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Wednesday, April 23, 2003

A Diner's Guide to Organic Restaurants

The New Mexican

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Northern New Mexico restaurants that emphasize local and/or organic ingredients are few and far between. But those that do take it seriously. Buying seasonal local/organic meats, poultry and produce becomes an essential, core part of their cooking philosophy.

Our A-list includes chefs who utilize at least 30 percent local and/or organic produce or protein in their dishes during the peak-growing season.

Every effort was made to include all Northern New Mexico restaurants that emphasize local and/or organic ingredients in this story. Any omissions are accidental.

SANTA FE

Andiamo! A Neighborhood Trattoria

322 Garfield St.; 995-9595. Dinner nightly beginning at 5:30 p.m.

Owner Joan Gillcrist says she tries to get the best quality ingredients she can — in the peak season, up to 40 percent locally grown produce. Baby greens from One Straw Farm make an earthy salad that needs little embellishment; farmers' tomatoes yield sweet freshness. A popular neighborhood restaurant, Andiamo! serves wholesome Italian fare in a relaxed atmosphere.

“With certain products, it’s worth spending a little more,” Gillcrist says. “I think if a meal really makes customers feel good, they’ll come back.”

Tulips

222 N. Guadalupe; 989-7340. Dinner only, Tuesday to Sunday, from 6 p.m.

Husband-wife team Kirstin and Steven Jarrett forego personal frills to adhere to their healthy-living mantra, which extends to their charming, intimate restaurant set in an old-

adobe cottage (the family lives in back). “Organic, hormone-free food has a better energy and a pure flavor,” Kirstin Jarrett says. “A nonorganic cabbage is tough and gassy, whereas an organic cabbage is so sweet I want to eat it raw.”

The Jarretts buy Shepherd’s Lamb, Sweetwoods goat cheese and Cheesecraft Roquefort, One Straw Farm organic greens and farmers-market peaches, to name a few. Tulips emphasizes clean, free-range (not necessarily organic) protein. The chicken liver paté is Pollo Real. Depending on the season, Tulips uses 30 percent to 60 percent local organics — “as much as we can,” the owners say.

Mu Du Noodles

1494 Cerrillos Road (at Navajo Drive), 983-1411. Dinner only, Monday to Saturday, 5:30 p.m. to 10 p.m.

There’s a direct relationship between farms and restaurants: If you support them, they will grow for you, says Mu Jing Lau, chef/owner of Mu Du Noodles, a bustling, trendy Asian noodle house that exudes a calm cool. Lau cooks what she would like to eat and buys as much local organic product as possible — all appetizers and side dishes come from local farmers in the peak season. She uses Pollo Real chicken, plus Shepherd’s Lamb and natural beef from Colorado.

Lau trades compost for beans — meaning farmers eat for trade at her restaurant. For her they grow daikon, long beans, radishes, squash, cilantro, bitter melon. Lau works closely with One Straw Farm and shops twice weekly at the farmers market — “a great social event for me” that takes time and costs a lot.

“Sometimes you can taste it, sometimes you can’t; but your body feels a lot better afterwards,” says Lau, who is now exploring roots, herbs and leaves with medicinal properties. “My clients are very conscious and they thank me for serving local, natural products.”

Pizza Etc.

at DeVargas Center, 986-1500. Monday-Saturday, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily; Sunday, noon to 8 p.m.

and

Joe’s Diner and Pizza

2801 Rodeo Road (in Rodeo Plaza), 471-3800 Sunday to Thursday, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m.; Friday/Saturday until 9 p.m.

After trying a new take on Margherita pizza five years ago, chef/owner Roland Richter’s summertime special has gained a cult following. The secret? Fresh mozzarella, fresh basil and farmers market tomatoes that have never been refrigerated. “I tried it with vine-ripened and hot-house tomatoes, but never got the same response,” says Richter, who

goes through 200 pounds of tomatoes a week during Margherita time. “Now I have customers asking for it all the time.”

A regular shopper at the farmers market, Richter buys from growers, from the market’s co-op “whatever I can use” — about 25 percent local organic in the peak season. He incorporates fresh produce into his dishes at Pizza Etc. and his new eatery, Joe’s Diner and Pizza.

“It’s extremely important to use organic, chemical-free when I can, because things get so over-refined and irradiated; they may look like the product, but the taste has nothing to do with the original,” he says. “I try to serve what I’d like to eat.”

