



*Organic*  
**Connections**

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THE AWARD-WINNING MAGAZINE OF NATURAL VITALITY

**MICHAEL POLLAN**  
**THE MISSING PART**  
**OF THE FOOD CHAIN**

**AMY GOLDMAN**  
**THE CHAMPION**  
**OF HEIRLOOMS**

**TAL RONNEN**  
**TOP VEGAN CHEF**

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# Can You Create Your Own Future?



**T**here has been a lot of learned philosophical discourse about how much of a say we have in creating our own futures. I'm not going to add to that dialogue. Instead, let's approach it simply and practically.

In January of this year, my wife and I took a big bag of wildflower seeds and, along with our two Australian shepherds,

ventured down the steep slope in back of our Austin home. It's fairly rocky soil and nothing much grows there that isn't native and hardy. I raked to prepare the hard ground, my wife scattered the seeds, the dogs barked excitedly and that was that.

Today, a few months later, we have a variety of beautiful Texas wildflowers to enjoy—a gift from nature that brightens the view and speaks in a silent language that somehow communicates directly to the human heart.

This was quite a simple exercise, but in a small way, didn't the action we took in January come back to us in the future? It got me to wondering how many of the actions we take every day actually work to create the future that we experience either sooner or at some time later.

In our example, we planted seeds and ended up with flowers. But what if instead of seeds we applied weedkiller? Would nature give us lovely flowers in return? What if I were short tempered with a colleague who interrupted my work? Wouldn't that be a seed I'd planted? What would grow as a result?

As mentioned, there has been a great deal of speculation about the reciprocal nature of things. The Golden Rule is a case in point, and similar ideas existed in ancient China, Egypt, Greece, Rome and India.

Maybe being *told* to follow a rule—even a golden one—isn't the answer. Perhaps we just have to work it out for ourselves. Our daily lives are filled with opportunities to choose. Do the choices we make improve our world and our quality of life?

We've now been covering stories about inspiring people in *Organic Connections* for over six years, and I'm more convinced than ever that individuals can change the world. The idea keeps me optimistic.

I'd be interested to know what *you* think.

*Ken Whitman* PUBLISHER

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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](http://www.naturalvitality.com).

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Gardener, author, artist, philanthropist and advocate for seed saving, Amy Goldman is one of the foremost heirloom plant conservationists in the United States. She talks with *OC* about her wonderful, colorful and flavorful passion.



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Vegan chef to the stars—from Oprah to Ellen to the US Senate—Ronnen previews his new LA restaurant, his role in Lyfe Kitchen and his mission to prepare great-tasting food for vegetarians, carnivores, flexitarians and everyone in between.



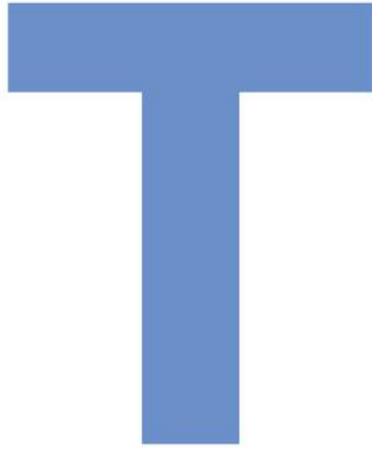
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# Michael Pollan

## The Missing Part of the Food Chain

by Bruce E. Boyers



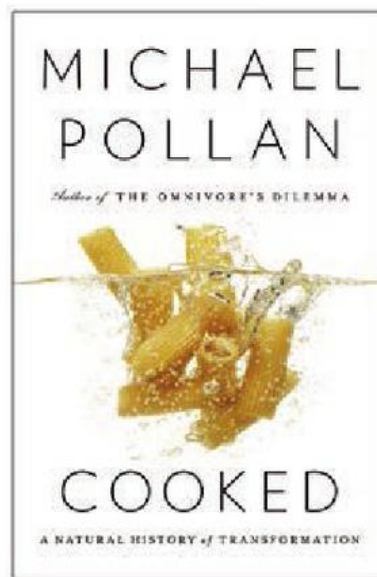
The reason we know about the many problematic issues with our industrial food system is due in large part to author, journalist, university professor and food activist Michael Pollan. His best-selling 2006 book *The Omnivore's Dilemma* broke ground in exposing inhumane animal treatment and the unnatural growing of monocrops within big agriculture—while at the same time highlighting the local, sustainable solutions at our fingertips. Pollan was also a co-star in and consultant for the film *Food, Inc.*, which took on the same issues at a cinematic level and was nominated for an Academy Award.

