



Photos by BETH NAKAMURA (above) and THOMAS BOYD (below) of THE OREGONIAN

For restaurants that rely on premium ingredients, it's critical to avoid waste. At Lincoln, chef Jenn Louis, top right, makes a ragu, top left, from lamb scraps. At Grand Central Bakery, below, every shred of chicken meat – and the bones – are used.

Balancing cost and conscience

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Leslie Cole, The Oregonian

The cooking school exercise seems simple enough: Students pick a favorite dish from a local restaurant and estimate the cost of ingredients three ways -- buying locally, buying from a national food distributor and buying from an importer.

So what would an aspiring restaurateur charge for that gorgeous plate of duck confit with butternut risotto? As little as \$11 or as much as \$26, depending on the source.

Cameron Rolka, a first-year culinary student at The Art Institute of Portland, is surprised to discover that buying local ingredients translates to a \$26 entree. The message was clear: It's not easy being green. "It's really hard," Rolka says. "You see that it's going to cost an extra 50 percent (for ingredients), and you might have to sell a dish for double the money. But if you're doing a restaurant, you'd kind of like to commit to be local."

It's a dilemma chefs across the country face every day: how to balance sustainable principles with the bottom line and, they hope, attract more patrons in the process. Yet sustainable purchasing isn't a hot topic in most culinary schools. Except in Portland, where The International Culinary School at the Art Institute of Portland requires that all students take a nuts-and-bolts course in sustainable purchasing.

So far, the culinary school on Portland's North Park Blocks is the only place in the country doing so, says Ken Rubin, its chef director. But the idea is catching on. Soon, Rubin says, the three-credit class will be a requirement at all 35 Art Institutes nationwide.

"It's crazy that nobody (else) teaches it," says chef-instructor David McIntyre, who developed the course last year for Rubin. "This is what everybody's doing in the industry. ... Everyone has to decide, am I going to use the organic chicken or not?"

But the lesson for the students in Cory Schreiber's Sustainable Purchasing and Controlling Costs class isn't only that local sourcing costs more. It's that running a restaurant, especially for anyone who commits to sustainability, means being savvy about food costs, clever about waste and intentional about every decision.

Will I buy everything locally, or just certain things? Should I rethink the duck confit dish or boost prices on other menu items to compensate? Can I save money by using the duck in a different way and reducing the food waste? These are the questions that young chefs must ask, and that's even before considering labor, beverages, rent and every other part of running a restaurant.

In fact, much of the restaurant industry seems hungry to adopt sustainable practices, not for philosophical reasons but to lure more customers. According to the National Restaurant Association, 70 percent of consumers are more likely to go to a restaurant that offers locally produced food items.

Meanwhile the industry is rolling out tools to help chefs deliver on good intentions (see info box at right). In January, food service giant Aramark and the IFMA (International Facility Management Association) Foundation published a free guide for "advancing sustainable practices within the food service environment." The 36-page document covers procurement of sustainable foods, energy and waste stream management, and more. Meanwhile, the James Beard Foundation has joined with the Sustainable Food Lab in New York, and representatives from both groups are gathering ideas from chefs, farmers and academics around the country, with plans to develop sustainability standards and a guide for restaurants.

Ten weeks of coursework may help the Portland students get a leg up, but no one leaves with all the answers. Instead Schreiber, the founding chef of Wildwood restaurant, hopes they move on with a framework for making decisions. Along with the cost-comparison exercise, students study eco-labels and food policy. They learn how to develop menus that work as a unit, with some dishes priced to sell at a lower margin and others at a higher margin. They visit a restaurant that works with small, local purveyors growing specialty items, and on another day get a crash course in Oregon's commodity crops, 90 percent of which are sold to other states or countries. "The commodity system is very important to our state," Schreiber says.

If there's a lesson to be learned, it's that craft, ethics and economics must intersect if a restaurant is to succeed.

"At the end of the day, it's a business," Rubin says. "We might have this idea of only buying chickens within the 80-yard radius of the restaurant (raised) on a rooftop somewhere, but when it's all said and done, maybe it's not possible. Or, you figure out how to present it differently."

Chefs such as Jenn Louis have mastered the tricky balance. At Lincoln, the North Portland

restaurant she owns with husband David Welch, food costs hover between 22 and 24.5 percent of the budget, well below the industry standard of 28 percent, although they use high-quality ingredients and meat, seafood and fresh produce from local, sustainable sources. Entrees are priced from \$16 to \$24, moderate for a white-tablecloth restaurant in Portland.

"I won't cheat myself out of using those more expensive products," Louis says. "They're all really important to use."

