
Organic
Connections
MAY–JUNE 2012
THE AWARD-WINNING MAGAZINE OF NATURAL VITALITY
JOEL SALATIN
LIFE LESSONS FROM A FARMER
PROFESSOR DAVID MONTGOMERY
OUR DISAPPEARING DIRT
CHEF MICHEL NISCHAN
SERVING THE UNDERSERVED

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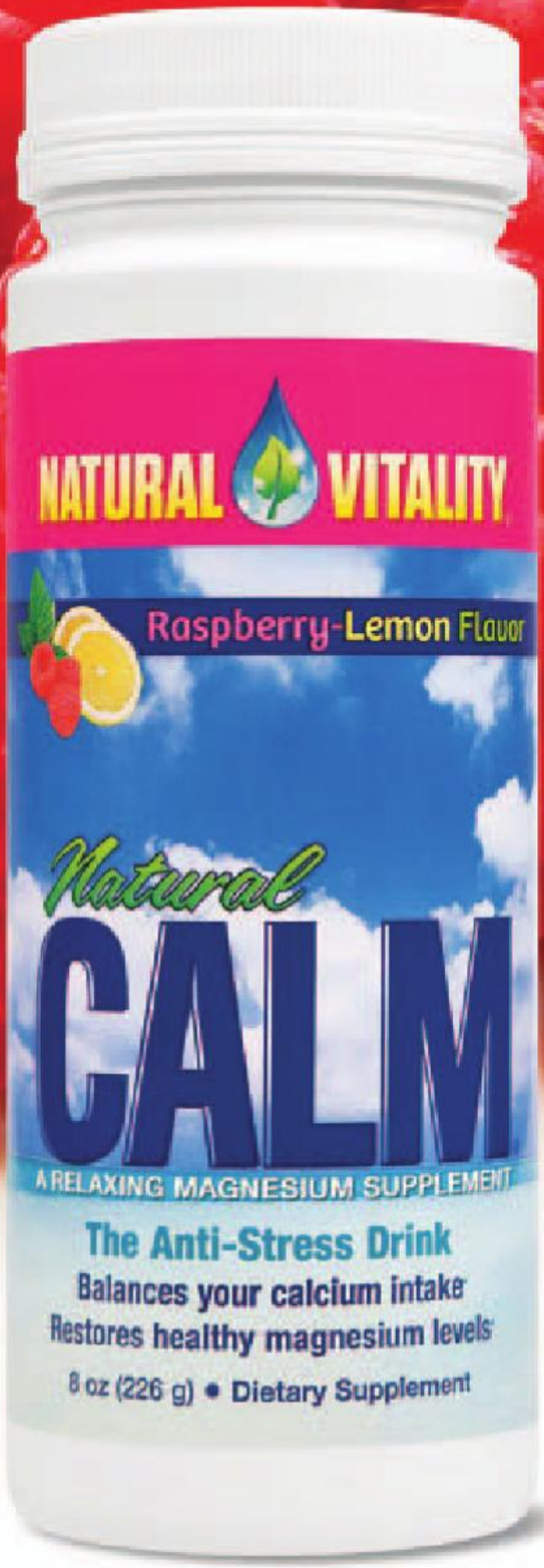

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The Court of Your Own Opinion

Sometimes it's hard (if not impossible) to tell what's *really* going on in the world. It's human nature for individuals and organizations to promote themselves in a favorable, self-serving way. Research, PR and advertising firms have made profitable industries out of this. They work hard to find out what you want to hear, and feed it back to you with a high degree of polish. That's why we have *clean* coal, *fruit* loops, fast *food*, the *benefits* of GMOs, the *sweet surprise* of high-fructose corn syrup, and politicians *for the people*.

Sure, there are things wrong with the world; but if you listen to the words and images you're fed by corporate spokesmen, politicians, and anyone else with an agenda, nobody (except their sworn enemies) is really responsibile for anything.

So, how can we make sound judgment calls and decide who and what to believe? Let's start with things we can all agree are not acceptable. How about slavery, torture, sexism, racism, persecution, murder, assault, rape, fraud, deceit or intimidation? Any objections? There are laws covering most of these. But how about the gray areas of fraud, deceit and intimidation?

It helps to define our terms. *Fraud* is criminal *or* wrongful deception intended to result in financial or personal gain. *Deceit* is the action or practice of misleading someone by concealing or misrepresenting the truth; a dishonest act or statement. *Intimidation* is frightening or over-impressing someone in order to make them do what one wants or so that they become silent or inhibited. If these points seem at all trivial, don't forget that fraud, deceit and intimidation were behind the meltdown of our economy.

In the absence of clearly defined law, the court is in your mind and you're the judge. Is what is being said consistent with what is actually being done? Is the public interest being served, or is it the interests of an individual or powerful group? Is government working for the good of the people or responding to lobbyists? Is it about short-term gain or long-term sustainability? We may not have law degrees but we've all seen enough legal dramas to competently assume our own bench.

These aren't easy questions and there's no *Ethics for Dummies* formula to avoid using our God-given brains to address them. Bloggers, pundits and credentialed experts can give testimony, but it's up to you to judge the credibility of their arguments.

Now is a good time to fire up that thinking machine and start making your own judgment calls. It's *your* life after all.

What do you think?

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In this issue

Organic Connections magazine is an award-winning publication brought to you by Natural Vitality—a purpose-driven human nutrition company. Our core belief is that you can't be fully healthy in an unhealthy environment. We publish *Organic Connections* to help inspire and educate readers with profiles of people working to make our world healthier and more sustainable. To learn about Natural Vitality's broader mission and our Natural Revitalization environmental action initiative, visit www.naturalvitality.com.

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Professor David Montgomery

Our Disappearing Dirt

by Anna Soref

Global warming, polluted water and air, vanishing rainforests and animal species—our plates are full of worry for the environment. Yet a growing movement wants our attention, concern and action focused on something right under our feet—dirt. Why? We've lost about one-third of the world's topsoil and most of that loss has taken place in the last 50 years.