Since then, Pollan has been featured and quoted in many documentaries, with appearances on several television shows, and has published three other books, two of which focus as well on different aspects of our food system and food culture. In addition, he is a contributing editor for *New York Times Magazine* and a former executive editor for *Harper's* magazine. For the many articles he has written, he has received the Reuters-IUCN<sup>1</sup> Global Award for Environmental Journalism, the James Beard Foundation Award for best magazine series, and the Genesis Award from the Humane Society of the United States.

Pollan's newest book—the just-released *Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation*—explores the subject of cooking through Pollan's own immersion into the world of culinary wonder. It is not a cookbook, but rather an exploration and history of enjoyment of different cooking methods through the four basic elements.

### Driving Down a Highway

Pollan's path to insightful examination of our food system began with an observation made while driving down a California highway. "Around the turn of the millennium, I had occasion to drive by a feedlot on Route 5 in California called Harris Ranch," Pollan told *Organic Connections*. "I had never seen a feedlot before and it was pretty mind-blowing. Three miles before I got there I could smell it: It was like, 'Where is this overpowering awful men's-room odor coming from?' I got closer, and then suddenly the golden hills turned black and there were wall-to-wall cattle coming right up to the highway, with a giant mountain of



corn and a giant mountain of manure in the background. I had no idea this is where beef came from.

"Then I put that together with another event: I was doing a piece on genetically modified food, and I had gone to a potato farm in Idaho. It was a scale of agriculture I

had never seen before, something like 40,000 acres divided into these crop circles. Each circle was about 175 acres, with what looked like a giant sweep second hand; it was the irrigation pivot out of which came water, fertilizer and pesticide. The farmer controlled it all from a little bunker in his garage, and one of the reasons that he did that was because he didn't want to be in the fields when he was spraying pesticide—or within five days after spraying pesticide—because it was so toxic. He showed me the warehouses where he stored the potatoes after they came out of the ground. They're not edible for six weeks because they're so toxic with systemics;<sup>2</sup> the potatoes off-gas the systemics and gradually you can eat them.

"And so, there were the hamburgers and the french fries; that's where they came from. That was the Happy Meal. I realized that nobody knew this. Maybe a few people living in the rural West were aware of it, but most people I knew had no idea where their food was coming from. So that was the germ for *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. It was those two scenes, which had a powerful effect on me."

### Changes in Consciousness

In the years following publication of *The Omnivore's Dilemma* much has changed—and Pollan has continued making careful observations. "The consciousness has shifted considerably," he said. "People know a lot more; they're a lot more skeptical of the claims made by the food industry. They're persuaded of the value of an alternative to industrial food, whether that be organic or local or pasture raised. So we've seen the market for alternatives burgeoning since then. And I think that's probably been the biggest change.

"In terms of politics, we have a First Lady who is talking about food and the links to health, and planting a garden at the White House. I think that's a sign of change in

*The consciousness has shifted considerably. People know a lot more; they're a lot more skeptical of the claims made by the food industry. They're persuaded of the value of an alternative to industrial food, whether that be organic or local or pasture raised.*



consciousness; I can't imagine her or any other First Lady doing that ten years ago. In terms of legislation, I don't think we've seen anything dramatic. We've seen some tweaks of food safety laws; we've seen some tweaks of the school lunch. But the kind of rigorous reform we need in order to conform the food system to what we want is still being stopped by the industry whose power has not been seriously diminished yet."

### Are We Just Passive Consumers?

Pollan has an interesting analysis of how the system became so skewed in the first place. "I think the industrial food system has victimized us, but we were complicit in this outsourcing of food and we were complicit in this speeding up of food and processing of food," he said. "One of the reasons the

"So they were very clever in exploiting what was going on in our society, but the move to processed food was more of a supply-driven than a demand-driven phenomenon. The industry is always happy to tell us that they're selling us what we've asked for. Well, not always; often they sell us things that they've dreamt up and decided we should need. I think that is definitely true with processed food. And even though we work and have more time pressure, and there was this tension between men and women over cooking, it could have been resolved in a way that didn't involve McDonalds."

How does Pollan feel we can shed this food system and take back control? "Cook!" he responded, laughing. "Take more responsibility for your food choices. Get into the kitchen and try doing something that you've never done before. Go to the farmers'

smells, tastes and experiences he discovered on the way.