Café San Estevan

428 Agua Fría St., 995-1996; Open Tuesday to Sunday: lunch, 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.; dinner, 5:30 to 9 p.m.; closed Mondays.

A former Franciscan monk, chef/owner Estevan Garcia isn’t in the restaurant business for money. Working with local farmers “religiously” and staying flexible is core to what he does. “It’s almost a spiritual thing: I enjoy it. The product is better. And whatever I put in my body, I want to make sure it’s the best,” he says. “It’s more work, but hey, what’s work? I want to make my reputation as a viable person here in the community and help the farmers stay in business.”

To fuel his cozy, traditional New Mexican eatery serving regional comida with the help of French technique, Garcia buys nearly everything from local farmers. He’s a regular at the market. In the peak season, 90 percent of his ingredients are local organic: lettuce, tomatoes, onions, greens, Sweetwoods cheeses and goat’s milk (for flan), honey — even flowers. Garcia’s lamb is exclusively from Tierra Amarilla-based Shepherd’s Lamb, while his eggs come from free-range chickens in Pecos.

“We’re lucky we have the farmers dedicating themselves to growing outstanding products,” Garcia says. “I don’t think chefs here take this bounty we have seriously enough.”

Café Oasis in the Desert of Life,

526 Galisteo St., 983-9599. Weekdays, 9:30 a.m. to midnight or close; weekends, 9:30 a.m. to 2 a.m. or close.

“I’m very spiritual. I believe the body is God’s only true temple and I believe in eating with reverence,” says owner Tobi Wilde, who runs Café Oasis with husband Richard Kurtz.

For their healthy-minded restaurant, the couple strives to get as much organic local produce and protein as possible: about 75 percent organics and up to 70 percent local in the growing season. That includes natural Taos Farms eggs, Bosque Farms honey,

Shepherd's Lamb, Taos Cow ice cream and free-trade organic Red Rock Coffee. Oasis boasts a series of funky Bohemian themed rooms (Tahitian tearoom, Victorian, mystic), as well as live music and a spacious patio in back.

Café Pasqual's,

121 Don Gaspar Ave., 983-9340 Monday to Saturday, 7 a.m. to 3 p.m.; Sunday, 8 a.m. to 2 p.m.; dinner nightly, 5:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. (Friday/Saturday) until 10 p.m.

Owner Katharine Kagel works with 250-plus purveyors to get the best ingredients she can. That means "clean protein," organic dairy and some organic produce during the growing season. Kagel flies in beef and pork from California and serves New Mexico Pollo Real farm-raised chicken. Café Pasqual's wine list consists of 85 percent organic wines.

"If organic is not part of the chef's and restaurant's philosophy, it's not gonna happen," says Kagel.

Longevity Café

112 W. San Francisco (in the Plaza Mercado at Water and Galisteo streets, 2nd floor)
986-0403 Monday -Saturday, 11 a.m.-11 p.m.; Sunday, 11 a.m.- 7 p.m.

"Our café is about community, health and self-expression," says Jordan Minkin, co-owner with Yukiko Amaya. "Organics define who we are."
In a vivacious "Zen with passion" ambience, the café emphasizes organic (95 percent) and vegan foods — pan-Asian bowls with brown rice, tofu and fresh vegetables, free-range teriyaki chicken and Ayurvedic dishes. Also on the menu: mostly organic herbal elixirs and loose-leaf teas. The eatery includes a cyber café and a retail section with many locally made bath, beauty and personal-care products, including sensuality enhancers. (Note: Starting Monday, the café has closed for remodeling for up to 60 days.)

O'Keeffe Café

217 Johnson St., 992-1065 Daily, lunch 11 a.m.-3 p.m.; dinner 5-9:30 p.m.

"If I have the choice to pay 10 percent more and get something so much better in quality while supporting my local neighbors, there's no question I'll do it," says Michael O'Reilly, proprietor of O'Keeffe Café, a classy bistro with a sophisticated food-wine-art ambience enhanced by red bancos and photos of its muse, Georgia O'Keeffe.

With an extensive wine list and French menu colored by Southwest and Asian culinary traditions, the café emphasizes local free-range and organic meats: Shepherd's Lamb, Pollo Real chicken, filets from Matt Mitchell in Roy, N.M., tender, fresh quail from San Antonio, N.M., and — coming soon — buffalo from Lana Fastnacht off N.M. 14.

