

## **SUSTAINABLE LIVING GUIDE: 56. SIX BIG IDEAS ON EATING GREEN<sup>1</sup>**

**Heather Sperling<sup>©</sup>**

The country's food consciousness is picking up speed at an exhilarating rate. As consumers, we are more powerful than ever—largely because we are more aware and active than ever. With the green food movement making strides at the grassroots level, and great hope for the impact of the new administration, 2010 is sure to be a big year for food. Here are some of the big ideas (and big issues) that you can expect to keep making headlines and, hopefully, making a difference.

### **1. Extreme Localism**

The Oxford American Dictionary dubbed “locavore” the 2007 Word of the Year—and, since then, the concept has spread at a rapid pace. The most recent step in the philosophy's evolution takes the idea of local food to the next level: growing your own food, in small batches, at home. The idea itself is far from new, but the fervor with which it's been approached is exciting—especially with the White House getting on board. While relying on backyard gardens and window boxes for sustenance isn't the solution to our country's food issues, the rise in home gardening has value beyond the actual yield—it shows an ever-growing connection with our food, and where it comes from.

### **2. Beyond Organic**

The national organic standards set by the USDA have failed to live up to many farmers', chefs', activists', and consumers' standards; to quote pioneering organic farmer Eliot Coleman, “Organic' is now dead as a meaningful synonym for the highest quality food.” One verbal solution is “beyond organic,” a phrase that refers to an approach that encompasses more than the USDA organic standards by embracing sustainable and locavore philosophies as well. How does it manifest itself in the real world? Some farmers are implementing methods that go above and beyond the official requirements. Others seek alternate certification from organizations like Oregon Tilth, widely considered to have the country's most stringent certification standards. Ask your local farmer where they stand on the issue—it's the local guys that are pushing this movement forward.

### **3. Conscious Consumerism and the Consumer Burden**

From food, plastics, and cleaning products to clothing and kids toys, what you buy can have an immediate impact on your health and the health of the world around you. Being a conscious consumer means having the knowledge necessary to avoid everyday items that contain toxic chemicals, or to buy sustainably raised seafood instead of species that are over-fished or high in mercury. Knowing where it comes from, how it's produced, and making responsible choices based on this knowledge with the goal of lightening your social and environmental footprint—this is the modern consumer's burden. While being a smart consumer can be a chore, luckily, resources for being better informed are increasingly easier to find.

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<sup>1</sup> Planet Green, Oct 2, 2010

#### **4. The True Cost of Food**

Part of being a conscious consumer is knowing “the true cost of food”—which is measured in ecological impact and health value, rather than only dollars and cents. Meat is one high-ecological-price food item that has fallen under serious scrutiny. (Remember The Meatrix?) Organizations like The Sierra Club are spreading the word with videos that preach the gospel of reducing food miles by eating in a way that reduces damage to the environment (and potential damage to your health). Eating seasonally and locally, eating minimal amounts of processed food, eating less meat, buying grass-fed, free-range meat and dairy—all are ways to minimize the true cost of your food.

#### **5. Food Safety**

With salmonella-ridden eggs glaring in our recent past, not to mention the litany of contamination problems in China, food safety is one of the paramount issues of 2010. The slew of widespread, highly publicized outbreaks of food borne illness showed the country’s food safety programs to be insufficient and arcane—and Obama has moved quickly since coming into office. The administration has taken steps to overhaul the FDA by increasing the number of food inspectors, modernizing safety labs, toughening rules meant to prevent sick cows from entering the food supply, and creating a new Food Safety Working Group. All good things—but salmonella is only the tip of the food safety iceberg. Hopefully this year we’ll see great strides—comparable to the steps taken against trans fats—in the elimination of Bisphenol A and synthetic food colorings.

#### **6. A New Administration = a New Focus on Food**

Obama has called the United States’ food safety system “a hazard to public health”—and we can only hope that this signals the beginning of a new era of increased oversight, increased awareness, and—hell, let’s think big—a radical change in the way our country grows, understands, and eats food. Obama’s 2010 budget proposes spending more than \$1 billion on food safety, nearly double the amount spent in 2007. But beyond food safety (as outlined above), many hope that the Obamas step up to the plate as leaders in healthy eating and responsible agriculture. As Michael Pollan wrote in his October 2008 letter to the future “Farmer in Chief”, “Food is about to demand your attention.” The First Garden is certainly a coup, and a hopeful sign for those that hope Obama does nothing less than change the way America eats. But there’s more to be done. Change is in the air—and we hope it stays that way, through next Earth Day, and beyond.