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When 'Local Sourcing' Means Aisle 12



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You buy your sunflower shoots, summer cherries and free-range chicken at the farmers' market. You stuff your canvas tote bag with organic and artisanal goodies: a sticky jar of raw wildflower honey, a wedge of pungent [cheese](#) from a rustic dairy, a loaf of whole-grain bread that's so dense and bumpy with seeds and nuts that it resembles a block of macadam.

Hauling this nourishment home makes you feel noble and healthy. You're supporting local farmers and entrepreneurs. You're in touch with the earth.

So then why is it, you wonder, that when you get home from work one evening, drained and famished, you find yourself layering slices of American cheese onto a bed of mass-produced white bread, frying it up in butter whose provenance you know only as "the supermarket," and dunking the crispy melting result into a lake of Heinz ketchup?

Why? Well, because it's delicious, for one thing.

But there are other reasons, too, and they're worth considering as the Fourth of July rolls around. Because let's be frank: As much as we dutifully internalize the wise teachings of [Alice Waters](#) and [Michael Pollan](#), there are plenty of unlocal, unartisanal and unapologetically corporate products that we continue to crave and cook with.

And that may be fine, at least in moderation, as some of the nation's most principled and acclaimed chefs will assure you. To declare your independence as an American eater is to embrace the knowledge that the pursuit of happiness is sometimes going to involve mustard or peanut butter that might have been stirred by a robot.

Ask around, and it's rare that you'll find a leading light in the culinary world who doesn't have a semi-secret fondness for at least one of these supermarket stalwarts, whether Hellmann's mayonnaise or Skippy peanut butter, Premium saltines or Oreos or Cheerios, American cheese or generic ice-cream sandwiches.

"There is something to be said about all those things," said Dan Kluger, the chef at [ABC Kitchen](#), whose Web site proclaims that the New York restaurant is "passionately committed to offering the freshest organic and local ingredients possible."

A lot of grocery-store staples "may not be organic," he added. "They may not be the best products in terms of our environment and GMOs and all those kinds of things, but we kind of grew up with them, and you can't help but revert back to them in a pinch."

Besides, said [Wylie Dufresne](#), the chef at WD-50 in New York: "It's actually a fuller life to try all that stuff. I would rather not be pious about things."

He should know. While creating his playfully surreal reinterpretations of American cuisine, Mr. Dufresne powers himself through a day in the kitchen by dipping into a ready stockpile of American cheese slices.

"I like all cheese, but my guiltiest pleasure is definitely American cheese," he said. "We have it in the restaurant all the time. The guys know that they need to stock Land O'Lakes American, or Chef will not be pleased. I've got probably four five-pound blocks of it in my walk-in right now. I'm constantly snacking on it."

Years ago, while working for the chef [Jean-Georges Vongerichten](#) at the Bellagio hotel in Las Vegas, he would fold a slice in half and spoon in a smear of steak tartare. "American cheese is the perfect soft taco," Mr. Dufresne said.

His habit might sound like one iconoclastic chef's personal quirk. It turns out, though, that top chefs across the country — in Atlanta and Boston and even the high-minded precincts of Portlandia — are more than willing to own up to a particular corporate-food crush.

[Michael Chiarello](#) is an organic vintner and a spirited advocate for the integrity of straight-from-the-soil California cooking, but if you were to poke around in his pantry in the Napa Valley, he said, you'd find, "behind the almond butter and the hazelnut butter and the organic peanut butter with two ounces of oil on the top you have to stir up every time you want a sammy," an aqua-topped jar of Skippy.

As an avid cyclist who often depends on peanut butter sandwiches for sustenance on long rides, Mr. Chiarello has a grievance with organic peanut butter. He equates it to "swallowing chalk."

“I about fell off my bike trying to eat an organic peanut butter and banana sandwich, because you’re just choking,” he said. “There’s not enough water in your water bottle to get it down. You’ve got to smack yourself in the back of the head.”

Does Tony Maws conjure up his own aioli at [Craigie on Main](#), his restaurant in Cambridge, Mass.? Of course he does. But the chef also calls himself “a complete sucker for Hellmann’s mayonnaise,” and can’t shake memories of dipping leaves of pressure-cooked artichokes into a cool jar of Hellmann’s when he was a kid.

“No other mayonnaise was acceptable in my house,” Mr. Maws said. “I’m also a sucker for Fritos. If I get in a car and I’m driving somewhere, there’s a bag of Fritos. I don’t know why. At the restaurant I make my own chips.”

Food & Wine magazine recently picked [Jenn Louis](#) to join its latest crop of Best New Chefs for her cooking at two restaurants, Lincoln and Sunshine Tavern, in Portland, Ore., a city so zealously fixated on food sourcing that it has become an easy target for parody. Ms. Louis herself tends to eat in the conscious, healthy way she ate while growing up in Southern California. But she, too, has a weak spot or two.