Modern agriculture's rampant use of pesticides and plows is destroying the quality, and quantity, of the planet's soil. The bottom line: without fertile soil, we cannot produce the food necessary to live. The scary number: we could be out of fertile soil in the next 100 years.

If you look back through history, from Mesopotamia to the Dust Bowl, when a civilization didn't take care of its soil, it proved unable to take care of its people. The fate of a society as directly tied to how its people treat the land is the premise of *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations* (University of California Press, 2007), written by David Montgomery, a professor of geology at the University of Washington.

Do the Math

Apparently dirt should be on the endangered species list—and just as with animals, its dwindling numbers are cause for alarm. "You don't have to completely run out of soil to have it adversely affect a society," Montgomery says. "We know that the global population is expected to rise substantially by 2050. If we are degrading our agricultural land at the same time that we are growing our population, somewhere those curves are going to intersect—that's not a good thing. The areas that are most at risk in the next half-century are the semiarid lands, which is where about one-third of humanity lives. And if we continue to degrade soils as we are, then it's no exaggeration that civilization is at stake."

What could we possibly be doing to consume and lose so much dirt? A primary culprit is that seemingly benign fundamental piece of farming equipment *the plow*. "The very thing it's designed to do, turn the earth, leaves the soil vulnerable and bare," remarks Montgomery. Contrast conventional farmland with other natural landscapes such as forests or mountains, where you don't see a lot of bare ground. "Most of the surface of the earth outside the arid areas is covered with plants. For hundreds of millions of years the leaves and needles have provided protection, reducing erosion by holding soil in place," he explains.

In addition to the plow, what are now called "conventional" farming methods, but are really a recent departure from agricultural traditions, involve pesticide application that degrades soil nutrition.

Monocrop farming, a cornerstone of industrial agriculture, leaves the ground bare and exposed for months at a time. So these methods result in weak, exposed soil that is very susceptible to fast rates of erosion in, say, a rainstorm, according to Montgomery.

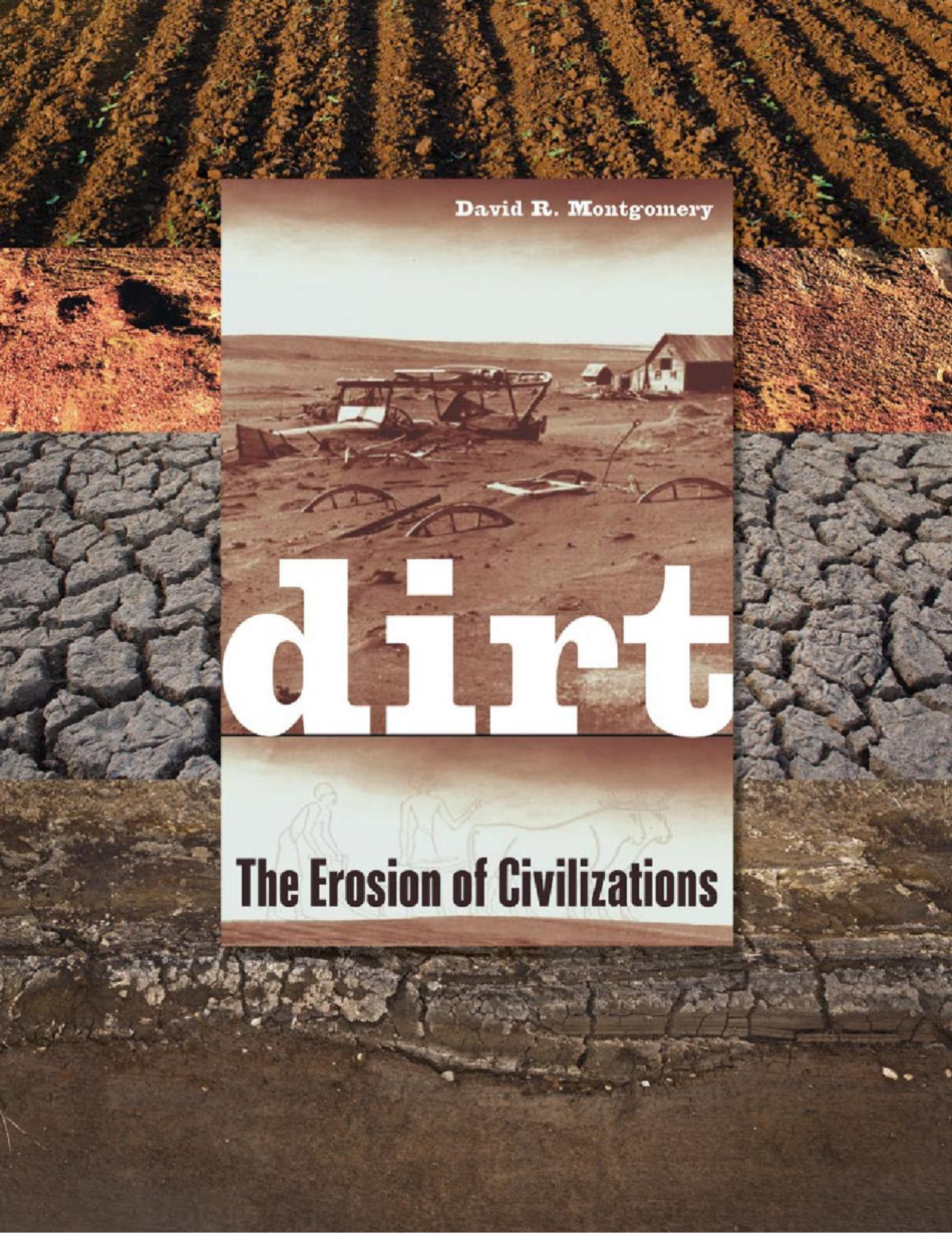
This troubling news about the plow and high-yield farming begs the question, How can we possibly farm and produce the rising amounts of food necessary without them? Organic and no-till farming are the answers, claims Montgomery. Organic farming methods help maintain the fertility of the land, increasingly important in light of a growing body of research showing that the soil's nutrients, such as calcium, magnesium and iron, have dropped between 15 and 30 percent during the past 70 years due to industrial farming methods.