During the growing season, up to 30 percent of O'Reilly's produce is local organic. The owner even takes his staff on field trips to meet producers.

While agribusiness has meant gains in low prices, the losses have meant homogenization of taste and size, O'Reilly says. Luckily, his customers appreciate the superior protein he serves. "They are responsive to meat with a story behind it, so we list it on our menu," he says.

Cloud Cliff Bakery & Art Space

1805 Second St., 983-6254 Monday to Friday, restaurant 7:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; bakery 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Saturday/Sunday, restaurant 8 a.m. to 2 p.m.; bakery 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Being local is about long-term commitment, says owner Willem Malten: "When you buy from your neighbors, you create a network of people with a vested interest in each other's success. And that makes a strong community."

An organic bakery and airy warehouse-restaurant featuring art installations and live music, Cloud Cliff utilizes 30 percent local organic flour. (Malten works directly with purveyors.) Other local organics: salad mix, Shepherd's Lamb, some Pollo Real chicken, potatoes, fruit (for tarts) and Taos Farms eggs.

The cost is more than commercial, yes, but it's about assessing your bottom line in a different way, Malten says. "The quality is really good," he says. "There's an enormous freshness to it that can't be beat by any corporate producer."

Santacafé

231 Washington Ave., 984-1788 Lunch Monday to Saturday, 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m.; dinner nightly, 5:30 p.m. to 10 p.m.

Executive chef David Sellers likes to feature local food on his menu whenever he can: ricotta and goat cheese-stuffed squash-blossom beignet with arugula, sun-dried tomatoes and English peas, for one, is always a huge hit. "We print our menu every day so if I can't get squash blossoms, it's no big deal," Sellers says. "We're also seasonally driven and getting this produce at the peak of its greatness is phenomenal."

During the high season, about 20 percent of Sellers' produce is local organic. The chef works with the farmers market co-op to procure baby mâché, arugula, apples, quince, peaches, fingerling potatoes, heirloom tomatoes, pea shoots, fava beans, eggplant and some cheeses.

Set in a sprawling hacienda with intimate dining nooks, upscale Santacafé's white-on-white color scheme sets the artsy, minimalist tone. Clean and fresh, Sellers' New American dishes flirt with Southwest and global influences.

ALBUQUERQUE

Jennifer James

2813 San Mateo NE, 505/884-3665. Dinner Tuesday to Saturday, 5 p.m. to close. Reservations recommended. Graze, 3128 Central Ave. SE, (505) 268-4729 or 268-GRAZ. Tuesday to Saturday, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.

Chef/owner Jennifer James doesn't shop at chain stores. Her sous-chef pounds curry into paste the old-fashioned way with mortar and pestle. "We support tradition — I like that (farmer) Cecilia (Rosacker-McCord) eats her beans while she picks," says James. "So we try to work around the farmers as much as possible. You grow it, and we'll find a use for it."

James incorporates up to 70 percent local and/or organic produce into her cooking, plus some Sweetwoods cheese, Pollo Real chicken and Sungreen sprouts. She buys vegetables from McCord's El Rancho Nido de las Golondrinas in Socorro.

Her upscale Jennifer James, in a homey adobe house, serves American cuisine with global influences. Flavors are clean, simple and well matched. Wines are oriented around food. James' Graze draws on the same cooking style, but the concept is building your own meal around appetizer-size courses. The setting — "urban pastoral" — is, fun, modern and upbeat in an airy warehouse space lined with outdoor motif murals.

Seasons Rotisserie-Grill

2031 Mountain Road, (505) 766-5100. Lunch, Monday to Friday, 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; dinner Sunday-Thursday 5 p.m. to 10 p.m.; Friday/Saturday, 5 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. Reservations recommended.

Executive chef Bob Peterson met his match when he paired up with Seasons owner Roger Roessler. A Northern California vintner, Roessler wanted to create a restaurant emphasizing simple, fresh, high-quality ingredients — sans fussy sauces and prep. Peterson grew up eating the "best organic fruit and veggies" from his Connecticut grandparents' gardens.

Sure, it's effort and cost, Peterson concedes, "But the flavor! Most people would not make sauce out of tomatoes grown with this much effort — but it's pasta like you've never had before. Vine ripened, hand-harvested, not genetically altered tomatoes are supreme quality. It's like tasting a tomato for the first time."