But she is highly disciplined on what goes in and out of her kitchen. She buys all the fresh foods she needs for the week, and nothing more. "We don't keep a lot on our shelves. ... What's on your shelf isn't food, it's money. Everything is perishable."

As dinner service winds down each night, they take inventory of meats and seafood and update a board in the kitchen, noting what they have, what they need and what they must use in writing the next day's menu.

Portions are modest. Waste is minimal, because anything fresh gets used up. When a whole lamb comes in, shoulders get braised for gravy; loin and rib chops become entrees; bones become stock. With savory bits of smoked ribs and trimmings from shoulder and shanks, she makes a delicious ragu. Bits of fresh albacore tuna left after filleting, the pieces too thin for a steak, can be poached in olive oil and added to salads (see accompanying recipe).

These days, being a great chef requires both craft and efficiency, Louis says. "It's the only way a business can survive. But it's also good, because it makes us better cooks, it makes us smarter cooks."

Sustainability isn't just the domain of white-tablecloth restaurants. Grand Central Bakery, which sells bread to restaurants and retailers and runs six cafes in Portland, sources berries and vegetables, eggs, butter, flour and more from farmers around the region. "It forces you to run a tighter ship," says Piper Davis, the bakery's cuisine director.

It helps that Grand Central buys in large volumes, which gives the bakery a price break. Even so, "you have to be really clever about waste control," Davis says, something bakeries aren't known for. Grand Central has software to analyze buying traffic patterns, which they tie into production and purchasing. They track waste and set "very aggressive" goals for limiting it.

They also do their own laundry rather than using a linen service and have someone in-house fix equipment when it breaks. Putting local meat in sandwiches required another shift. Earlier this summer, Davis decided it was time to switch to locally raised pastured chickens for their popular chicken salad sandwiches (see accompanying recipe). The local birds are three times more expensive, she says. "But it's something I'm passionate about because large-scale chicken production is so heinous. And this tastes good."

To compensate, they make chicken salad using both white and dark meat. And like thrifty home economists, the staff roasts the chickens, picks the carcasses clean and saves the bones for soup stock. And now the cafes put one soup on the menu each day, not two.

"The difference between a cook and a chef is that a chef thinks about this stuff," Rubin says.

"I tell people that if you're not keeping control of your costs, all you really have at the end of the day is a very expensive hobby."

Olive-oil-poached Albacore

Makes 10 ounces

Although this recipe uses a generous amount of olive oil, the leftovers can be used another time or two to cook fish, or in the accompanying recipe for Olive-oil-poached Albacore With Cannellini Beans, Fennel and Olives.

Ingredients

- 1 lemon, thinly sliced
- 2 large cloves garlic, sliced in half
- 3 sprigs fresh thyme
- 1 10-ounce albacore tuna fillet, cut into 1/3-inch-thick slices
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
- Olive oil (for poaching)

Instructions

Line a heavy medium skillet with lemon slices, and add garlic and thyme. Sprinkle tuna with salt and pepper and place atop lemon. Add just enough olive oil to cover tuna. Place skillet over medium-low heat and, using an instant-read or deep-fat thermometer to check accuracy, bring oil temperature to 130 degrees, about 3 minutes. Then turn off heat and allow tuna to cool to room temperature in the oil. Discard lemon slices, thyme and garlic.

From Jenn Louis, chef and co-owner, Lincoln Restaurant

Olive-oil-poached Albacore With Cannellini Beans, Fennel and Olives

Makes 4 servings

Ingredients

- 2 tablespoons olive oil (you can use oil left over from poaching tuna for accompanying recipe), plus additional for serving
- 1 medium onion, cut into small dice
- 1 medium bulb fennel, cut into small dice
- 1 15-ounce can cannellini or other white beans (such as white runner or borlotti)
- Grated zest from 1 lemon
- Freshly squeezed juice from 1 lemon
- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1 pound arugula or mixed summer greens
- 1 shallot, thinly sliced
- 1 recipe Olive-oil-poached Albacore (see accompanying recipe)
- 1 cup pitted kalamata olives (taggiasca and leccino are also good options)
- Lemon wedges for serving

Instructions

In a large skillet over medium heat, add 2 tablespoons olive oil and sauté onion and fennel until tender. Add beans, lemon zest and lemon juice. Season with salt and pepper, and add a good drizzle of olive oil. Toss greens and shallot together and use mixture to line the bottom of a platter. Break up albacore in rough large chunks over bean mixture and adjust seasonings as needed with salt and pepper. Add olives and gently toss together. Place bean mixture over greens. Serve with lemon wedges on the side.

From Jenn Louis, chef and co-owner, Lincoln Restaurant