"The whole idea of cycling nutrients and bringing matter back to the land, and supporting life in the soil that mediates the transfer of nutrients from earth to plants is the very essence of organic farming," Montgomery says. "Instead of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, organic farming uses animal manure, compost, natural pest control, and crop rotation to invest in the soil. Organic farming keeps matter in the soil that helps retain moisture, improves soil structure, helps liberate nutrients, and is itself a source of plant nutrients."

Increasingly, farmers are opting for no-till farming techniques. These rely on farm tools that rotate less of the soil, and utilization of cover crops—vegetation planted in between growth seasons that holds the soil in place and provides other benefits.

Soil Sustainability

The key to long-term soil sustainability is twofold, Montgomery points out. First is just keeping the soil in place by eradicating the plow; second is maintaining the fertility of the soil that's there. But if the soil erodes much faster than it's produced, you can have a very fertile soil that will disappear;


David R. Montgomery
dirt
The Erosion of Civilizations

so we need to get both right. For example, large-scale organic farms that are plow-intensive might have more fertile, robust soil than "conventional" farms, but they may still erode the earth more quickly than new soil can be produced.

Many are skeptical that organic, no-till farming can feed the world, but Montgomery assures us it can. "If you look at farming, there is a very counterintuitive effect in terms of productivity. Large-scale farms aren't necessarily more productive than small farms. In fact, if you look at the gross output of total amount of food per hectare instead of the productivity of an individual crop per hectare—which is the relevant way for feeding our soon-to-be post-oil world—then the most productive farms are small-scale labor-intensive farms, not large-scale industrial agriculture. Therefore, if you really take the challenge of how will we feed the world later this century, the idea that we would do it with large-scale industrial agriculture actually flies in the face of the reality," he says.

The Dirt on GMOs

Amid the growing revelation that industrial farming methods are rendering our soil infertile and promoting staggering rates of erosion, the added effects of genetically modified organisms loom large. Thus far, potential health concerns posed by GMOs have centered on our food supply, not the soil. But considering that GM plant material will eventually wind up in the soil, questions about possible adverse long-term effects arise.

"What soil ecologists have learned in the past couple of decades about how the life below ground is so finely tuned to the life above ground is simply amazing," Montgomery reflects. "For instance, the way plants exude sugar that is tailored to grow the microbes that actually assist the plant with nutrient transfer from the soil into the plant and serve as a shield against pest and disease organisms. So, if we start introducing new organisms designed to do particular things—GMOs—how are they going to interact with a system that has evolved over a much longer time cycle? There is a great chance for unintended consequences. And all of this is for a promise of increased yields from GMO production that has not been met yet. There's not a lot of evidence that yields have gone up with GMO crops."

Essentially, as with most GMO concerns, how they will ultimately affect the soil is a wait-and-see proposition. But Montgomery asserts an even bigger problem with GMOs. If the goal of this technology is to actually feed the undernourished and truly destitute, you are never going to feed these people who don't have money by selling them proprietary technology, he warns. "They don't have any money. So the idea that you can feed the hungry with seeds that have to be purchased each year from a company is ludicrous."

Foundation of Our World

We don't give dirt a whole lot of credit; we spend more time maligning it than singing its praises. Even the term *dirt* is synonymous with grime, filth and muck. But consider that there are 10 billion microorganisms in a handful of fertile soil. That's more than the population of our planet—*in one handful of dirt*. Soil is truly a complex and little-known entity when you think how much life it holds, and gives. "Our world is built upon a world that we take for granted, that we don't notice, that we are barely aware of, and yet it's foundational for our world," Montgomery says. "Ninety-seven percent of our food comes from the soil. It's the one resource we can't afford to undercut because it really is the foundation of our world.

"We've been remodeling many ecosystems into agro-ecosystems to feed ourselves, and we're doing it with a philosophy of adding fertilizers and poisoning the life in the ground that we don't understand and don't like. The problem with pest killing like that is it's not the beneficial organisms that come back first after we apply biocides; it's the pest organisms. Consequently a biocide-based agriculture is essentially a recipe for addiction." Again, Montgomery states the answer for sustainability lies in organic farming methods that work with this complex, bio-rich soil, which is far from muck, grime or filth.

Getting people to somehow relate to dirt, to care about soil, is vital to reverse the current destructive systems in place. "Soil is the most underappreciated and devalued natural resource," Montgomery continues. "Whales are these beautiful charismatic, majestic creatures, and it's easier to rally people to save the animals that we can relate to in the megafauna than the bugs and things that people don't really like. Can you imagine rallying people to save the worms? That would be on Stephen Colbert in a minute!"

As passionate as he is about the plight of dirt in the face of erosion, Montgomery concedes he doesn't exactly get excited when he sees the stuff. "If I go to the ocean and see a whale breach, it's an incredible emotionally positive experience; it's inspiring. And I have to admit, if I look at a landscape covered by fertile soil I am not particularly inspired. Yet when I see land that has been so degraded it can no longer support farming and life—and I'm thinking of places in the Amazon I've been to that have been stripped of forest and intensely harvested and now are a barren wasteland—that hits me in the gut; there's a real intense emotional reaction in terms of how people could so abuse the land that it wouldn't be able to take care of them in the future. So, if I go to a well-run farm and stick my hands in fertile soil, I'm impressed; but it doesn't strike me with the same emotional impact as on the negative side. And that, I think, is one of the problems with soil—it's not as sexy or exhilarating as a whale breaching. Even so, in the big picture of things, it's far more important."

As an undergrad, Montgomery loved the field of geology because he could read the history of the earth through the rocks that compose it. While he was learning all about the importance of rocks, a book he discovered in a bargain bin at a local bookshop altered his course of study. It was an out-of-print work, written immediately after the Dust Bowl, about soil degradation. It changed the way he viewed soil. Montgomery's years of teaching and fieldwork made him realize that there's a communication or education gap between people like himself who spend decades studying these ideas and those who never give them a thought. He wrote *Dirt* to offer readers a look at soil through the lens of history, because it takes the politics off the table.

