



The
Making
OF A
Food
Mecca



Facing page photos clockwise from upper left: Andrew Wellman, Natalie Stultz, Anthony Rezek, Joanne Pearson, Jim Westphalen, Natalie Stultz, Gene Parulis, Andre Jenny

Back in the late 1970s, just about the only place to get a cup of coffee and a snack after 9 p.m. on a Sunday in Montpelier was at Bob's Sunoco. From a vending machine.

How times have changed.

It's not just that the restaurant business is booming (see pages 36-45). It's that the ham and eggs on the menu are likely to come from down the road and that the number of farmers' markets has ballooned from 19 in 1986 to more than 50 this year. It's that your local market is likely to offer Gilfeather turnips, breads leavened with wild yeasts and baked in wood-fired ovens, cheeses made of cow, sheep, and goat milk, fresh pastas, free-range chickens, and "to-go" items like samosas and spring rolls. It's not just that people are interested in local foods, it's that they are willing to join Community Supported Agriculture ventures (CSAs), in which consumers support farmers financially by paying in advance for a season-long supply from the farmer, regardless of what the harvest yields.

Vermont is in the midst of a culinary and agricultural awakening. A spectrum of Vermonters — consumers, food producers, policymakers — are making a connection between food and land, food and community, food and taste and health. Allen Matthews of the Center for Sustainable Agriculture at the University of Vermont says our state is No. 1 in the nation in per capita direct sales from farmers to consumers: Our sales are more than five times greater than the national average.

What has emerged in Vermont, says Amy B. Trubek of Cornwall, author of the new book "The Taste of Place," is "a true regional cuisine." Writing about the relationship between the taste of food and the place it comes from, Trubek quotes the late British food writer Elizabeth David, who, writing about France 40 years ago, penned words apropos of Vermont today: "Recipes alone are not enough. A flourishing tradition of local cookery implies also genuine products; the cooks and the housewives must be backed up by the dairy farmers, the pig breeder and pork butchers, the market gardeners and the fruit growers, otherwise regional cookery simply retreats into the realms of folklore."

"David realized the necessity of a network of people working in concert to support a vibrant regional cuisine,"

says Trubek. "That's what we have in Vermont now. It's truly a cuisine of the moment."

Vermont's newest "foodies" — the localvores — harken to the past, looking for ways to reduce waste and make the most of our short growing season. In doing so, they are bringing back foods considered "old-fashioned": offal, root vegetables, dried foods, pickles and preserves. But this new breed has taken to heart the adage "eat locally, spice globally." As Ripton cookbook author Andrea Chesman notes, in the past Vermonters brought taste to bland dishes through pickles and relishes. "Now," she says, "we do it through ethnic spicing."

Vermont's expanding food culture is remarkable in its breadth and depth. The focus is on more than just what's on the plate, it's on who gets to sit at the table. The Vermont hills are filled with folks working toward food justice, better school lunches, fair wages and benefits for farm workers and preservation of agricultural land (see pages 46-55). The culture supports older farmers and nurtures younger ones, and it values the old — dairy is still king — while encouraging the new.

We hope this special 120-page issue, with its entire feature section and more devoted to food, will spur you into the garden, where you can join contributor Andrew Nemethy in savoring the "micro-seasons" of the palate (page 120). Perhaps it will galvanize you to visit a farmers' market, to join a CSA, or to patronize a restaurant that is a member of the Vermont Fresh Network, which links chefs and producers. It may inspire you to safeguard our working landscape or improve your school's cafeteria offerings, or help end hunger in our state.

We hope it lures you into the kitchen with an armful of Vermont-grown and Vermont-made foods to prepare meals in which you can literally "taste" Vermont. And we hope it persuades you to eat thoughtfully and happily and to rejoice in the fact that this is, in fact, "a cuisine of the moment" and it's happening right here, right now.

Turn the page, and dig in. — Marialisa Calta