That's why heirloom vegetables are a major part of Peterson's cuisine. He seeks the best out and pays for the "expensive and fickle" — to the tune of 60 percent local-organic

produce during the peak season. Seasons' fish is 95 percent wild and line-caught; its beef, grain-fed Midwestern; and its eggs and chicken are free-range for special dishes, though Peterson is trying to upgrade that.

With a Sonoma feel, Seasons is set in a "loud and electric" curved space, Peterson says. Diners like to take a cozy seat by the open kitchen's wood grill in winter.

Prairie Star Restaurant

288 Prairie Star Road, Santa Ana Pueblo, (505) 867-3327 Dinner nightly 5:30 to 9 p.m.; closed Mondays

"I love the product — it's some of the best I can get," says chef Heath Van Riper of why 45 percent of his produce is local organic and 75 percent of his protein is free-range organic.

Although Van Riper changes his menu seasonally, he switches around dish components to take advantage of fresh Hummingbird mushrooms, Pollo Real chicken, Chama Valley lamb or Sungreen sunflower shoots, purple beans or baby chard — a skill he learned from fellow chef Johnny Gabaldon.

"I feel if supporting locals means spending a few more dollars, it's fine," Van Riper says. "My customers appreciate it." A fine-dining favorite in a lovely old hacienda on the Santa Ana Pueblo, the Prairie Star boasts views of the towering Sandia Mountains and lush Rio Grande bosque.

CORRALES

Jim White's Casa Vieja

4541 Corrales Road, (505) 898-7489. Open seven days for dinner, 5-9 p.m. Patio dining in summer

Chef-owner Jim White lives in Corrales. He sees local farmers every day in town and in his restaurant, and feels compelled to support his neighbors who stop by with a basket of onions or bundle of garlic. White splurges on local organic eggs (\$2 a dozen vs. 89 cents) and organic Pollo Real chicken. His chile is Corrales green. In the peak season, 25 percent of the chef's produce and 30 percent of his protein is local.

Set in a 300-year-old adobe (formerly a home, chapel and courtroom), Casa Vieja is a New Mexico/American grill. "Some things, like eggs, I feel very strongly about buying here — the quality is superior and I want to support the local economy," he says.

ESPAÑOLA

Ice's Tearoom

House 33 on Los Luceros Road/1097 just north of Española, (505) 852-2589. Open annually from March through November, Tuesday to Thursday noon to 5 p.m. Reservations required; five-course meal \$20 per person; cash or checks. Gift shop adjacent.

After Gayle (a Pojoaque middle-school teacher) and Ron (an archaeologist) Ice “retired,” they started farming. That was 13 years ago and their lovely 4½-acre Ice’s Organic Farm is still going strong. The couple cultivate four types of lavender plus vegetables, flowers, herbs, raspberries, strawberries and fruit trees — apple, apricot and pear.

A fan of tearooms, last year Gayle Ice, 69, decided to open her own featuring the farm’s fresh organic produce, which makes up about 40 percent of her menu. Set in a flagstone sunroom, sleek Nambé vases decorate three dainty tables set with china and silver. Hummingbirds buzz just outside the large windows. The tearoom accommodates 15. After a tour of the farm, guests dine on a five-course meal, all prepared by Gayle and her assistant Loyola Trujillo: fresh egg salad (the farm has a dozen hens); chicken salad with her rosemary; green salads dotted with calendula and pansies; dressings of fresh basil and dried tomatoes; sorbet made with fruit from the Ices’ 75 apple trees; and homemade zucchini and apricot breads. Gayle Ice pickles her own cucumbers and makes raspberry and plum preserves.

“We use whatever’s in season and as many products here as we can,” she says. “‘Luncheon for life’ is my slogan. You know, Ron and I just like working in the dirt.” Says Ron Ice, 70, “It’s a lot of work for fun.”

PENASCO

Sugar Nymphs Bistro 15046 N.M. 75 in Peñasco (505) 587-0311
Winter hours: Thursday to Saturday; lunch 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; dinner 5:30 to 7:30 p.m.; Sunday brunch 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Call for summer hours.

Chef Kai Harper honed her talents at San Francisco’s celebrated Greens restaurant, famous for its symbiotic relationship with local farmers. She brings that sensibility to Sugar Nymphs Bistro, an enchanting, simpatico and relaxed eatery operated with co-owner/pastry chef Ki Holste.