Certainly awareness about the importance of soil fertility and even erosion is gaining ground. Urban farmers, Community Supported Agricultural programs, and media such as the film *Food, Inc.* all exist, in part, to turn the tide on soil degradation. "Today I've seen a big attitudinal shift on the part of students," Montgomery notes. "They are thinking and talking about sustainability, whereas five years ago they weren't."

The Next Step

Heartening news about soil degradation is that human behavior can actually restore soil much quicker than nature can build it.

Our world is built upon a world that we take for granted, that we don't notice, that we are barely aware of, and yet it's foundational for our world. **Ninety-seven percent of our food comes from the soil**. It's the one resource we can't afford to undercut because it really is the foundation of our world.

"I've seen farms turned around from poor soil to adequate soil to producing higher yields in a decade or two," says Montgomery. "To a farmer, that might be too long, but the idea that you can reinvest in the soil and have it return in that time scale is amazing."

Although it's easy to leave it up to farmers to adopt methods to protect soil, there's a lot an individual can do. Consider composting. "My wife is an organic gardener and she has literally transformed our yard over 10 years," relates Montgomery. "She did it with mulching and composting mostly, and it's had an incredible effect on the life of the soil and the productivity of the yard. Composting is a great way to revitalize soil."

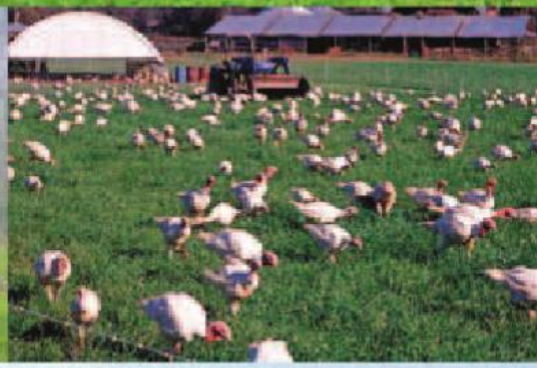
He also suggests thinking about any of the spaces to which you have access, such as your lawn, the soil around the trees on the street, or the planting bed in an apartment window. How one treats the soil can have a tremendous impact on what it produces, whether you're growing food, flowers or trees.

Of course, buying organic produce and foods is an excellent means of supporting healthy soil, Montgomery concludes. "Although right now there's no way to ascertain if the farmers you buy from are using methods that support the soil, most of the organic farmers I know are very sensitized to the issue of erosion and are managing their land pretty darn well."

To find out more about ways you can prevent soil erosion and contribute to soil fertility, visit Remineralize the Earth at www.remineralize.org and the Bionutrient Food Association at www.bionutrient.org.








Joel Salatin

Life Lessons from a Farmer

by Bruce Boyers

Joel Salatin—farmer, author, featured speaker, and the subject of several documentaries—has spent his life learning from nature how a food system is supposed to function, and putting it into practice at his Polyface Farm. Then, raising his eyes up from his tractor, he has wondered how average citizens, having no connection to the sources of their food and possessing no food security whatsoever, could possibly think they could go on this way.

"While doing a lot of public speaking events, it has struck me just how abnormal our twenty-first-century civilization is," Joel told *Organic Connections*. "What's really frustrating is that I meet so many people who, when you start talking about some of these issues—whether it's the lack of nutrition in foods, the pathogenicity of food, the pollution stimulation of factory farming, animal abuse in factory farming, peak oil, energy use, the carbon cycle, soil depletion or water depletion—have this kind of glazed look come over them. It's almost as if the average person really thinks that we're going to be the cleverest, smartest civilization in the world; in fact, so clever, so smart, that we'll be the first one to actually figure out how to sever our relationship with an ecological umbilical. We'll be able to sail off cavalierly into some *Star Trek* future without any visceral relationship to an ecological womb."

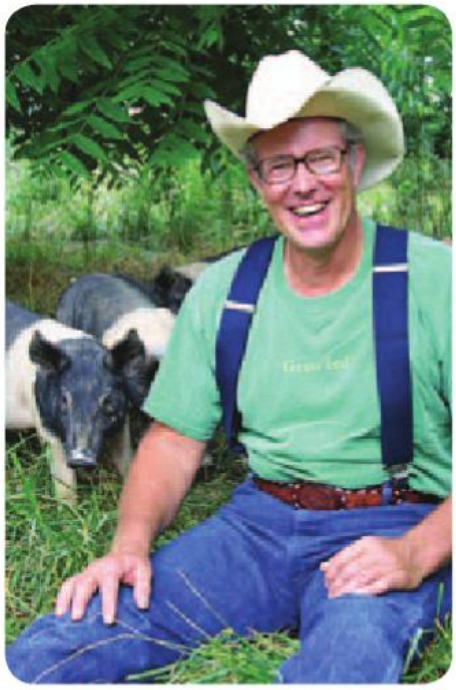
Joel's observations brought him to write his latest book, *Folks, This Ain't Normal: A Farmer's Advice for Happier Hens, Healthier People, and a Better World*. In this book, Joel observes that a couple hundred years ago there was a garden and animals right outside the door of the average home. It has now come to the point where food is produced someplace else, in some mysterious fashion, and magically arrives, fully prepared, or nearly so, in front of the consumer.

"For people like me who think we are really attached to nature, we'd better figure out how to build a nest, live in it and regenerate it or we're not going to be doing right by our own stewardship mandates," Joel said. "What led me to write *Folks, This Ain't Normal* was this profound disconnect and even almost seeming ambivalence toward a really basic response to an intuitive understanding that we're heading for a precarious precipice. It's so difficult that nobody wants to even think about it; so we'll simply bury our heads in the celebrity Hollywood bellybutton-piercing culture and somehow it will all work out."

