

---

## **The Food We Eat and the Health We Get**

American University - March 15th, 2005

Nora Pouillon

My name is Nora Pouillon, chef and owner of Restaurant Nora and Asia Nora. I am very happy to be here today to speak with you about why the organic movement is so important to human and ecological health, and why I have devoted my life and business to this cause.

One of the first lessons we learn as adults is to look out for ourselves, that no one cares as much for our own bodies and minds as we do. Somewhere during this time also comes the awareness that we are what we eat, we are what we breathe, and we are the choices we make.

But, how many people sitting here today actually think about these choices? That the food we eat, the water we drink, and the air we breathe determines not only the well being of our bodies, but also the well-being of our environment? That our bones, organs, heart, brain and every part of us is made up of matter that has passed between our lips? If we do think about these things, we know and feel the connection between the environment and ourselves.

This realization came to me early - I think because of my upbringing in Austria. More than anything else, my parents taught me that health is a priceless asset that no money or power could purchase - a possession and responsibility that each of us must consciously protect and maintain.

As a child, I spent time on a self-sufficient farm in the mountains where I learned to respect both the farming and the daily hard work needed just to bring food to a table. Living with these farmers, who valued everything and wasted nothing, I became aware of the seasonal food cycles and how we are all linked to nature.

My education on the importance of food in our lives continued at the French Lycee in Vienna where we children sat down for a three course lunch served to us by waiters. There, I learned that sharing food, actually taking the time to sit down to eat, and to socialize with friends was a satisfying and nurturing moment to be treasured. Here at this school, it was not about the work that went into the meal; instead it was the feeling of comfort that resulted from sharing it.

When I came to the United States as a young bride in the 60s, the first thing I noticed was that the way I had known flavor and food in my childhood did not apply - the US seemed to lack a relationship with its food. The supermarkets were full of lifeless sameness - packaged and processed foods without any diversity and hardly any fresh seasonal or local foods!

I also noticed that there were so many more diseases affecting Americans than Austrians. That was when I determined that the health problems in this country must be linked to what all Americans had in common: the air they breathed, the water they drank, and the food they ate. I realized that diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular problems, and cancer were, and are now, 30% related to the quality and quantities of foods being consumed, I decided to research and find the way to pure, fresh foods and a healthy diet.

The word “diet” is not about restriction - diet is what we choose to put into our mouths, not what we omit.

As I began to research America’s agricultural practices to find a more healthy alternative for myself and my family, I found out that we were using too many chemicals, too many additives, too many unnatural flavorings. I learned that food was produced for reasons of convenience and profit instead of flavor and nutritional value. I also discovered the following shocking statistics:

- At least 30% of all cancer in the US is diet related
- 911 million pounds of synthetic pesticides are used on conventional farms, but only 1% of these pesticides reach the target pest - meaning 99% is left to harm the environment
- An estimated 20,000 cancer deaths each year in the US are caused by pesticide residues on food
- It is estimated that American conventional farmers use 1.5 billion pounds of pesticides each year - about five pounds for every man, woman and child
- We have lost 75% of the genetic diversity of agricultural crops during this century - instead of reducing pesticides, companies are using more and more unnatural means to manipulate and produce food for populations
- 30 plants feed 95% of the world’s population
- In the past 100 years, 250,000 plant varieties have gone extinct and one plant variety disappears every six hours.
- The US, since the beginning of the 20th century, has lost 93% of their crop species diversity and 1/3 of the native cattle, sheep and pig breeds.
- 70% of the packaged foods sold in the US in 2000 contained genetically modified ingredients - YET no labels distinguish them from their traditional counterparts - WE are not even given the chance to make our own informed decisions!

- The pesticide run-offs from the Mississippi River have caused a dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico of 6,000 square miles where nothing can live - LARGER than the state of Connecticut
- We spent nearly 2 trillion dollars this year on health care - 16% of the US economy, but only 600 million on food (both conventional and non-conventional.)
- More than 50% of all Americans are considered to have a least one disease, pre-disease or borderline disease condition.
- 65% of American adults are classified as obese
- 150,000 school-aged children are diagnosed with child-onset diabetes
- 18 billion people (over 6% of the population in the US) have diabetes
- Childhood cancers have increased by 25% in the last 25 years

THESE ARE REAL STATISTICS THAT EFFECT REAL PEOPLE EVERYDAY!

If we knew these facts about our agricultural practices and their repercussions on our health, we would never choose conventional food over organics. We would try to change the system, see that our consumer power drives supply, and we could demand a healthier alternative.

When we do not know the facts and continue to purchase conventional food, it means we are literally making ourselves sick:

- We are supporting a corporate food system that reduces our farmable lands by 3,000 acres a day and erodes our topsoil - one inch of topsoil takes centuries to form!
- We are still supporting an agri-business that raises animals in less than humane conditions instead of feeding them nutritional grasses that they are NATURALLY meant to consume.
- We are still supporting pesticide use and the proliferation of highly processed and nutritionally devoid products - we are eating empty food!

We must ask ourselves, Why do we choose to use so many chemicals when we can see they are negatively affecting our minds, bodies and our environment?

We can trace chemical use back to a time before conventional agriculture was considered “conventional.”

Chemical use in the US can be linked to the end of the Second World War when the ammunition industry needed a new outlet for the nitrogen. We took this by-product of a war economy, repackaged it, and renamed it as fertilizer. The new wonder crop grew like promised, but so did the weeds. The fertilizer industry went back to their labs and came up with new products to fight the weeds and other pests - pesticides, herbicides, fungicides - and the vicious chemical cycle and war against the earth had begun.