"*Cooked* kind of grew out of this whole project that I've been engaged in for the last decade or so, which is following our food chain from the field to the body," Pollan explained. "*The Omnivore's Dilemma* is very much about the beginning of the food chain, with earth and grasses and animals and crops. Then I wrote two books about eating and nutrition, which are really about what the food does on the body end of the food chain.

"But then there was this area in the middle that I had overlooked, probably because I took it for granted: and that's the link in the food chain where the stuff coming off the farms gets transformed into meals. That's what I knew the most about—or thought I did—and it just didn't seem like it needed any attention. But the more I

## The movement to **sustainable agriculture** and **local food systems** is going to top out if people are not willing to **cook** for themselves.

food industry is successful is that they're very clever marketers and they know how to press our buttons. If you relieve somebody of work, very often they'll take you up on it. If you make something sweeter, saltier or fattier, we'll often eat more of it."

Pollan also challenges our assumptions about America's wholesale adoption of convenience food. "One of the things that surprised me in the research for *Cooked* was I had accepted the typical view that the reason cooking declined was because women went to work and didn't have time to cook, so they turned to processed food. The history is actually more complicated than that. In actuality, the industry was trying to push us into buying more processed food *long before* women were working. *Later*, the industry seized on the tension that had arisen in American families when women did go back to work and there was a question about who would do all the housework. The food industry essentially exploited feminism to argue that their food was liberating for women—I mention the KFC billboard from the seventies, which had a big bucket of chicken and the words 'Women's Liberation' above it.

market and buy some vegetables and figure out what to do with them, or join a CSA, where you're really forced to figure out what to do with things that you don't know about.

"Just think of yourself a little bit less as a *passive consumer* and little bit more as an *active producer*. It's that change of identity, that switch, that's really, really important. We're locked into this idea that except for what we do at our jobs we're consumers of everything else in our lives. That is a very impoverished way to live. There is enormous satisfaction to be had in producing things and providing for yourself and your family. It feels really good."

### **Cooked**

This is exactly where Pollan is going with his latest work, *Cooked*—a work that continues his overall examination of our food system with a very unique approach. The book examines cooking methodologies through the four elements: fire, water, air and earth. With each of these elements, Pollan takes us on a journey of a particular culinary creation—and in doing so, relays the magnificent

worked on these issues, the more I realized the cooking piece or food-processing piece (depending on whether you are a human or a corporation) is really the key. The movement to sustainable agriculture and local food systems is going to top out if people are not willing to cook for themselves.

"Then on the other side, looking to the body end of the food chain, one of the things I learned studying nutrition was that if you're cooking, you don't really have to worry too much about nutrition, since you're not going to make french fries every day because they're such a pain, and you're not going to have dessert every night because it's so much work. You're going to eat in a pretty sensible way. There's a lot of research that suggests that people who cook eat healthy diets, and people who cook struggle less with obesity. A family who has a family dinner is healthier in both the literal and the metaphorical senses.

"It gradually dawned on me that cooking was the key on both ends, to the health of the body and to the health of the land. So I wanted to write a book that would not argue that case and lecture people, but would seduce them into cooking and remind them

of just how interesting it is. There is an amazing amount of science, history and culture that is at your fingertips when you bake a loaf of bread or make a braise. I think we've been robbed of this by cookbooks and TV cooking shows that make it look like contact sport, and by all the marketing saying you can't do it or you don't have time to do it. So *Cooked* is really an attempt to reclaim that wonderful activity for ordinary people."

Through reading his book, Pollan would like people to become as immersed as he did in the adventure that cooking can be. "My hope is that they'll be seduced into doing more cooking themselves, or trying it if they haven't done it; that they will trust their instincts a little bit more," Pollan added. "We've been intimidated into believing that cooking is really complex. I hope I'm creating in readers some kind of willingness to trust their instincts, get their hands dirty and take a chance.

"One of the things I'd like people to see as they read this book is that, wow, he's having a good time! Because I had a very good time writing this book—the most fun I've had as a journalist."

#### A Continuing Mission

Pollan does see a continuing thread, a mission, through everything he does, including his latest work.

"My aim is to help people see that food is really important, not just to our health but to our happiness, to our communities and to our families," Pollan concluded. "Being more conscious of all of those things is very rewarding. It tends to lead toward taking food a little more seriously, paying a little more money for it, carving out a little more time in your life to enjoy it, and slowing down. So if there's a mission, I think that's what it is: to be a little more conscious of what's at stake every time you sit down at the table." ■

*You can obtain Michael Pollan's book *Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation from the Organic Connections* bookstore.*

*For more on Michael Pollan and his work, please visit [www.michaelpollan.com](http://www.michaelpollan.com).*

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1. IUCN: International Union for Conservation of Nature.

