chef, and the students applaud. "Next time you cut an onion, you're going to think of me," she says.

The students, many of whom have taken other classes with Stec or Cordero, are intrigued:

"I love Laura's energy. She's an inspiration as a chef and as an activist," says Shelly Morris of Redwood City, who came with her friend Kelly Lee.

Hilary Stamm of Sunnyvale, who is a student of Cordero's and is half- Japanese, says it may be coincidental, but the Global Warming Diet "falls right in line with my diet, the Okinawa Diet," which is high in soy, seaweed, vegetables and roots, and low in fish. "It reminds of things I used to eat as a kid."

Stec, 44, began her love affair with food as a child in Michigan, putting on theme parties. After getting a degree in marketing and moving to Los Angeles to work in the film and video industry, she headed to Humboldt County and studied at the Vega Macrobiotic Center.

She switched careers and continued her studies at the Culinary Institute of America. In addition to catering, she is also a culinary health instructor at Kaiser Permanente Medical Center and has served as a chef-instructor at area hospitals, including Stanford Medical Center.

Like Cordero, she's practically a vegetarian, but she doesn't preach. "Everyone's concerned about health, but that's not what motivates them," she said. "People go into the kitchen because they like the food they cook."

She lives in a Barron Park Eichler surrounded by herbs and vegetables with two roommates: Susan Stansbury, director of the environmental organization Valley of Heart's Delight, and gardener Paul Schmitt. "You should either know a gardener or a cook," she said. Not surprisingly, there's a clothesline and compost bin.

Cordero, 41, a native Californian, met Stec through their mutual involvement on the board of World Centric, a Palo Alto nonprofit that focuses on environmental issues. Cordero, whose work focuses on global climate change and atmospheric dynamics, is a fellow in San Jose State's Global Studies Institute. He lives in College Terrace with his wife, Clare.

Because he frequently flies, he often purchases certificates that subsidize renewable-energy programs, in hopes of offsetting the damage of carbon dioxide emissions from airplanes.

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Cordero gets around mostly by bicycle, which he totes onto Caltrain for his commute to San Jose State. In the last few years, he's also become a gardener. In terms of caring for the land, "you can't do anything better than that," he said.

He says the global-warming problem is not caused just by carbon dioxide, but by a variety of emissions, including chlorofluorocarbons, nitrous oxide and methane. Livestock are an obvious culprit, he says.

In fact, that's what inspired the forthcoming book. It all began at the end of last year with an "NPR moment," said Stec, who heard a report citing the effect of livestock on global warming.

"Global Warming Diet' came into my head," she said. That very day, she registered the Web site www.globalwarmingdiet.com. "I was pumped. ... Eugene was the first person I called. Food and science touch people on different levels. ... The two of us are like yin and yang."

The next step was a book contract: Publication is slated for 2008.

Both Cordero and Stec emphasize that they're not trying to get people to completely transform their diets. The goal is moderation.

Getting people to eat better means teaching them how to prepare food, Stec says. People eat three times a day, but most have had no training in how to prepare a meal. "Nobody ever taught them."

Interestingly, Cordero recently surveyed his undergraduate students and discovered they spend an average of three hours a night watching TV. Yet they don't have time to cook, so they eat takeout. He shakes his head in disbelief. "Where does this three hours come from? I never saw the word 'cooking.'"

Says Stec: "What I want to do with this book is turn people back on to cooking. I'm not coming from this judgmental place that you have to be a vegetarian, because that turns people off.

"The thing that motivates people to actually cook is that they like what they're eating. They've got a sharp knife, a couple of things to make it easy, and little things here and there that can make your cooking life easier like the condiment plate. ... They need to be motivated by pleasure."

Info: For more information on Stec's cooking classes, go to www.laurastec.com .

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