Conventional farming began to use these chemicals to supposedly “protect” our “perfect” foods. In reality, this false protection comes at a very high cost for both our health and the environment. In the US, it takes 1/3 of a pound of synthetic agricultural chemicals to grow enough cotton for one t-shirt. In the last 50 years, more than 75,000 chemicals have been developed and introduced into the environment. Every year legal pesticide use kills 60 million birds. Current farming practices cause about 70% of the pollution in our nation’s rivers and streams, and 3 billion pounds of topsoil erode each year due to this pollution - a rate seven times faster than topsoil can be replaced naturally. Soil is a resource that took millions of years to accumulate and that humanity now races through!

Every day, approximately 1 million American children age 5 and under are exposed to levels of neurotoxic pesticides in food that exceed EPA safety standards merely by playing outside!

Conventional chemical farming has removed the nutrition from our soils and the safety from our environment - what we truly need is a soil teeming with plentiful and varied life forms to create plentiful and wholesome produce - nutritious soil results in nutritious food, and acting in a sustainable manner perpetuates a healthy cycle instead of a harmful one.

Much like we have chosen to use chemicals, we are increasingly allowing ourselves to be separated from our food sources and our farms by choosing foods that are not seasonal or local. We have disconnected ourselves from where our food comes from, how the animals we eat are treated and raised, and how our food is grown. We place no importance on sharing food together.

When we choose the route of anonymity - that is giving corporations more control over our foods, our consumer power is weakened - we give up personal control to food manufacturers who are then free to manipulate tastes, prices, and shipping methods for all of our foods. Cheap food is not good food; manipulated food is not pure food. AND, having everything and anything available in a supermarket year round means less nutritious choices for all of us.

Local Food provides the urbanite with one of the few remaining connections to nature. When we choose local farmer markets, we make a direct investment in a relationship - a heightened level of control over the food we eat - AND we help the farmer retain a greater share of what is spent on their food production. With this upfront payment, you bolster the farmer’s cash flow and keep him economically viable. So think of building relationships and making direct investments in your health on Saturday and Sunday

mornings when most local farmers markets - Dupont, Arlington, Georgetown - are open and waiting for you!

Choosing Organic reflects a desire to work with nature instead of against it - to use earth-friendly growing methods, natural insect repellants, crop rotation, and composting to promote the earth's sustainable nature.

Researchers from the University of Copenhagen compared plants grown under strict organic conditions with plants grown with the use of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers. It was found that the organic plants contained higher levels of vitamins and secondary metabolites - some of which are thought to lower the risk of cancer and heart disease. Rich organic soil is therefore known to produce food that contains 50% more vitamins, minerals and enzymes than conventionally farmed produce.

Organic soil also results in highly nutritious grasses and grains for our free-roaming chickens and cows, which directly affects the quality of the meat we enjoy. I've mentioned before that we are what WE eat, but another truth is that we are what THEY eat! (Mad Cow Disease)

Day after day, year after year, these benefits add up! Our own health and happiness, not to mention the future of life on earth, are in OUR hands when we sit down to eat!

When I opened my restaurant, I carried all of these organic and sustainable beliefs from my home to my business - together with my two partners, we opened our restaurant, Restaurant Nora, in January 1979.

When I became the first certified organic restaurant in the US in 1999, the goal was to provide my customers with a guarantee that they could trust the food they were served. I felt other chefs needed to know that an organic restaurant could be a viable, profitable business; I wanted to inspire my customers to bring a healthier diet into their homes; I wanted to demonstrate the priority of organics in my life and the passion I have to share this vision.

At the restaurant, certification also means expressing our organic values beyond the food - where EVERY aspect of our business takes the principle of sustainability into consideration. Our waiters wear organic cotton shirts that are laundered in our basement with biodegradable, phosphate-free detergent. All of our water is triple-filtered and is free of chlorine and all heavy metals. Our carpet is made from recyclable nylon. All of our pre-consumer vegetable trimmings, eggshells, and coffee grinds are composted. We produce one to two 55-gallon trashcans a day of compost material that is a wonderful natural resource.

By eating at Nora's you too are part of the healthful, sustainable cycle that perpetuates life. By choosing organics you know the product you work with: you know where it comes from and how it is farmed. Anonymity disappears: a face returns to the food we

share on our tables. While we may give up the freedom to order whatever we want at anytime of the year, this is a small price to pay for the health benefits of pure, clean food.

For me, organic food was never a choice - it was an absolute necessity. I had to become certified to protect and directly invest not only in my health, but also in our environment and in our future.

Thirty years ago, organic was a small, lonely, costly and risky business. Today, it is a thriving industry of \$15 billion at a 22% growth rate per year - compared to the 3-5 % growth rate of the conventional grocery industry. A dedication to organics is no longer an indulgence or a fashion trend - it is a sound business move for both restaurants and individuals.

Organic living has matured; fueled by a concern for our bodies and the lands we inhabit. It is a lifestyle that involves a more complete understanding of how nature works and allows us to find our own place within the fabric of life. Modern life can be lived sustainably, and I dream of organic living becoming the rule, rather than the exception.

Taking one step at a time is the easiest way to incorporate organics into our lives! Just imagine what drastic and wonderful changes we would see if each of us requested only organic milk or just organic chickens or lettuces or sugar! If each of us shopped at local farmer markets, learned what foods are in season, and how these foods are raised, grown and produced!

As the organic and sustainable movement grows, I am hopeful that more people will come to embrace a simple, yet profoundly important idea: when you eat, you are eating not just for yourself - you are eating for all of us and for those yet to come.