Nature, Teach Me

It is true that Joel grew up in an environment many of us have never seen. "I guess I began realizing in high school how different I was from the rest of the world," Joel recalled. "While everybody else was lazing around on Saturday mornings, I was up every Saturday, year round, at about four o'clock, to put my stuff together and get into the local curb market.[1] So I wasn't about staying up on Friday nights or whatever.

"That period was also the beginning of *Mother Earth News* and the hippy movement, and we had a steady stream of counter-culture hippy types coming through the house. Although we were a very conservative, religious family, and nobody else in our church, certainly, had entertained people like this,



If we are to keep these things decentralized, if we are to spread out this food production as opposed to concentrating it, we're going to need a more historically normal number of farmers. Talk about abnormal—we're the first civilization in the world that has twice as many people incarcerated in prisons as we have growing our food!

we found them to be our people; they were interested in the same kind of things we were, and we just shared a lot of camaraderie with them. So very early on I realized, 'Whoo, boy, I'm cut from a different cloth than the average person here.'"

As Joel learned the many aspects of farming, he took a tip from the natural progressions that were happening right in front of him. "When you come to the farm in a spirit of humility and you say, 'Nature, teach me,' then you see things that others don't see and you have to invent things that others don't *know* are necessary," he said.

"For instance, if you look at nature, you realize that animals don't stay in the same place; they're always moving. As soon as you adopt that as one of your patterned convictions, suddenly you're not trying to figure out how to build a football-field-sized building to house animals. Instead you're trying to figure out how to make shelter and housing temporary and/or portable. The manner in which you view the way it's supposed to be drives the design innovation of what you're developing.

"In another example, industrial agriculture is trying to teach us that depleted and infertile soil lacks chemicals, herbicides and pesticides. Instead, we can look at that and ask about how soil is built throughout history. It has always been built with perennials, herbivores, and periodic rest and disturbance cycles. How do we stimulate this landscape in respect and honor to this carbon, real-time solar, biomass accumulation-decomposition cycle?"

No Animal-less Ecology

It is evident from watching Joel on film, and reading his books, that he has perceived and utilizes animals as part of this cycle. "From pole to pole, at the tropics and every place in between, there is no animal-less ecology," Joel explained. "One of the signature roles of animals in nature is that they're the only way, except for humans and machinery, to defy gravity in fertility placement. Fertility—nutrients and biomass—tends to move downhill. That's why you have fertile valleys and infertile mountaintops and slopes. Animals—especially herbivores—typically eat in the valleys, then climb up to the ridges to sleep and defecate because that's where they can look out and see if they have predators coming up to attack them. That cycle then carries the valley nutrients back up on top of the hill so that it can restart the sequence.

"Herbivores also prune the biomass to restart it to its fast growth cycle. If you don't prune the grass, it will just simply turn brown and oxidize in the atmosphere, and you won't have any carbon sequestration or anything. So the role of the herbivore is to prune the plants for more verdant and stimulated growth and for more efficient conversion of solar energy into decomposable biomass. I call it the biomass accumulation restart button."

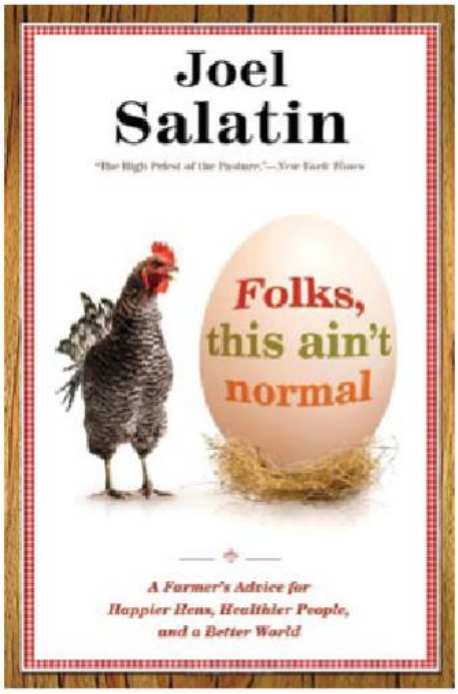
In observing Joel at work on his farm, you see him employ the livestock he is raising exactly for these purposes. It is because of his implementation of nature and her cycles that his profit per acre is several times that of his industrial farming neighbors.

Local Food Tsunami

Part of Joel's mission is the teaching of real, sustainable farming—and the need for it has never been more vital. "One of the big opportunities we're facing right now is what I like to call the 'local food tsunami,'" Joel said. "I assume that fossil fuel is going to become more expensive, because that is historically normal. The way to bet is that our food system will not become more and more concentrated, because that is extremely abnormal. Our food system becoming less concentrated, becoming disseminated out on the landscape better—that is historical normalcy, and also the way ecology works. Ecology does not transport plant or animal carbon long distances.

"If we are to keep these things decentralized, if we are to spread out this food production as opposed to concentrating it, we're going to need a more historically normal number of farmers. Talk about abnormal—we're the first civilization in the world that has twice as many people incarcerated in prisons as we have growing our food! So if you're in a horse race, the way to bet is on the horse that has the track record. All I'm trying to suggest in this book is that this is a historical abnormality; it's a very untried racehorse that we're betting on. I'm just wanting to help people who are attempting to get their heads wrapped around the extent of our abnormality to realize, wow, this is not sustainable and it's not going to continue like this."

> The thing that I'm suggesting is to take the glue—the substance of things that were normal until this last century—and grasp it with one hand, while we march into the future with the other hand fully embracing the appropriate technology that overcomes, frankly, a lot of the problems that the previous generations have encountered.



Feed the Omnivores

Not all of us are going to be farmers. For this reason Joel, in his book—relating back to how life is lived on his farm—gives various suggestions (in a list at the end of several chapters) for anyone wishing to assume more control of his or her food system. These include ideas such as canning and preserving, taking a family vacation to a farm, planting a vegetable garden,

buying a couple of chickens, composting, and many more.