2. systemics: Pesticides that are absorbed and circulated by a plant or other organism so as to be lethal to pests that feed on them.

*One of the things I'd like people to see as they read this book is that, wow, he's having a good time! Because I had a very good time writing this book—the most fun I've had as a journalist.*



**Amy Goldman**  
The Champion of Heirlooms





**TO SAY THAT AMY GOLDMAN** has made heirloom fruits and vegetables her life's work would be an understatement. By profession she is a clinical psychologist—but she left that career behind years ago to plant and grow these unique varieties, and to advocate, write about and promote the agricultural heritage and diversity of heirlooms. She is the author of three award-winning books on the subject, and has written for *Martha Stewart Living*, *Fine Gardening*, *Organic Gardening* and *Garden Design*. Along with television appearances, she has also been profiled by the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, among others.

Amy is intimately involved with Seed Savers Exchange, the renowned nonprofit organization dedicated to saving and sharing heirloom seeds. She recently retired as chairman of the board, but retains the post of special advisor to the board.

### Journey through History

What originally drew Amy to heirlooms was their beauty. "I was fascinated by their novelty and diversity," Amy told *Organic Connections*. "I read some books about heirlooms and began buying seeds and growing them for exhibition at the local county fair. Fairgoers were also amazed by them—the colors, the shapes, the sizes. They were unusual in the early 1990s. I fell in love with them because of their good looks and flavor, their utility—not to mention their history and their deeper meanings."

As a good part of her work, Amy has learned a great deal about the tradition of these heirlooms, and she shared some of the more remarkable stories with us.

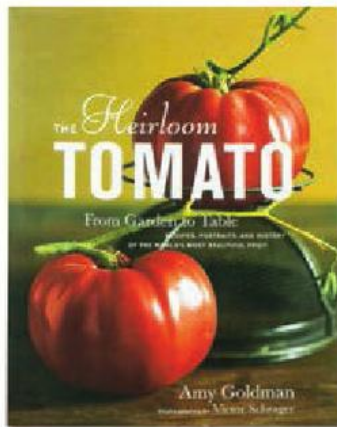
"Probably the most famous commercial heirloom is the Moon and Stars watermelon," Amy related. "It's visually spectacular and it tastes heavenly. It's a green oblong melon that is speckled with yellow spots—'moons and stars,' so to speak. Even the plant is speckled with little yellow stars."

Amy tells the story of this melon in her book *Melons for the Passionate Grower*. "Originally introduced as Sun, Moon and Stars by Peter Henderson and Company in 1926, it was still alive and well a decade later, according to the J. D. Robinson Seed Company, which described the fruit as novel but not without merit. Later it was dropped from commercial production and vanished.

"Kent Whealy, the cofounder of Seed Savers Exchange, didn't forget the melon. After years of searching, he found what he

was looking for not far from home, near Macon, Missouri, where the watermelons grow. In the spring of 1981, Merle Van Doren saw Kent give an interview on local television. Merle wrote that he was keeping the melon and would have seed at harvest time." Whealy ended up obtaining the seeds. "It was then reintroduced and is now beloved," said Amy.

Another heirloom draws one in, just



because of its name. "Radiator Charlie's Mortgage Lifter Tomato," Amy laughed. "What is that name all about? Well, for starters, it's one of the biggest tomatoes that I've ever grown. To paraphrase from my book *The Heirloom Tomato*, eating a thick juicy slab of Mortgage Lifter, marbled with white, is like having a last steak supper before you die and go to tomato heaven.

"This big beefsteak tomato was bred by M. C. Byles in West Virginia in the 1930s by crossing four heirloom beefsteak types. His nickname was 'Radiator Charlie' because he was a radiator repairman. His shop was located at the bottom of a steep incline in Logan, West Virginia, and the story goes that he would just wait there for trucks with busted radiators to roll back into his shop.

"Anyway, he, like most of us, had a mortgage to pay off. In the 1940s he sold his tomato seedlings for a dollar apiece, and that helped to pay off the \$6,000 mortgage on his house. *Mortgage lifter* is a term used by farmers to describe supplemental profit making; the source can be sales of a tomato or a hog, or corn or beans."

