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CHEF RICK BAYLESS

Sustainability in food—
and business philosophy



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A COURSE IN SUSTAINABILITY

Chicago's own world-renowned chef Rick Bayless talks about his motivation, inspiration and his passionate support of local agriculture

You may know him as the winning chef from last season's "Top Chef Masters" or you may have dined at one of his three restaurants downtown. What you may not know about chef Rick Bayless is how much of his own beliefs and support for locals go into making his food.

Bayless has pioneered a local and sustainable food archetype in how he prepares, makes and even grows his own ingredients before they're used in his monthly-changing menus and signature dishes. To him, being sustainable extends beyond his work—it extends to all aspects of life. Since opening his first restaurant, Frontera Grill in the '80s, which offers affordable, authentic Mexican cuisine. Bayless has always had an original approach: Keep it local. Bayless even puts his money where his mouth is, offering grants to local farmers who otherwise might not be profitable without an extra boost.

For more than 20 years, Bayless has been supporting small organic farms and farmers markets in the Chicago area by purchasing produce, meats and other ingredients that go into his award-winning creations. Bayless grows some produce on his own, too. At his Chicago home, Bayless grows greens, edible flowers and herbs in his garden, all of which he uses for salads and other dishes at the upscale Topolobampo. In the warmer season, chilies and tomatoes are picked from his rooftop garden downtown and served as his signature "rooftop salsa" each day "I think that being involved in growing food is a very essential part of being a great chef," says Bayless.

When he's not busy gardening, cooking, hosting a TV show, penning cookbooks or utilizing and showcasing seasonal and regional ingredients in thinking up new dishes, he takes time to realize the beauty of it all, by teasing the taste buds of his Twitter followers with photos of his latest plate and by answering foodies' questions.

We caught up with Bayless to talk about his motivation, inspiration and his passionate support of local agriculture.



TOPOLO

What got you buying locally and eventually growing some of your own ingredients?

I don't think you can have great food without great local agriculture. When we first opened Frontera 23 years ago, there was almost nowhere—well, actually it took me three years to find one farm to buy from and that farm went out of business the next year. Then I found another one and that one went out of business. The whole idea of local produce is one that is fairly recent. When we opened Frontera there were no farmers markets in the city of Chicago. There was one in Evanston, but nothing in Chicago at all. We've had a big scene change when it comes to the relationship between food and locale in the United States—and specifically here in Chicago.

When we opened up, I knew we couldn't be a great restaurant if we didn't have great, local agriculture. I looked for small local farms we could buy from. Then, I just started growing stuff myself. I realized that the best way for me as a chef to understand where the food comes from—and what it means to actually produce it—was to do it myself. Now I have it much better—and I say this to every chef and that's one of the reasons we have the restaurant garden on the roof—because I want the chefs to go up there and have a sense of what it's like to grow and to harvest and to take care of what's being grown on our property. You look at food in a very different way if you grow it yourself.



What would you say your environmental or sustainable philosophy is in terms of being a chef?

The one thing that you find out when you start working with local farmers is the best ones—the ones that give you the best looking, beautiful, delicious food—are the ones who are working in a sustainable way. Being an organic or sustainable farmer means you're taking care of the earth. A lot of the organic farmers will tell you they really are dirt farmers because they're creating real, healthy dirt. When you find people who take care of the earth itself, usually whatever they grow they're taking special care of as well.

I think the sustainability aspect, if you're looking at it purely from an aesthetic standpoint, relates directly to great-tasting food, great ingredients to work with. There's a flip side to that..., you could say: Well, yes, I don't want to use up all of our resources in the world. I want my daughter to live in a world that's a pleasant, positive one, not in one where they're trying to deal with the horrors of what we've handed them. I believe we have to take care to find a sustainable way to live. I can't stand it when I hear chefs who run just awful kitchens where they yell and scream at everybody and work people 80 hours a week, and then they say, 'Oh, but we only use organic ingredients.' Well, it doesn't make sense to me because sustainability is a way that you look at all of life, not just one aspect of it. I would say our philosophy of sustainability is all-encompassing, it doesn't just deal with food ingredients we get to cook with.

How does Frontera Farmer Foundation help local farmers?

What our foundation does is provide capital improvement grants for small, family-owned farms in the Midwest. The reason we do that is because most of these small farms do not make enough money to buy the kind of equipment they need to become more profitable. Our foundation exists solely to help them. We want to help them buy watering systems, new tractors, greenhouses—something that will help make their businesses more profitable. Most of these businesses will clear about \$35,000 to \$40,000 in a year, if they're good. It is just not enough to take a quarter of the revenue and invest it in a new tractor, but that's what they need if they're going to take their farm to a bigger or more profitable level.