Given that we have come so far from our food roots, is Joel inferring that we should ultimately go back and live like we did two hundred years ago? Far from it. "So many people—especially the industrial foodists—think I'm some sort of a throwback and that I want to return to hoop skirts and wringer washers," Joel laughed. "Nothing could be further from the truth. The thing that I'm

suggesting is to take the glue—the substance of things that were normal until this last century—and grasp it with one hand, while we march into the future with the other hand fully embracing the appropriate technology that overcomes, frankly, a lot of the problems that the previous generations have encountered.

"An example of how we can incorporate the past to deal with today's problems is in the use of omnivores. Historically, omnivores—chickens and pigs—were essentially homestead food recyclers. They were the things that took the blemished fruit, spoiled milk, or whey left over from cheesemaking and converted that into a very nutrient-dense package of eggs, poultry or pork. Today, depending on who you read, anywhere from 30 to 50 percent of everything that goes in landfills in the US is actually decomposable—and 30 percent of it is actually edible!

"That's a profound break with historical normalcy, where all that stuff was food for the omnivores. These days we're throwing all of it in the landfill—using diesel fuel to get it there—and compensating with chemically grown grains for that incredible waste of edible product.

"People who talk about how bad the battery-cage egg production and egg factories are need to understand that if every kitchen in America had enough chickens attached to it—whether a home kitchen or institutional kitchen or restaurant kitchen—to actually eat all the food waste coming out of that kitchen, we wouldn't even need commercial egg commerce in the entire country. All the eggs would be produced on site. We wouldn't need the landfill, we wouldn't need the diesel fuel to haul it anywhere, and it would all be an imbedded integrated system."

No Place like Home

"Another illustration, of course, is refocusing our attention on the home itself," Joel continued. "The household has moved from the focal point of life, where real life and real memories happen, to simply a kind of pit stop for activities all outside the home. Normalcy is not to be running off at every little thing—maybe not have so many soccer leagues and maybe not have so many other activities—but actually to come home and get to know each other and make the home the focus of where the real memories and the real activities occur.

"In that vein we can make the home a focal point, for example, of food preservation. The kids can learn their fractions by measuring quarter cups and half cups and things like that. There's a visceral understanding of this cerebral principle of fractions. That's how people learned academic things for centuries. They did it in the context of what they needed to know, and on a practical participatory basis. It's only been in very recent years that we've gone to this incredible abstraction where we know more and more but we have no reason for needing to know it or how to apply it, or any sensible context or reason for its application. I'm not suggesting that we be stupid or that we not know things, but I am suggesting that there is a context in which we can learn things and know things, and that home is one of those better places."

Really Only Us

In the final analysis, Joel points out that we all brought society and our food system to this point—and it will take each and every one of us to bring it back again.

"I wish—I *wish*—I could snap my fingers, and the average person wouldn't have to do anything and everything would just turn out fine," Joel concluded. "But the fact is that we are where we are because of trillions of moment-by-moment decisions made by millions of people over the last several decades. We could have endorsed the scientific aerobic composting program of Sir Albert Howard[2] in the 1940s, when it was introduced to the world, and said, 'A pox on chemical fertilization—we're going to do the biological approach!' But we did not. We could have told whoever was the first one that invented TV dinners, 'A pox on you!' But we did not.

"We've participated in where we are, and we're going to have to participate in where we need to go. So this whole idea of rediscovering and reconnecting to our ecological umbilical through domestic culinary arts is part and parcel of the whole system. It's not just up to farmers; it's not just up to food distributors; it's not just up to processors. We've already tried that. We tried giving up our historical responsibilities in domestic culinary arts, to Velveeta Cheese and Kraft and Procter & Gamble and Quaker Oats, and look where we are. We've got Twinkies and Cocoa Puffs and Mountain Dew and squeezable cheese. The truth is that there isn't any *them*, *they* and *those people*—there is really only us. And *us* has to get busy and start participating in this."

Joel's book Folks, This Ain't Normal: A Farmer's Advice for Happier Hens, Healthier People, and a Better World *is available from the* Organic Connections *bookstore. Learn more about Joel and Polyface Farms at www.polyfacefarms.com.*

1. curb market: precursor to today's farmers' market.

2. Sir Albert Howard (1873–1947): English botanist and organic farming pioneer; a principal figure in the early organic movement. He is considered by many in the English-speaking world as the father of modern organic agriculture.

Chef Michel Nischan

Serving the Underserved

by Anna Soref

It's not everybody who could turn down a request from the late Paul Newman to open a restaurant, especially if that someone were a passionate chef. But for Michel Nischan, when that offer was made, the time wasn't right; he was too busy helping nonprofits and socially responsible businesses make the world a better place. Yup, he turned down what most would see as a dream job with a dream partner to continue doing the right thing.

Meet Michel Nischan, a chef celebrated for more than his kitchen skills.

Cookbook author and James Beard Foundation Award winner, this acclaimed restaurateur is more interested in helping others than gathering fame and riches for himself. Whatever he touches—whether it's mixed heirloom grain risotto, a truck-stop café, a New York City bistro, or a nonprofit—success abounds. Yet instead of reaching for material rewards, he takes the road less traveled and follows his inner guides of values and passion.

Early Years

Nischan readily admits to myriad mentors along his path to success, but his true heroine is his mother, whom he credits with making him who he is. Nischan spent many a day in the kitchen with his mother—though this was not the typical baking-cookies-on-a-Sunday-afternoon kind of cooking. At three years old he was working the apple peeler to skin bushel after bushel, and by twelve he was frying chicken, smothering pork chops, and canning tomatoes and bell pepper. "I just loved being with her in the kitchen. After school my brothers would go play sports; I would go hang out with Mom in the kitchen," he says.

Having experienced the Great Depression while growing up on a fourth-generation farm, his mother was keen on food security. "My mom saved all fat; we rarely had beef because it was expensive, but when we did, she'd save the fat and put it in coffee cans in the freezer. This is a woman who could dispatch a live hog and turn it into bacon."