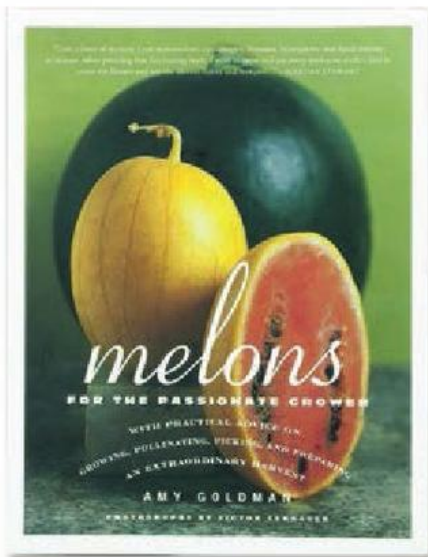
In another tomato story, Amy managed to unearth new information about a famous variety. "There's a lot of misinformation about the original Brandywine tomato," she said. "Sudduth's Brandywine, also known as Brandywine, is a delicious pink beefsteak type, and it grows on a plant that has potato leaves. Most people believe it to be the original Brandywine. I went back to the seed catalogues to learn more. The *original* Brandywine—today known as the Red Brandywine—is red-fruited and grows on plants with regular leaves. It was introduced by Johnson and Stokes in 1889.

"The pink one that many people know and love is a family heirloom saved by the Sudduth family of Tennessee. As good as the pink one is, the red one is perfection: high acid, high sugar, savory, mouth filling, juicy, beautiful."

### Flavor Rich

As aficionados have discovered, many heirloom varieties have flavor far superior to industrially grown produce. There is good reason for this. "Generations of farmers and gardeners have selected their best and most flavorful varieties and passed the seed down to the next generation," Amy explained. "Heirlooms are designed to be homegrown and used in cookery—not bred for transport or mechanical harvesting. Most heirlooms grow on tall indeterminate plants and produce a harvest over an extended period; the

industrial tomato grows on a short plant and is harvested green all at once. There's a correlation between big plants and big flavor: the more foliage, the more photosynthesis, and hence tomatoes with more flavor and sugar.



“One of the keys to growing luscious fruits and veggies is letting them fully mature on the vine. In industrial production, melons, squashes, pumpkins and tomatoes are routinely harvested too young. Tomatoes are picked green and gassed with ethylene to artificially ripen them; so they will never catch up in flavor. The beauty of an heirloom is that the gardener can allow it to ripen on the vine in full sun and reap the rewards over a season.”

### You Can Grow Them Too

Amy pointed out that there are many reasons for someone to start growing heirlooms. “They’re beautiful, they’re delicious, and they’re easy to grow,” she said. “By growing heirlooms you are also preserving the best of the past for the future. This notion is sometimes called ‘eater-based conservation.’ By growing and saving heirloom seeds, you’re helping keep these varieties alive. Hence it’s good for you and it’s good for the planet.”

Growing them is rewarding and fun as well. “The good news is that it’s just as easy to grow heirlooms as it is to grow modern hybrids,” Amy said. “The same basic kinds of advice hold true: plant a garden with fertile loamy soil or add soil amendments as needed; provide enough space for things to grow; and be vigilant. For the novice gardener, there are some choice how-to books on heirloom gardening available.

“It’s important to look for good open-pollinated varieties, and I don’t think a grower could do better than by starting with seeds from Seed Savers Exchange. SSE has an extensive commercial catalog of seeds for the general public. In addition, by becoming a member of SSE, you have access to excellent educational publications and a community of like-minded individuals who exchange the rarest of rare seeds in their annual yearbook.”

### Saving Seeds

“Many definitions of *heirloom* exist out there, so let me share with you my definition,” Amy continued. “An heirloom is ‘a variety of value that is open pollinated and breeds true from seed.’ Thus seeds can be handed down to the next generation. *Open pollinated* refers to a standard variety that breeds true from seed—saved seed produces offspring like the parent (unlike F1 hybrids\*).

“If the new heirloom gardener wants to get more involved and learn how to save seed, I would recommend growing easy-to-save crops like tomatoes or beans or peas. These are mainly self-pollinating, although there is some degree of crossing by insects. If you want to save pure seed, you have to either isolate the variety by distance from other varieties with which it could cross, or prevent bees or other pollinators from bringing in foreign pollen and contaminating the seed.”

It’s easiest to isolate by distance. “If you grow only one tomato variety in the garden, you know it’s not going to cross with any others. Harvest the ripe fruit and save the pure seeds for next year’s crop. You can do the same thing with one variety of pea, one squash, one melon, one watermelon, one eggplant. When you isolate by sufficient distance, you know those won’t cross with other varieties of their species.”