“Occasionally if there’s an [ice cream](#) truck going by, I love the old-school ice cream sandwiches,” she said. “We have great local ice cream up here. They don’t taste like that. But it’s very nostalgic. I really like how you peel the wrapper and you kind of lick around that rectangular ice cream sticking out of the little chocolate [cookies](#).”

Tellingly, perhaps, Ms. Louis is 40. A lot of chefs making waves right now grew up in the 1970s and ’80s, which means that, even if they had nutritionally vigilant parents, they developed their palates during a golden age for the unquestioned dominance of mass-produced treats and condiments.

Americans tend to ask a lot more questions now: Is this beef grass-fed? Are those heirloom [tomatoes](#)?

Thinking locally, growing organically and cooking with a farm-to-fork philosophy have indisputably raised the level of gastronomic dialogue in this country, but at times they’ve also fostered a sense of polarization.

[Aaron Bobrow-Strain](#), the author of an exhaustive new social history called “White Bread,” recalls buying a loaf of Wonder Bread (for book research) at a grocery counter in Walla Walla, Wash., where he lives, and getting a glare from a fellow citizen.

“He looked at me like I was buying meth,” Mr. Bobrow-Strain said. “That’s when it struck me that this is about more than taste or health.”

The way he sees it, arguments about food too often degenerate into a false duality between “the virtuous people” and “the pitiful people in need of saving who just can’t make the right decisions.”

Phil Lempert, an industry analyst who bills himself as [the Supermarket Guru](#), sees some of the stringent focus on “only local, only organic” as unrealistic, and out of step with how most people actually eat. “Unfortunately, in our food world, we think in terms of extremes,” he said. “That if it’s on a supermarket shelf and commercial, it’s bad. If somebody’s making it in their basement, not adhering to any food-safety standards or whatever else, it’s got to be good. We’ve got to relax just a little bit. And understand that there’s something in between.”

Whether it’s Dan Barber on the East Coast or [David Kinch](#) on the West, chefs have played a pivotal role in elevating the dialogue about agriculture in the United States. But for some elite cooks, virtue doesn’t automatically delight the tongue. Proudly “house-made” ketchup can be found in ramekins at hundreds of brunch spots these days, but many chefs don’t actually like it.

“I don’t want your house-made ketchup,” said Erik Anderson, who, with his fellow chef Josh Habiger, runs the kitchen at the buzzed-about [Catbird Seat](#) in [Nashville](#). “I’m sorry. I’m sure it’s delicious, but it’s not the taste I’m looking for with my eggs.”

[Gabrielle Hamilton](#), the chef and owner of [Prune](#), in the East Village, pointed out that as noble as it may be, house-made ketchup never seems to replicate the taste and consistency that our palates often expect.

“They put too much cinnamon stick in it, or cloves,” she said. “It tastes like pie filling. They want it to taste like Heinz, and they can’t figure it out.”

Linton Hopkins has tried. At the [Holeman & Finch Public House](#) in Atlanta, a restaurant that’s famous for (among other things) its [double cheeseburgers](#), and at the nearby Restaurant Eugene, the 45-year-old chef created a house-made mix after becoming obsessed with replicating the flavor and flow of Heinz.

“We make our own ketchup, but I used Heinz as our model,” he said. “Heinz just nails the umami of ketchup better than anybody. I personally spent weeks on the project, testing batches and matching it up against Heinz.”

He has experimented, too, with echoing the crunch of a Ritz cracker. “One goal of mine is the saltine,” he said. “We haven’t accomplished that yet, but I love the saltine cracker.”

And sometimes he simply incorporates a brand-name product itself, instead of trying to hatch its small-batch clone. “I use Coke all the time in our cooking,” he said. “I use it in barbecue sauce. Coke has a lot of aromatics in it. We rub it on suckling pig.”

To his thinking, category-killers like Coke and Heinz have earned a place, whether you like it or not, as a central part of the American culinary landscape. “There’s nothing wrong with that,” he said. “Part of it is the fun of celebrating Americana and not turning an elitist eye to everything we do in America.”

On some menus, that dab of supermarket-sourced ingredients can give a dish an extra layer of depth, even a wink to the past. At ABV Wine Bar in Manhattan, the chef, Corey Cova, is serving a “[foie gras fluffernutter](#)” that summons up the sticky smush of that Generation X after-school snack, all the way down to a bed of Wonder Bread.

At Prune, Ms. Hamilton has long relied on Pepperidge Farm white bread to make the restaurant’s [shrimp toast](#). To do so was a “researched and curated” decision, she said; she ran scores of breads through the hot-oil gantlet to see which one worked best.

“It’s the only one that stands up in the fryer,” she said. “It’s got excellent structure. Nothing else does it.”

So what if it wasn’t baked by a squadron of bearded, monastic Brooklynites using a sacred strain of yeast that can be traced back to the Last Supper.

“Some of these things are correct and delicious on their own terms,” Ms. Hamilton said. “They don’t need to be apologized for.”