

chef's special

Now serving: Your organic dinner

Professional chef Tamar Adler grabs a jar of green tomatoes off the pantry shelf of her restaurant in downtown Athens, Georgia. A pickled item always tops her ever-evolving menu. But summer harvests have begun in earnest, and Adler is looking forward to high-season flavors—early greens, fresh polenta, and just-reeled-in trout. Dessert is still up in the air, but Adler would love to make something from the honey she gets straight from bees at the University of Georgia lab.

WORTH THE EFFORT

Like many other chefs across the nation, Adler uses only organic produce, dry goods, and meat. It's a balancing act of flavor, availability, and the fickleness of the market, but for Adler and others like her, the food's outstanding taste and beauty are worth it.

"There's a subtlety in taste that most people don't realize. They can't identify the difference but

they recognize it," Adler says. "They know they are tasting something different."

It's that taste that has many Americans buying more organic fruits and vegetables at the supermarket and ordering them in restaurants. U.S. organic food sales grew by approximately 20.4 percent during 2003, to reach \$10.38 billion, according to figures from the Organic Trade Association. According to the National Restaurant Association's 2005 industry forecast, 46 percent of family-dining restaurants reported more orders for organic food than in 2003. Just browse your local bookstore and you'll see more organic food cookbooks and magazines than ever before.

BETTER-LOOKING PRODUCE

Taste and beauty are paramount in the minds of nearly every chef in America. Just about any one of them will argue that differences in palate and appearance between organic and conventional produce is more than just skin deep.

"Organic looks more like real food, while non-organic can sometimes look like plastic coming out of a mold," says Pithya Kongthavorn, a chef in Tucker, Georgia.

For Adler, the decision to serve only organic fare is a no-brainer. "You get your fill of vitamins for a week," she says. "The cilantro is so sweet it tastes like sugar. You've never seen such beautiful turnips. There's a brightness and robustness to the taste and look (of organic) that's undeniable."



NO PESTICIDES=GREAT TASTE

Health, energy, lifestyle, and buying patterns are all ever-changing challenges in an

organic chef's routine. Most chefs cannot rely on food preferences alone as they develop menus; food availability

and preparation affect what they put on the menu. Cost constraints limit Kongthavorn from serving organic meat, so he encourages seafood and vegetarian offerings.

"It's a give and take—to create a balanced menu within the context of the harvest," says Adler. "The organic food comes from what we preserve,

what we can get nearby, or what we travel a long distance for."

Adler and Kongthavorn say lack of pesticides, natural living conditions

for animals, and healthy soil all affect food's flavor—and the health of their customers. Organic farming's emphasis on soil nutrition has a positive influence

on the taste of the food, they say.

Organically-grown produce is bred more for taste than marketability.

For instance, some conventional produce, such as tomatoes, are bred to be more resistant to damage during transportation and to sustain a longer shelf life.

Adler believes even more people

would eat organic foods if they knew more about the health benefits of an organic diet. "There isn't a real infrastructure for helping people make that choice."

Although the organic process produces vegetables and fruits that grow less uniformly, she says there's actually less work involved when bringing them from the kitchen to the table. Using organic products allows chefs to rely on their skills—and the basic nature of food—to help customers learn what chefs know about food and how to best prepare it.

"The balance between work and cooking is a testimony to making the switch to organic," Adler says. "We don't add as much (seasoning), and we don't want to. Those flavors can just stand alone." 🌿

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Chef Tamar Adler