### Beyond the Garden

As Amy has pointed out, someone getting involved with heirlooms is doing a lot more than just creating interesting and flavorful produce. She herself observed this early on and got heavily involved with the Seed Savers Exchange. It is an organization that, since its founding, has done a tremendous amount of good in forwarding and preserving this vital natural heritage.

“Seed Savers Exchange was founded in 1975 and is the nation’s premier nonprofit seed-saving group, with a membership of over 13,000,” said Amy. “The mission is to develop

a network of people who are committed to collecting, conserving and sharing heirloom seeds and plants. It is an active community of backyard gardeners, orchardists and others who are preserving these varieties in their gardens and fields. As I mentioned earlier, SSE has an exchange program wherein people exchange seeds with each other. We estimate that through the course of Seed Savers’ history we’ve passed on approximately a million seed samples to others.”

Seed Savers Exchange has its own vault in which seeds from the rarest varieties are preserved for posterity. “Seed Savers Exchange is also a regular depositor of seeds to the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in Norway,” Amy added. “We sleep easier knowing that if disaster strikes us—for instance, if a tornado does damage in Iowa, where Seed Savers’ vault is located—we have some safety duplication. We’re deeply grateful to the government of Norway for giving us this free insurance policy.”

Amy recently married Cary Fowler, who headed the international committee that proposed the establishment of the Seed Vault; he currently serves as chair of its International Advisory Council.

### The Bountiful Legacy

“We’re losing a lot of diversity in agriculture,” Amy concluded. “In order to have a more bountiful future, we need to continue to collect and conserve our plant genetic resources so that breeders can develop more heat- and drought-tolerant crops. The pressure is really on now to ensure that agricultural crops adapt to climate change.” ■

For more information on the Seed Savers Exchange, please visit [www.seedsavers.org](http://www.seedsavers.org).

Further information on Amy Goldman and her work can be found at [www.rareforms.com](http://www.rareforms.com).

Amy Goldman’s books *Melons for the Passionate Grower*, *The Heirloom Tomato*, and *The Compleat Squash* are available from the Organic Connections bookstore.

\*F1 hybrid: A term used in genetics and selective breeding. F1 stands for *Filial 1*, and indicates the first generation of plants or seeds resulting from the crossbreeding of distinctly different parental types.



# Tal Ronnen

## Top Vegan Chef



Chef Tal Ronnen set out to make a point: vegan, meatless cooking can equal or better “regular” carnivore fare.

His success is attested by some people you may have heard of. We’re talking about Oprah Winfrey, who, in the spring of 2008, hired Ronnen to prepare meals for her 21-day vegan cleanse. And Ellen DeGeneres, who retained Ronnen to cater for her and partner Portia de Rossi’s vegan wedding. Ronnen was also Arianna Huffington’s chosen chef for her party at the Democratic National Convention, and he catered the first vegan dinner at the US Senate as well. He even assisted Chrissie Hynde of the Pretenders in opening her restaurant, VegiTerranean, in her home town of Akron, Ohio.

### Finding True Flavor

The sumptuous tastes that so many are raving about are exactly what Chef Ronnen was seeking when he embarked on this path. “It was actually out of sheer frustration from growing up with really good food and parents that were foodies,” Ronnen told *Organic Connections*. “When I crossed over to eating a vegetarian diet, I noticed that I was being served side dishes that were coming out with my family’s regular dishes. There was not a protein component—it was just an afterthought. That kind of inspired me to learn how to cook traditionally, first, and then to apply that to vegetarian, then vegan, cooking.”

It was clearly more than just a mission of personal eating: Ronnen was out to literally

change the world of vegan cooking. “I think for the most part that, in the past, when you dined out in order to eat vegan food, what you’d find was sort of left over from the hippy movement of the sixties and seventies—a lot of brown rice, hummus, sprouts and things like that. Those are all great, but you’re not going to win over a diehard carnivore with those types of dishes. So I like to create meals that I remember eating as a child or even as a teenager that inspire me to make



vegan versions of them. My mission is just to prepare great-tasting food that appeals to people of *all* walks of life: vegetarians, carnivores, flexitarians and everyone in between.”

Ronnen cites an example from his current menu. “At my new restaurant, Crossroads, we do a take on oysters on the half shell,” he explained. “We use an artichoke leaf as an oyster shell with an artichoke purée, a crispy oyster mushroom that’s been seasoned with nori to give it a seafood flavor, and a yellow tomato Béarnaise sauce and kelp caviar. It’s really indulging food.”

