

THE AMERICAN FOOD REVOLUTION STARTS HERE.



“You cannot separate what you are from what you do,” says Eric Ripert, renowned Chef of New York’s Le Bernardin. He is seated on a raised platform at the Rubin Museum of Art next to fellow Chef David Chang of Momofuku fame. The two are part of the annual LUCKYRICE Festival, the topic “Buddhism in the Kitchen.” As the two answer questions from the crowd, an attentive audience comprising a wide cross section of food lovers, culture buffs and pop culture enthusiasts eagerly listen in. As the night wears on, it’s evident that this is less about religion and more about the ethics of today’s chefs and the topics confronting businessman and food lovers alike. From sustainable farming to organic produce, there are chefs out there who are starting their own mini food revolution, not to attain fame or accolades, but simply because their passion extends beyond the need to make a buck — to embrace a meaningful respect for the food they prepare and the produce we consume.

Balancing a tight rope of “cost verses conscience,” factors beyond economics come into play for many who spend their lives in the kitchens of the world. It is starting to have a big impact on what we’re exposed to, what we crave and what we’re served. “If you can’t kill an animal you shouldn’t put it on your menu,” says Chang, whose most famous dish was once suckling pig, something that after careful consideration he has taken off the menu. He is far from preachy in his delivery — and the

first to admit he is anything but perfect — but his dedication to his craft and what it means to be part of the most basic human food chain is unmistakable. “I realized not so long ago that by serving it [suckling pig] I was disrespecting the cycle of life,” he admits. Although not a Buddhist, like French-born Ripert, he is part of a successful group of well-respected chefs who are looking to sustainable farms, local produce and ethical cooking to make a difference.

But it’s not only New York’s high-end establishments that are at the forefront of this revolution. In St. Louis, far from the city of lights, Chef William Gideon — whose resume boasts cooking for four presidents, the lovely Julia Child and countless establishments prior to the newly opened Riverside Casino — has managed to take the seemingly impossible and turn it into a reality. A world of over-processed fast food (the standard casino fare) is a far cry from what Gideon has on offer. “I want to be as culinarily creative as I can be while keeping economics in my mind,” says Gideon. Which is a tough balancing act when dealing with mass production on a lower price scale, but it’s something that can be done, as seen by the quality and affordability of the food offered at the myriad restaurants he oversees within the complex. “You have to be able to think outside of the box,” he explains. “The executive chef must have vision and great organizational skills. He or she must be able to impart them to the staff. Making risotto from scratch for 2,000 people can be done. It just has to be

orchestrated properly.”

“If the chef has done his or her job correctly, the fresh product will almost always taste better than the processed one,” says Gideon. “Sometimes it can be a lengthy education of your customer base exposing them to fresh cooking styles and getting them to change from the things they have grown up with. Once they do, it can be infectious. They will spread the word and populate your establishment.”

As food networks gain in popularity and we continue to be bombarded with information on nutrition, the American food revolution starts and ends with our culinary idols. For Chang, it’s about getting back to basics. “I know it’s hard to justify a \$30 organic chicken to a struggling family, but I think it’s up to us to educate that same family on how to turn that one chicken into seven different meals,” he explains. For Ripert it begins with those closest to you: “It’s about feeding our staff, our neighbors and the world.” For Gideon, triumphant in the kitchens of St. Louis, it’s a process, one he is happy to be a part of. “I think we will start to see more restaurants that are a step above the fast food level who are doing a melting pot of different ethnicities,” he says. “They will serve a combination of made-from-scratch and pre-packaged cuisine that will appeal to a broad clientele. Food across America is constantly evolving. I love being a small part of that evolution.”

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