Harper collaborates with four local organic farmers, utilizing up to 90 percent local organics in the peak season; at other times, 40 percent organic. The chef’s eggs and

protein consist of some local, some organic and some commercial. Even so, all of Harper's contemporary American dishes are priced under \$11.

"I really make an effort to use local farmers' produce," she says. "And part of our philosophy is that local people can afford to eat here — and not just as a once-a-year event."

TAOS

Lambert's Restaurant

309 Paseo del Pueblo Sur, (505) 758-1009; open every evening from 5:30 to 9 p.m., except Fridays and Saturdays when seatings continue until 9:30 p.m.

"I buy what's available locally and try to work from there," says chef Zeke Lambert, owner of Lambert's with wife Tina. "I'm not the kind of chef looking for the least expensive products. Ultimately, when it comes down to food, you will taste the difference."

With seven specials a night, Lambert uses "world-class" yellow wax beans, Dixon tomatoes, baby bok choy, winter parsnips, fresh porcini and leafy greens to create his New American fare with an international flair — i.e., wild caribou or acorn squash soufflé with shellfish. Working closely with Morningstar Farm, at least 70 percent of Lambert's produce is local during the peak season. (Vegetables are locally grown under organic principles, Lambert says.)

Set in a 1930s home constructed of stacked railroad ties, Lambert's feels intimate and cozy with its four small dining rooms, fireplaces, wall of windows and lush, tree-lined front yard.

Doc Martin's

at the Taos Inn, 125 N. Pueblo Road, (505) 758-2233 Open daily, 7:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.; 5:30 to 10 p.m.

The Taos Inn has a long tradition of supporting local growers, and chef Patrick Hartnett has continued that legacy. He uses Pollo Real chicken, and works with Rios Co-op, Photo Farm and Morning Star Farm. In high season, about 70 percent of Hartnett's ingredients are local and/or organic: mushrooms dropped off by local pickers, Sweetwoods goat cheese, chile, mixed greens, beets, turnips, onions, tomatoes and baby carrots. Pastry chef Daria Cuthbertson uses organic flour bought from co-ops.

“The farmers are right here, just down the road, and they offer a much better product than you’d get elsewhere,” Harnett says. “Everyone wants the natural, off-the-grid thing in Taos.”

Sheva Café

812-B Paseo del Pueblo Norte, (505) 737-9290 Sunday to Thursday, 7 a.m. to 10 p.m.; Friday, 7 a.m. to 4 p.m.; Saturday dinner featuring local music, 5 to 10 p.m.

In chef/owner Yamiv Sheinbein’s native Israel, cooking with local organics is a way of life. So he slid naturally into organics after opening an eatery in Taos. “I just don’t like chemically treated, hormone injected vegetables,” Sheinbein says. “I can’t stand the taste.”

Sheva is a vegetarian restaurant serving healthy Middle Eastern cuisine. During the peak season, 50 percent of Sheva’s ingredients are organic — including dairy, coffee, flour, produce and the pitas (except the yeast). Sheinbein’s greens are local.

Gypsy

360 Café & Espresso Bar, 480 N.M. 150 (Seco Plaza) in Arroyo Seco, patio dining, (505) 776-3166; (opening a nearby organic hot dog stand, Dog Bite Motel, this June) Monday to Saturday, 7 a.m. to 4 p.m.; Sunday, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Chef/owner Sheila Guzman’s cuisine is about the world, as is her philosophy on local organics. “If you can’t practice what you preach, you should just shut up,” she says. “And you’ve got to start somewhere. I want to be on the list of people encouraging keeping our planet and bodies healthy.”

That’s why, eight months ago, Guzman opened Gypsy 360, a casual café in “New Mexico modern” — open kitchen, copper counters, slate and wood, lots of windows and mirrors — with dishes from around the globe. Think Vietnamese paper rolls, Argentine grilled flank steak and sushi rolls. Guzman changes the menu every three months, but keeps her organic focus — organic beef from Colorado, Taos Bakery buns, organic coffee, beer and wine, farmers market produce.

In the peak season, 70 percent of Gypsy 360’s ingredients are organic; 50 percent are local organic. Eggs hail from Taos Farms. “Whatever control we have, we want to do the right thing,” she says.