Chef Ronnen’s culinary mastery has brought him into several unique positions. He has taken his expertise to some of the top vegan restaurants in the United States, including Sublime in Fort Lauderdale, Madeleine Bistro in Los Angeles, and Candle 79 in New York City. He worked with Wynn Las Vegas executive chefs to create vegan menus for 22 restaurants in the famed hotel, and he has conducted workshops with students and staff at Le Cordon Bleu campuses nationwide.

### Lyfe Kitchen

Recently, the launching of Lyfe Kitchen’s chain of fast-casual healthy food restaurants became headline news due to the involvement of Mike Roberts, former global president and COO for McDonald’s Corporation. When Roberts became Lyfe Kitchen’s president and CEO for Restaurant, he asked Tal Ronnen to be one of the two executive chefs.

It was through Lyfe Kitchen’s president and CEO for Grocery, Stephen Sidwell, that Ronnen became involved. “I got introduced to Mike Roberts by my friend Stephen Sidwell, whom I was working with,” Ronnen related. “He asked me if I wanted to be a part of it, and I said, ‘Of course.’ I’m working with someone who has the systems and operations for bringing food to the masses now wanting to focus on organic, vegetarian healthy food. I couldn’t think of a better way to spend my time as a chef. I create all of the plant-based vegan dishes on the menu for Lyfe.”

Obviously Ronnen is very much behind Lyfe Kitchen’s mission. “It will introduce people to eating healthy food, but in a familiar format,” he said. “It will acquaint them with new ingredients; everything is under 600 calories; there’s a sodium cap—a lot of benefits to eating at Lyfe. And the plan is to expand to 250 locations in the next five years.

“It’s not fast food—we call it ‘fast casual.’ Fast-food restaurants have a three- to five-minute ticket time. We’re at about eight minutes, so you sacrifice a little bit of time to get quality



*My mission is just to prepare great-tasting food that appeals to people of all walks of life: vegetarians, carnivores, flexitarians and everyone in between.*



*At my new restaurant, Crossroads, we do a take on oysters on the half shell. We use an artichoke leaf as an oyster shell with an artichoke purée, a crispy oyster mushroom that's been seasoned with nori to give it a seafood flavor, and a yellow tomato Béarnaise sauce and kelp caviar. It's really indulging food.*





food. There's no deep fryer in the restaurant. Everything is made fresh and cooked fresh to order."

### Standing at the Crossroads

As one might imagine, a restaurant Ronnen himself opened would be quite unique—and his brand-new Los Angeles-based Crossroads restaurant certainly is. "We're bringing Mediterranean food to LA that just happens to be vegan," he said, "and the word *vegan* isn't even on the menu.

"It's unique because it's in a fine-dining environment but everything is small plate, ranging from \$6 to \$14, so you can try many different things. Unlike a lot of vegetarian restaurants there's a theme. In some vegetarian or vegan restaurants you can get miso



soup and a burrito and a Reuben, yet those cuisines have nothing to do with each other. I guess that's fun for some people, but at Crossroads the food is all going to go together across the board, whether it's a salad or soup or a small hot plate. It's very cohesive."

Diners can choose from a variety of mouth-watering dishes, such as Morel Mushroom Gravy with house-made Focaccia Biscuits; Herb Risotto–Stuffed Banana Peppers with Basil Lime Beurre Blanc; and Caramelized Leek Flatbread with Crispy Root Vegetables. Dessert options on the menu include Chocolate Bundt Cake with Chocolate Whiskey Sauce, and Carrot Cake Ice Cream with Candied Carrot Chips.

The name is indicative of the clientele Ronnen and his partners wish to attract to the restaurant. "My partner Steve Bing came up with the name," said Ronnen. "They were sitting around trying to think of a name that didn't scream vegan or green, and something that everyone would feel comfortable with. This will be a crossroads for a lot of people—vegetarians, vegans and carnivores all dining in the same restaurant and having a good time together."

Ronnen has seen to the business side of Crossroads as well. Partner Steve Bing is the founder of the Shangri-La business group, an organization with interests in property, construction, entertainment and music. Another partner is Parnell F. Delcham, CEO of United Culinary Artists; Delcham has previously overseen several different restaurant groups and the opening of many concept restaurants. The kitchen is helmed by executive chef Scot Jones, who is best known for having been

executive chef at Chrissie Hynde's VegiTeranean restaurant.

