Thinking Globally, Eating Locally: Working with Our Farmers

As a chef, I've worked hard to incorporate local ingredients into my menus, because I believe the local food movement is more than a trend; it's a key to sustaining the agricultural vitality of our community. Plus, the fact that a tomato just off the vine, an egg with a pristine yolk, and a strawberry that is half the size but twice as sweet as a store-bought berry all do wonders to enhance the flavor of my food that no conventionally grown food trucked (on average) over 1200 miles can ever hope to accomplish. So let's just say it's for selfish reasons.

A key factor of the farm-to-table ethos is the relationship with the actual farmer, and I am happy to count over a dozen Ventura County farms in my restaurant's family. I know they take just as much care growing their produce as I do preparing it.

Nearly year round, I can rely on Peacock Farms for their silky oyster and shitake mushrooms, delicious and juicy field tomatoes, and, my favorite, their sumptuous eggplants. They grow 9 different varieties, from Black Beauty, an Italian classic dark purple, to Asian varieties such as Orient Charm and Calliope. At our restaurant, we incorporate these in a slightly sweet eggplant hummus, our classic Parmesan, and a rustic vegetable torte. You can find the Peacock Farms stall, and most of the other vendors here, on Saturdays in Ventura and Sunday mornings at Ojai Farmers Market.

Harry, David, and Monique from Jimenez, Gonzales, & Co. grow Italian sweet peppers and tiny cherry tomatoes that end roasted and tossed with Ojai olive oil in our bruschetta and also as a base for our "kicky" marinara.

Friend's Ranch is responsible for the oranges, tangerines, lemons, and sometimes even the grapefruits that go into our 3-fruit juice elixir at breakfast. Earthtine Farms provides a rotating menu of greens, from arugula to butter lettuce, Romaine, and dandelion. Even our spices are locally sourced, including garlic, basil, oregano, and a few more exotic species such as Hungarian paprika and Thai mint.

The list goes on, but over 75% of our produce and 50% of our proteins come from right here in the county. We estimate we save over literally tons of CO2 emissions a year. (One study estimated that an *individual* could save 2,268 kg CO2 over the course of a year by eating local food just once a week.) Buying my ingredients locally also means I get to contribute back to the local economy, and it also helps us feel closer to the community and our true partners in our love of food: the farmers who grow it and raise it.