Taos Bakery

1223 Gusdorf Road (505) 751-3734 Monday to Saturday, 7 a.m. to 3 p.m.; closed Sundays. Patio dining.

Chef/baker/owner Seth Klein is committed to supporting his community. In the peak season, 98 percent of his flour comes from local organic purveyors, including New Mexico Flour Project and Mountain Mama's in Monte Vista, Colo.; up to 30 percent of his produce is local organic. Klein uses free-range chicken and beef as well. And he's aiming for 100 percent local organic within five years.

In the summer, the chef takes anything the farmers offer. His neighborhood bakery hires locals and buys from locals, providing a roomy, eclectic environment including angels overhead, old lumber and rustic latillas, handmade tables, plants and "lots of doodads." The bakery lends its walls to spotlight rotating artist shows.

"The more local people I use who say, 'That guy uses my tomatoes!' will eat here and bring a friend," Klein says. "As long as we all stick together, we can make a living and not turn into Main Street America."

Taos Cow

New Taos Cow location in Arroyo Seco pending; 424-8200 (at the Santa Fe freezing facility).

Served regularly in Santa Fe at Cinemacafé, Café Oasis, Jinja, Santa Fe Bar & Grill and The Ore House, plus The Range Café in Bernalillo

Injecting cows with hormones is bad for the cows and the folks drinking their milk, maintains Justin Young, who owns Taos Cow with Jamie Leeson.

In producing 50 flavors of their super-premium ice cream, Young and Leeson also like to support small, local business, so they have been working with Rasband Dairy in Belen and Isleta — a multigenerational, family-run operation that uses no hormones — for nearly 10 years. Taos Cow's mix is made in Isleta; freezing the ice cream takes place in Santa Fe.

"They milk the cow one day and we're making ice cream the next," Young says. "It's as fresh as possible."

Dragonfly Café & Bakery

402 Paseo del Pueblo Norte, (505) 737-5859. Breakfast daily 7 to 11:30 a.m.; lunch, 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.; wine dinners once a month; available for private parties

Local farmers coax their garlic and parsnips with "love and care — and you can taste it," says owner Karen Todd, who incorporates New Mexico-grown food into her specials.

Fruits and veggies Todd gets mostly from Morning Star Farm — about 30 percent local and 30 percent organic (including chicken) during the growing season: tomatoes, herbs,

leeks, greens, chard, garlic shoots, beans, squash, spinach, watercress, fruit (for pastries) and carrots. Better ingredients just make the chef's job easier, Todd says.

Dragonfly is a neighborhood café set in an old adobe, "sunny and warm," rustic and earthy with stained glass and a lush yard in front with tables for al fresco dining.

"There's nothing better than something plucked from the ground hours earlier," Todd says. "My clientele appreciates that quality and they're looking for that when they come here. If I tried serving something from a can, it would create a riot."

Café Zodiac

In Inspirations bookstore, 114 Doña Luz (505) 751-0959. Café hours 11 a.m.-4 p.m.; café closed Sunday but juice bar is open.

Café Zodiac's decor matches its philosophy: What we do affects the earth, so the earth affects us. "Our menu is based on astrology," says Alan Kinner, chef/owner with Joelle Hunt.

Set in a "fun" bookstore and hemp shop, the vegetarian café features a juice bar (carrot and fresh wheatgrass), organic coffee bar, salad bar, free-range chicken and planetary-influenced dishes. For example, a Taurus might order the earthy, peanut-sauce enhanced tempeh burger. Kinner makes his soy milk, rice milk and chai from scratch. Zodiac is 80 percent organic year-round, about 50 percent local during the growing season. "We like organics for nutrient content and environmental reasons," Kinner says. "I don't believe in supporting the chemical industry and I'm not going to buy it."

Main Street Bakery

112 Doña Luz, (505) 758-9610 Daily, breakfast 7:30 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. Monday to Friday; lunch 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m.; breakfast only Saturday/Sunday, 7:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Housed in a historic building once the domain of lady of the evening Doña Luz, Main Street Bakery has been a jail, bank, car garage and, since the 1960s, a bakery. Owner Virginia Medina continues that baking tradition, even using the same organic flour. In fact, the bakery's emphasis is vegetarian (also vegan) and organic ingredients — about 50 percent in the high season.

