

A Pioneer in Organic Cuisine

by Carole Ottesen

NORA POUILLON, chef and doyenne of organic cuisine in Washington, D.C., is the recipient of AHS's 2003 Catherine B. Sweeney award, given for extraordinary and dedicated efforts in the field of horticulture. At her restaurants, the eponymous Nora, which opened in 1979, and Asia Nora, which opened in 1994, Pouillon insists on using only quality ingredients grown organically and harvested in season. Associate Editor Carole Ottesen spoke with her about her commitment to organic produce and practices.



How did you get interested in organics?

What started me was [understanding] the relationship between what we eat and how we feel. It's very important to eat well to feel well. Growing up [in Austria], my parents paid a lot of attention to what we ate, and we were never sick.

When I came here in the '60s, supermarkets looked the same all year around. There were tomatoes all year around, except that they were pink in winter. Lettuce was iceberg. There was hardly any fresh produce available, and it didn't have flavor.

After researching this, I realized it had to do with the agriculture in this country. Everybody used unbelievable amounts of fertilizers, pesticides, fungicides, and hormones. Once you realize all that goes into your food, why would you want to eat it?

How has the view of organic food changed since you started Restaurant Nora?

In the last 10 years, more and more people and organizations have talked about the connection between the environment and farming. Environmental foundations were created. There is more consumer awareness

of how we exploit nature—the depletion of our oceans and of the nutritive capacity of our topsoil. And there were books like *Our Stolen Future* [by Theo Coburn et al.]—a really good book that didn't get the publicity of the others like *Fast Food Nation* and *The Botany of Desire*.

What had a big impact in the Washington area was the opening of Fresh Fields [now Whole Foods supermarket chain]. Consumers and chefs saw that organic food was going mainstream. That woke them up.

What kind of problems did you encounter in the early days?

The biggest problem was availability. I couldn't use distributors and wholesalers. Finding the products in the quality and the commercial quantities I needed was difficult. Balsamic vinegar came in tiny little bottles. I begged for three years for a number-10-size can of organic tomatoes!

Finding produce was also difficult. The small farms that grew organically weren't equipped to do deliveries, so I had to pick things up.

And it was difficult to find staff that would do what I wanted them to do. They thought I was crazed. They didn't want to order from farmers because the produce was dirty—or had holes from bug bites.

Is organic food more available now?

As organic food became more mainstream, I could get things from Europe. Now I get olive oil in 70-gallon drums from Spain and 2½-gallon containers of balsamic vinegar from Italy. Organic cheeses come from France and Italy. Olives come from California; grains, nuts, beans, coffee, sugar, and chocolate come from local distributors.

It still sounds difficult to find all of the different products you need. Is it?

It's very labor-intensive. I have a person

who handles the process because it's so complicated. We helped to organize a cop of 30-plus Amish and Mennonite farmers who deliver two times a week—and in summer three times a week—produce and tiny little greens, berries, herbs. There are three Amish farmers who raise our pigs, lambs, and chickens. And we get organic beef from Sunnyside Farms in Washington, Virginia.

You also serve produce only in season. Is that a hard and fast rule?

That's the only way you can do it. If it's not in season, it's outrageously expensive. In our area, you *can* grow some things all year around—lettuce, Belgian endives, mâche. It's just that people have lost interest in doing that. So farmers have, too.

You and your family travel a great deal. Does sampling foreign fare affect your menu planning?

First of all, the menu at Restaurant Nora is new American cuisine—a hodge podge of all cultures and influences. That's what America is to me. When I travel, I just absorb how the local people do things, how they mix spices, what the flavor profile is. We go to markets and restaurants more than we go to museums.

You said once that you would like to start a chain of organic fast-food restaurants. Is that idea still intriguing?

I've been saying it for 10 years or more. I've even put menus together. You would need a lot of money to grow, to contact the farmers, to secure prime real estate, money to do a commissary. And you need locations in good areas; think about Starbucks. It would have to be done by someone really committed to organics, to people—and someone who doesn't mind losing a couple of million. Running a restaurant is like playing the lottery. And doing it organically is another risk factor.