

SUSTAINABLE DINNER PARTY: THE FOOD

WHAT IS A SUSTAINABLE DINNER PARTY?

A sustainable dinner party is a shared meal that focuses on local food and the farms and people who produce it. Much like a typical dinner party, there will be good friends, delectable cuisine and stimulating conversation, but with a focus on the plate in front of you and the issues that surround it. A sustainable dinner party presents an opportunity to discuss modern agriculture and enjoy some delicious seasonal food in the process.

WHAT IS SUSTAINABLE FOOD?

Sustainable food is grown and produced using methods that do not harm the environment and that are respectful of workers, humane to animals, provide fair wages and support farming communities.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The food that most people eat today is very different from the food that humans have eaten throughout history. In just the last sixty years, radical changes in agricultural practices have contributed to climate change, massive abuse of antibiotics, widespread obesity and rampant animal cruelty.

A sustainable dinner party is a way to examine these problems and possible solutions. By taking small steps such as hosting or attending a sustainable dinner party, you can help pave the way for a sustainable future; increased awareness can lead to changes in personal choices and advocacy for changes in our food system.

WHERE CAN I FIND SUSTAINABLE FOOD?

The first place to look for sustainable food is at the farmers' market, where you may find locally raised vegetables, fruits and meats, as well as dairy products, baked goods and other prepared foods. Farmers' offerings are seasonal, so you will always be buying the freshest and consequently the tastiest ingredients. Shopping at a farmers' market is an important way to support small farmers who produce food sustainably, because they are able to earn more by

selling directly to consumers than by selling through grocery stores. Be aware that while some farmers' products are not certified organic, that does not mean they are not growing food according to organic practices, so be sure to ask questions.

Another option is to join a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture group). In a CSA, members purchase a share of a farmer's crop before it's planted. This takes some planning ahead, but it is a great financial benefit to the farmer and offers the consumer an excellent deal on fresh food. As the farmer begins to harvest the crops, CSA members receive a box full of seasonal vegetables on pre-set days.

If you can join a local food co-op (a collectively owned food store), you'll have a great alternative to shopping at a conventional grocery store. Members can choose to have the co-op purchase primarily natural, sustainable, organic and local food.

If you can't shop at a food co-op, farmers' market or join a CSA, look for organic and local food at your grocery store. As much as possible, buy vegetables and fruits that are in season. These have probably traveled less distance to market will often be fresher, better tasting and more nutritious than out-of-season produce.

SEASONAL INGREDIENTS

People have come to expect to find many varieties of fruits and vegetables available all year round. In the United States, most of this produce was shipped thousands of miles using non-renewable fuels. Because it has to withstand such a long journey, much of the produce we've become accustomed to eating has been bred, engineered and chemically treated to have a long shelf life and a near perfect appearance. In essence, consumers are now used to eating subpar produce that lacks nutrition as well as flavor. When you buy seasonal food from sustainable, local sources, you are getting food as it was meant to be consumed. Many smaller farmers grow and sell heirloom vari-

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eties that are highly distinct and flavorful. Your sustainable dinner party will be a celebration of seasonal ingredients!

DRINKS

Food is not the only sustainable aspect of a sustainable dinner party; drinks can be sustainable too. There are many organic beers, wines, juices and soft drinks that you can include in your menu. Depending on your region, you may be able to find a vineyard producing local wine. Many major cities have their own breweries and buying beer from them is a way of supporting local business. If you can't find local beverages, look for organically or bio-dynamically produced drinks and be sure to serve tap water instead of the bottled kind!

MEAT

Eating local, humanely raised meat is a significant choice you can make toward eating sustainably. Sustainably raised meat can be expensive. However, if you eat less meat, but spend your meat dollars on high quality sustainably raised meat, you can balance your budget. It's good for your own health as well as the health of the planet.

Industrially raised meat has extremely negative environmental effects. Emissions from meat production constitute about 18 percent of the greenhouse effect responsible for climate change. Manure from millions of animals in close confinement pollutes the land and water. Many non-renewable resources go to feed, butcher, package and transport factory farmed animals as well.

Sustainably raised meat is produced using practices that treat the animal humanely and have fewer negative effects on the environment. Sustainably raised animals have access to pasture, are fed their natural diet and allowed to exhibit natural behaviors. Small farms do not overburden the land with too many animals; waste is used as fertilizer which, in turn, nourishes crops.

Meat labeling can be befuddling. Look for the words “certified organic” or “biodynamic”, “grass-fed” and “pasture-raised”. Beware of the term “natural”; while artificial preservatives or synthetic ingredients are prohibited, the term has no bearing on how the animal was raised or what it was fed. For more information, see Sustainable Table's *Glossary of Meat Production Methods* at www.sustainabletable.org/spread/handouts/Glossary_of_Meat_Production.pdf.

For your sustainable dinner party, think about featuring dishes in which meat doesn't hog the spotlight — or even serving no meat at all! You can find all kinds of recipes at www.meatlessmonday.org.

For more information about how to find sustainable food, see Sustainable Table's “Questions to Ask” at www.sustainabletable.org/shop/questions and visit www.eatwellguide.org to find farmers' markets, CSAs, co-ops and stores in your area that sell sustainable food.

To learn more about sustainable local food, visit Sustainable Table at www.sustainabletable.org