"Our bread is handmade with tender loving care and we wouldn't dare use anything else but organic flour," Medina says.

Her flour comes from Mountain Mama in Monte Vista, Colo., and goes into homespun cornbread, currant scones, cinnamon rolls, turnovers and bread. The bakery's green chile is vegetarian and its salad greens organic. The space is comfortable with counter service.

Says Medina, "Our motto is 'All natural, all organic — almost.'"

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Decisions, Decisions

Why chefs do — or don't — choose local and/or organic ingredients

Stories by Michelle Pentz Glave | For The New Mexican

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Julie Graber/The New Mexican file photo Sophie

Vigil of Nambé Orchards sells fresh vegetables twice a week at the Santa Fe Farmers' Market. What makes a tomato juicy, a pear candy-sweet or a radish intense and peppery? "Earth, wind and light impart flavor," says Taos' much-lauded star chef Joseph Wrede, formerly of Joseph's Table. Not surprisingly, Wrede is a committed proponent of incorporating local organic produce and protein into his inspired creations. "If you buy from a mass-market purveyor and product is not picked ripe or is given hormones, you have to manipulate it more," Wrede says. "Staying in season, using local and organic food, the flavor is better - that makes my job easier."

If that's true - and most chefs here agree it is - then why is it that only a handful of restaurateurs take advantage of the produce Northern New Mexico farmers grow in their own back yards?

Like most multifaceted questions, the answer is complex.

First, the stats: In Santa Fe, a culinary destination with upward of 300 dining establishments, growers and ranchers can name only eight chefs deeply committed to incorporating local and organic produce or protein into their menus. A metro area of 750,000, Albuquerque has about six local, organic-friendly restaurateurs; while earth-minded Taos, despite its tiny size, also boasts six.

With the twice-weekly Santa Fe Farmers' Market bursting at its seams and Whole Foods Market's weekend rush so intense it has hired a parking attendant to direct traffic, the casual observer might conclude consumers just can't get enough organic sunflower shoots, pasture-raised lamb and New Mexico goat cheese. But this theory starts to disintegrate once that same consumer takes a seat behind pressed linen and china.

"People ought to pay the price that the farmers want; that's a great idea, but not feasible," says longtime restaurateur Joan Gillcrist, owner of Santa Fe's Andiamo! A Neighborhood Trattoria. "If I'm making a tomato-mozzarella salad and paying \$2 to \$3 a pound for tomatoes, all of the sudden that salad costs \$12. And the customer isn't going to pay that." Says David Sellers, executive chef of Santacafé, "I've liked the quality of every New Mexico product I've had, and I like to support the local people. When you get something harvested in season, it's at the peak of its greatness. But unfortunately, this has to be a business where you balance costs."

Local organic products cost more - but why? Large corporations can sell much cheaper because of government subsidies, explains Finn Yarbrough, whose family owns Bee Tree Farm in San Juan Pueblo. "It's hard for restaurants to be able to buy locally and sell back at the prices they need to," he says. "Even so, food is being depreciated lately; price is not balanced with production costs."

A handful of Northern New Mexico chefs maintain that with a concerted effort they are able to make up higher cost for superior product elsewhere: spend more, but put fewer spectacularly flavorful tomatoes on a plate. Or pass along an extra 60 cents per plate. Local growers acknowledge their goods may cost anywhere from two to five times more than mass-produced vegetables, eggs and meat.

Ginny Greeno, owner of Taos' Western Sky Café, tries to buy organic and from local farmers during the growing season (about 10 percent of her total) because, she says, it makes good economic sense to circulate money within a community. She buys Oatie Yum Yum cookie bars from a local purveyor, organic wheat flour from Northern New Mexico, Chimayó red chile from Stevie Archuleta and local hormone-free beef.

"You have to trade off what the grower needs and what the customer is willing to pay," she says. "We're just a neighborhood place, so it's hard to strike a balance as to what the market will bear."

It's not the cost, says Cecilia Rosacker-McCord, who farms an acre of produce on her 30-acre El Rancho Nido de las Golondrinas in Socorro. "It's the paperwork and not having one invoice for everything," she says.

Another issue is volume. Small, boutique restaurants - especially those with higher entrée prices - can more easily ebb and flow with farmers' yields and alter their menus accordingly, says Kirstin Jarrett, chef/owner of Tulips with husband Steven.