The connection between nature and food was always present in the Nischan kitchen. "When Mom wasn't happy with the anemic vegetables she found in the grocery stores, she dug up the back and side yards to plant a kitchen garden that the neighbors called 'the farm.' We had an above-ground swimming pool that we had to put in the driveway because there was nowhere to put it in the yard," he relates. From this garden, Nischan learned what ripe, just-picked fruits and vegetables tasted like—a taste that would guide his future culinary endeavors.

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From Nightclub to Kitchen

In the late 1970s when Nischan first struck out on his own as a young adult, he headed not to a kitchen but to nightclubs as a musician. However, the money was a losing proposition. "We were good; still we'd come home from a tour and do the math and we'd have lost $500 to $1,000. During this time my mom saw how thin I was and she said, 'Let's get you a job at a restaurant so that at least you can eat.'"

And so, at a local truck stop, began the career of a world-renowned chef. A string of restaurants followed, where Nischan impressed with his cooking skills. "There'd be someone struggling to break down legs of veal, and I'd offer to help and then surprise them because of all the venison and pig legs I'd done; and they'd see that and make me in charge of butchering."

The $2-an-hour raises kept coming and Nischan officially quit music, though not for the money. "It was a little heartbreaking, but I was getting much the same thing out of food as I was getting out of music. Putting together numerous plates and dishes requires a lot of people to work. You all have to be on the same page and—just like with a band—when you are, the audience loves you. I was doing well; people liked me. I was a natural at it."

His abilities landed him in a number of upscale restaurants. "So here I was, cooking at these classic French restaurants, getting busted for calling stock 'broth' and sautéing 'frying.' Then I'd come up with something like roasting shallots with lardon, pouring off the fat, which was very sweet because of the shallot juice, and then


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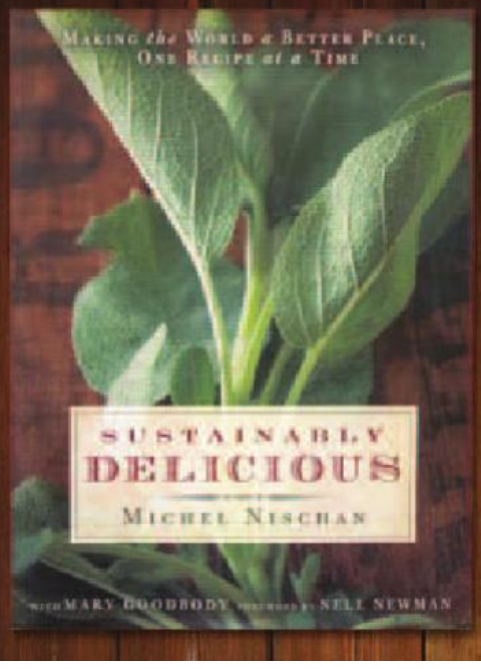
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Michel Nischan
with Mary Goodbody
foreword by Nell Newman

mounting it back in to make a sauce. People would go nuts over the stuff. I didn't have the terminology but I sure had the creativity," he remarks. In 1981, his creativity led him to become chef at the Fleur de Lis restaurant in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

On the way, the one thing Nischan could never get used to was the quality of the meat and produce delivered to restaurants. He figured that if he could get farm-fresh produce (no more huge, round, pink tomatoes), he could beat every other chef based on that alone while creating awareness of local farms. He started driving out to the country looking for farmers to buy produce from, only to discover there weren't any small farms. The seeds of advocacy were planted. "Those were the days when you could make 30 phone calls and have 5 percent of the stuff in your cooler come from a farmer. It was really tough back then," he says.

Making Connections

By 1991 Nischan owned his own restaurant, Miche Mache, in Connecticut with his wife, Lori. By this time Nischan was making 20 phone calls and getting 40 to 50 percent of his food from local producers. "We would take the seats out of our minivan and drive to the country for organic eggs, pig and veggies." Although they were buying local, Nischan was reducing cream, cooking with foie gras and butter, and using every weapon in the arsenal to get great reviews. The health of the food wasn't in the equation.

Then his son, Chris, was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes.

"It was a time of turmoil in my life," Nischan recalls. "I was now making the connections between food and human health, realizing that everything I did with food would have everything to do with Chris's long-term outcome."

The solution? He opened Heartbeat at the inaugural W hotel in New York City. "You could order anything at Heartbeat and you'd know it would be healthy," Nischan says. Heartbeat was based completely on local, sustainable and organic, with no processed foods of any kind—no white sugar or flour and no butter or cream. "We were juicing a lot of starchy vegetables so the juices could thicken themselves without our using flour or cornstarch," he says. Heartbeat became very popular and so did Nischan's mission to create a cuisine of well-being. He began speaking publicly about sustainable, local healthy food.

Life was good. But something nagged at Nischan. That something was a deep desire to provide healthy food to other than the wealthy Heartbeat clientele.

Then 9/11 brought the hotel industry to its knees, and the W New York told Nischan he would have to order food from approved purveyors to cut costs. "But look on the bright side," they said. "You'll cut costs and max out on your bonus."

During this time his mother would become sick and pass away. "My mother's illness had me thinking about the difference I could make in other peoples' lives the way she had made a difference in mine. I was deeply troubled that at Heartbeat we could feed people this healthy, local food because I could charge $40 an entrée. Now they wanted me to use boxed beef and conventionally raised stuff. I had these intense feelings that I just had to quit. I talked to my wife and we looked at the checkbook; we had enough money for five months. I resigned."

Working as a consultant in the local, sustainable food movement, Nischan helped Delta's Song airline develop one of the first in-flight food-for-sale programs, and it was all based on organic and sustainable produce. "It was great; you could fly on Song and get Stonyfield organic yogurt, and an Earthbound Farm organic apple instead of some year-old Washington State apple. I was beginning to really love life; I wasn't working 80 hours a week or tied to a range. I was particularly proud of the work I was doing with Song because they were flying about 35,000 people a day. I set up the distribution to allow this to happen and I felt like I was truly starting to make a difference."