"We've got a really great team," Ronnen pointed out. "It's a group of very talented people from the restaurant industry. They've come together to create this concept, and I think that's unique in itself. A lot of vegetarian or vegan restaurants are opened by very well-intentioned people, but they might not necessarily be savvy in the restaurant business."

### The Local and Sustainable Difference

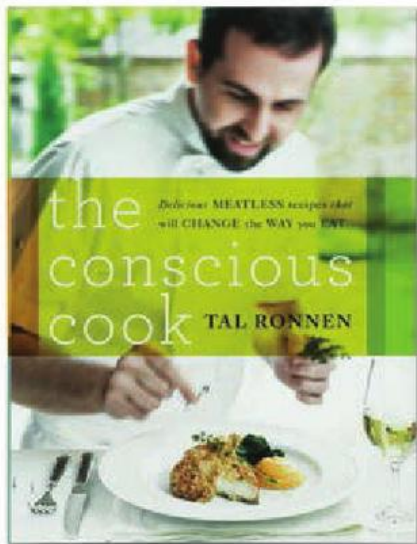
Many top chefs, including Alice Waters, Wolfgang Puck, Rick Bayless and Dan Barber, have discovered the flavor difference in local, seasonal and sustainably grown ingredients. Tal Ronnen is no exception—and Crossroads most assuredly utilizes them. "We're a seasonal restaurant," he said. "Anything that we cook with is at the peak of its season and tastes as good as it's going to get. When you start using ingredients that are out



of season and flown from halfway across the world, that's when they don't taste as good. So cooking seasonally and using organic ingredients definitely makes our dishes."

The sourcing of local ingredients has been in place since Crossroads' opening. "We have a really unique partnership with LA Specialty," Ronnen continued. "LA Specialty is a great group that does what I would normally do on a Sunday, and that's go to the farmers' market. They basically do that for us and bring local, sustainable and organic produce to our restaurant. That's where we get most of our produce."

But it's not just the flavor that has influenced Ronnen—it is the health issues associated with



conventionally grown produce. “We just had training with our front-of-the-house staff and they asked what inspired me to order all organic,” Ronnen said. “I told them we’re ordering mostly organic, but where we don’t think it makes sense—like if there is a local farmer that hasn’t gotten USDA certification but has organic farming practices—I’m cool with that. To me, it’s looking at it on a case-by-case basis.

“I also explained to them that I choose to cook with organic ingredients not so much for what people think is important with organic, which is largely pesticides—although that is important; but GMO food and irradiated food are bigger reasons for me. I explained to them why we wouldn’t want genetically modified or irradiated foods, especially with some of the conventional produce being sold to restaurants being irradiated. They were surprised; they thought *organic* just meant no pesticides.”

### Spreading the Word

Ronnen is not simply serving his cuisine to patrons; he is also spreading it through the printed word. Not long after his first appearance on *Oprah*, he released a cookbook entitled *The Conscious Cook: Delicious Meatless Recipes That Will Change the Way You Eat* (William Morrow, 2009).

a wide variety; so I wanted to write a book that really spoke to chefs, and that’s what I did. With Oprah Winfrey’s support, when she had the book featured on her show, and also with Ellen’s, it was the first vegetarian cookbook to make the *New York Times* bestseller list for six weeks in a row.”

The recipes contained in *The Conscious Cook* can also, of course, be utilized by home



Interestingly, it wasn’t originally targeted at the home kitchen. “I created it to fill a void,” said Ronnen. “There wasn’t a vegan cookbook that I could pass on to my peers. I know a lot of chefs who cook meat and work at hotels, and they said, ‘Hey, Chef, give me a cookbook that I can learn from,’ and I really couldn’t think of one. There were a couple but there wasn’t

chefs—of the more patient variety. “Definitely a lot of people enjoy it at home, but some people are a little intimidated by the recipes,” Ronnen remarked. “Everyone is pitching these 30-minute meals and microwave meals, and I’m not about that; everything I do is from scratch. So when people see that a recipe takes an hour or an hour and a half, some don’t have time for that and I think that’s kind of sad. People used to spend all day cooking and now they’re afraid of an hour recipe.”

Nevertheless, it is certain that through his cookbook as well as national television publicity, through educating others and cooking for major culinary venues, Chef Ronnen is changing the landscape of how the world views vegan cuisine. ■

*Tal Ronnen’s book, The Conscious Cook, is available from the Organic Connections bookstore.*

*To find out more, please visit [www.talronnen.com](http://www.talronnen.com).*



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