"We're so small, we can wait 'til Sara (Grant of the Santa Fe Farmers Marketing Association) says, 'I have this,' and then we create a menu around it," Kirstin Jarrett says. "But if you're using 200 pounds of potatoes a week, you're going to have a hard time finding a local grower to keep up with you," Western Sky Café's Greeno says.

Some chefs, such as Wrede, work closely with suppliers. He counts on nearby Morning Star Farm's Melinda Bateman and Bill Bockbrader to tell him when the turnips are just right or the eggplant is ready to pick. "The biggest problem on our farm is how to produce enough in this growing season and the size of our (2-acre) farm," Bateman says. "We sell about one-third of our yield to local restaurants."

Few restaurateurs make a concerted effort to buy regularly from Shepherd's Lamb, a ranch of 800 mother ewes near Tierra Amarilla operated by Molly and Antonio Manzanares. "We have a limited number of racks and loins - which is what all the restaurants want - so chefs who have been loyal to us over the years are going to get them," Antonio Manzanares explains.

For their part, most ranchers and farmers prefer to sell to grocers or directly to consumers via farmers markets. Selling at the farmers market means retail (versus wholesale) prices and one-stop delivery.

"We used to sell to restaurants, but we don't any more," says Eremita Campos, who runs the 2-acre Algo Nativo farm in Embudo with daughter Margaret. "They don't order enough. It took a lot of my time to get the orders and it was a pain. Then, my daughter wasn't doing anything besides delivery."

Sara Grant of the Santa Fe Farmers Marketing Association has tried to offset that problem by taking farmers' surplus produce and knocking on kitchen doors offering goods for sale. For the most part, she finds willing buyers. As One Straw Farm's Rick Gaudet says, "What Sara's doing is great; there just needs to be more of her."

Says Grant: "The problem is, it's easy with the normal (mass distribution) food channels. It's habitual and everything happens without any effort. Chefs are generally a group that's overworked. If someone would make it easy for them, I think they'd do it."

There's also the "wow" factor. "Restaurants like a lot of specialty stuff," Grant says. "And in a lot of cases they're using stuff totally out of season." Money rules the fickle and notoriously brutal restaurant business and decisions often come down to the bottom line, chef Wrede says.

Many chefs receive bonuses for keeping costs low. What mass suppliers deliver is uniformity and consistency - and that can be tough to get from local operators, concedes Patrick Hartnett, chef at Doc Martin's in the Taos Inn.

"That's the sad part about it," Wrede says. "Most prefer consistency over brilliance. With an under-ripe, gassed Roma tomato, you know what you've got. It takes all the question marks out of the equation."

Why bother at all to buy local, organic or local organic? Those who do must immerse in the philosophy of seasonal change and nature's inconsistencies in order to make it work, says Café Pasqual's Katharine Kagel, who works with more than 250 purveyors and emphasizes clean protein, organic wine and dairy.

Supporting the local economy is one reason, says Santa Fe native Johnny Gabaldon, formerly chef of the Indigo Crow in Corrales. "I strongly believe it's the right thing to do," he says. "This is a small area and we need to capitalize on what's here."

Designing a menu around local ingredients is work, but that's the beauty of it, says Heath Van Riper, chef at Bernalillo's Prairie Star Restaurant. "I was raised on a ranch in Wyoming where we were used to serving food we raised," he says. "I feel better about what I'm eating; it's more satisfying. And it takes me back to home: walking out to the garden and picking something to eat that day; cracking open brown eggs for breakfast ..." Farmer Rosacker-McCord says it's the difference between a yellow pear that's fabulous or bland. "I'm picking today and bringing it to you within 12 hours - my arugula can sit two to three weeks and still be as fresh as something you get from Sysco (a national restaurant supplier) that's turning yellow so you have to throw half away," she says.

Wrede believes his local organic building blocks set his cooking apart. "My food is pretty simple; I use three major items: a protein, herb and vegetable," he says. "I don't do chiles or tamales, so this is my way of imparting a flavor that is uniquely local. Therefore, I separate myself from the other chefs of an equal skill level."

"I feel better," says the Santa Fe Farmers Marketing Association's Grant. "It tastes better. The closer to being fresh, the more life energy a food has. Think about produce recently

harvested (and about) vegetables, picked unripe, sitting in coolers where that force just drains away.

"What I say is: Vote with your fork."

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