Meeting Paul Newman

Out of the blue came a call from Paul Newman's daughter Nell asking for Nischan's help because her dad wanted to open a restaurant based on local and sustainable values. "I need you to either talk him out of it or help him with it," she said. The restaurant would be housed in the historic Westport Country Playhouse in Connecticut that Newman's wife, Joanne Woodward, had worked to revitalize. "I told Nell I was really flattered but that I was finally at a place in my life where I was gaining momentum, although I'd be happy to offer advice," Nischan recounts.

"I went to a meeting with Paul and a potential operator, and Paul started the whole discussion by saying that we really needed to buy from local producers. Immediately the operator says that won't be possible; that he'd like to buy from Connecticut farmers, but they don't deliver and he can't drive all over the state. So I looked at Paul and said, 'How about a farmers' market in the parking lot?' I suggested getting a dozen or so vendors and having the market on Thursday when there were no plays so that the parking lot would be empty. The restaurant could get its weekly produce delivery then. Paul looked at me, his eyes twinkled and this grin popped up across his face; he stood up and stuck his arms out to hug me. That was our first meeting.

"The subsequent operators we interviewed kept disqualifying themselves because their values didn't align with Paul's. About a year later he asked for another meeting at the playhouse, but when I got there it was just him waiting for me; his entourage of trusted advisors was absent. He gives me a hug and we walk into this mezzanine level where he had all the light bulbs in the ceiling unscrewed except one, and two chairs opposite each other under the one burning bulb, and he made me sit facing him. 'Why won't you just do this damned restaurant with me?' he asked. I said, 'I don't know, Paul; I need to ask my wife.' The problem was that I had completely fallen in love with the man.

"Lori said, 'Michel, this is the first time you'll ever work with somebody that you don't have to convince of anything.' And the lights went on and the sky opened up. In every job previously I'd always had to fight. So it was an opportunity to have my first ever restaurant that could really be based on my personal values. I took the job."

When he told Newman yes, he said it was on the condition that he could start a nonprofit based on food justice and food security in order to bring a more sustainable food system to underserved populations and balance out the white-tablecloth restaurant.

Dressing Room, dedicated to local, sustainable cuisine, opened in October 2006. Nischan's dream nonprofit, Wholesome Wave, with a mission to bring healthy, sustainable food to underserved communities, opened in June of 2007.

The world lost Paul Newman in 2008, but today Nischan owns the vibrant and successful Dressing Room. "If Paul and I have a handshake, it's until the last man standing—and I am the last man standing. And boy, do we miss Paul! Joanne comes in a lot and the girls come in a lot, and we see the partnership is alive and well—which it is. It's a wonderful thing," he says.

Nischan works at Dressing Room on weekends but his wife really runs the show. Nischan's heart and soul belong to Wholesome Wave.

A Wholesome Tidal Wave

Nischan didn't want Wholesome Wave to be another nonprofit descending upon a community, determined to change things. He wanted to offer a program to already established community nonprofits to help them raise money, teach them, and give them the technical assistance they needed to be able to run consistently.

"The way we work is completely based on trust. It's how I wish the restaurant biz always worked; but the margins there are just so slim and competitive that it's really hard to get chefs to collaborate, even though that was my dream. When I was buying from farmers, I was reaching out trying to get other chefs involved, thinking, 'If we *all* can buy more from local farmers, they can grow more, and maybe we can get them to deliver.' It never worked out, but we now have that sort of collaboration at Wholesome Wave."

The first Wholesome Wave program was the Double Value Coupon Program, for which pre-pilots were conducted in 2007, followed by its official launch in 2008. The program doubles the value of food stamps and other federal assistance when customers purchase locally grown fruits and vegetables at farmers' markets. It's doing extremely well; after four years, DVCP is in 25 states in almost 300 markets. "The success just exploded, but a lot of that has to do with the talent, passion, drive and innovative nature of our Wholesome Wave team and of the many nonprofit program partners that we work with," Nischan points out. "Often the funder has a nonprofit that they've identified, and we go in, teach them everything, and then fold them into our learning community."

The learning community involves nearly 60 nonprofits throughout the country that Wholesome Wave connects. "Another reason we've been able to grow so fast and be so effective is that everybody learns stuff in real time instead of a single, isolated program taking four or five years to figure it all out on their own. For example, one nonprofit informed us that if your marketing brings people to sign up for federal assistance, you could actually get half of your marketing budget reimbursed by the government. So it's things like that that one partner learns and then reports to us, and we push it back out

onto the field and now all the partners know it. Many meaningful relationships among nonprofits have been created in this way; hence the success of great networks."

A key objective of Wholesome Wave is data gathering from its programs that, among other things, can be used to influence government legislation. Nischan is a big believer in the fact that, regardless of economic status, if people could choose to eat healthy food, most would. "Our data shows that, yes, when people can choose healthy, they do."

In 2010 they surveyed 1,700 farmers and 550 consumers receiving federal benefits and using DVCP at farmers' markets. The average sales increase after DVCP was implemented was at least double in every market; some have seen up to 600 percent increases. Over 90 percent of the consumers said the amount of fresh produce they could buy with DVCP made a significant difference in the health of their family's diet. Additionally, the increased sales helped local economies and certainly the farmers themselves.

Wholesome Wave's next program, launched in 2010, was the Fruit and Vegetable Prescription Program (FVRx). This provides underserved communities with produce from farmers' markets by allowing consumers to redeem healthcare provider–generated "prescriptions" at participating markets for fresh fruits and vegetables. Each dollar invested in the Family FVRx program pays forward threefold by nourishing the consumer, boosting the farmers' revenues, and uplifting the community as a whole—not to mention the potential savings to our nation's spiraling healthcare costs.

Has this chef on a mission finally found where he wants to be? "One thing I've learned in life is that I don't plan that much. I do know that doing a white-tablecloth restaurant, selling food to those who can afford it, definitely creates awareness, but it's not going to change things. We have to work on all aspects of sustainability and bringing real food to everyone, regardless of income. That will create change, and that's what I intend to do."

To find out more about Wholesome Wave, visit www.wholesomewave.org.

Want to try one of Nischan's famous recipes? Visit www.organicconnectmag.com.

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