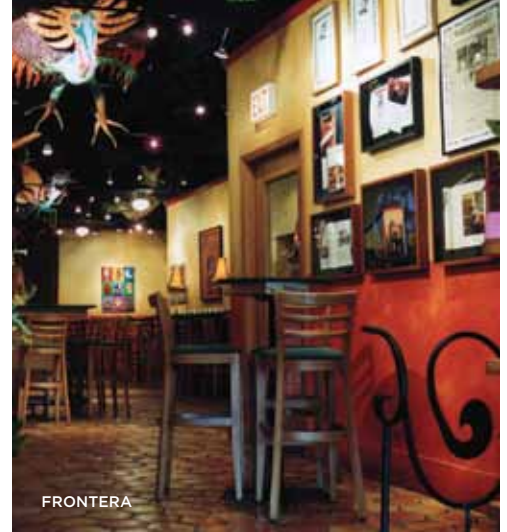
What facets of Xoco are green and what motivated you to gain LEED certification?

We work in a very sustainable way here, but there's something about LEED certification that people recognize. I wanted to show people you could do a restaurant that is quick-service, and didn't cost a fortune to build out and still do it in an environmentally sustainable way. We worked with an architectural firm that focused on sustainability to put this whole project together. If you go for LEED certification, there are tons of things you have to do in terms of the basic build-out. We got most of our points for purchasing almost all of our building materials manufactured within a 500-mile radius [of Chicago]. We worked a lot on alternative lighting in the place so everything wasn't just incandescent bulbs. We also worked hard on the exhaust system, the biggest energy hog in a restaurant because it sucks out all the air-conditioned and heated air. We worked to find a manufacturer—I think there's only one manufacturer of an eco-friendly exhaust hood—and we found that one after a long search. It really worked, although, the city of Chicago didn't want it because it doesn't fit their rules. We had to convince them and that took a lot of time because most of the building codes are not made for environmentally friendly equipment.



With the knowledge that you've gained, what advice would you give to other chefs who may not be embracing sustainability?

Well, it's easier than you'd think most of the time. A lot of people will say, 'Oh, I can't buy organic stuff because it costs more.' Well, what you learn is to think about ways you can utilize some organic things in the midst of other things. You take it in steps. Then, the next thing you know, you figure out ways to work it into other places as well or you're going to figure out ways to utilize more of a particular product and have less waste. It's very interesting: If you just put your mind to it, you'll figure it out. I always suggest everybody take it one step at a time. Don't try to go green all at once or to go organic or to go local, just take it a step at a time. When you get something that feels right and it finds a home in your place, then start thinking about the next thing you can do. We certainly didn't do it all at once. Sometimes we look back and laugh. Our world is so complex right now. If we looked at it and thought we were going to do it, we would have all said absolutely no we can't do that, it's just too much. But, we did it one step at a time and here, 20 years later, we look back on it and say, 'Wow, we did it.'



You're an avid Tweeter. What's the experience been like connecting with others?

I like it a lot because it's a short format. If you tell me I had to blog and endlessly answer questions, I'd never have time to do it. My office is above the restaurant, but often times I have to take an elevator down to the basement, I'll answer a couple of tweets while I'm waiting for the elevator. I'll just pull my phone out. I do it all on my phone, I don't do it anywhere else. It gives me the opportunity to listen to people, to stay in touch with people. I didn't even realize I was going to have this relationship with all these people that are following me. Mostly I did it because I like being able to look around me and just see what's beautiful, capture it in a photograph and post it for other people to share the beauty that's around me. I just posted a few minutes ago this great big pile of roasted poblano peppers cut into strips. It's probably a gallon and a half of these, and they're wood-roasted and have the most amazing aroma. Oh my God. You know the expression 'stop and smell the roses?' That's what Tweeting is for me. It's my opportunity to stop and look around me, and ask what is just remarkably beautiful here? And when you see the pile of those roasted peppers, you might just walk on by it if your mind is on the next thing you're doing. I try to stay aware enough to see that beauty that is right around me.

Read more about this topic at mindfulmetropolis.com/blog.

Bayless' newest book entitled [Fiesta at Rick's](#), a casual, party cookbook, hits shelves in May. Follow Bayless on Twitter: [@Rick_Bayless](#). Catch Bayless at this year's [FamilyFarmed.org Expo](#) for a cooking demo on Saturday, March 13 at 10:30am.

Brett Marlow is a Chicago-based freelance writer. For more of his writings, visit bretttandbutter.com.