

## On the Menu: A Texas Bounty

by Kitty Crider, Austin American-Statesman

It's one thing for individuals to **eat** only **locally** grown food for a meal, a week, or a month. It's quite another for a university in Austin to commit to cooking a **locally** grown meal for its students, even for a day: Could it get enough products? And would pizza/ sandwich-loving college kids **eat** it?

"That's why it's called an **Eat Local** Challenge," said Leon Trevino, executive chef for Bon Appetit Management Co., which is the contracted nationwide food service provider for St. Edward's University. Bon Appetit Management is unique in that in 1999, it established a companywide policy that a minimum of 20 percent of its food budget be spent on **local** ingredients. And every fall, beginning in 2005, it designates a day for its **Eat Local** Challenge at all its facilities, which includes the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cisco Systems Inc., Nordstrom Inc.'s headquarters, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis.

"No other company is spending as much **locally** as we are," says Maisie Greenawalt, director of communication for Bon Appetit Management, which also serves a small Cisco **location** in Austin. "We are unique in magnitude, percent and dollar amount. We are now at 30 percent (of the food budget), which represents about \$55 million annually. I think we are also unique in our commitment in going directly to farmers and making their programs sustainable as well as providing great-tasting food to our customers."

Trevino, who moved to Austin from the Chicago area about three months ago when Bon Appetit took over the food contract at St. Edward's, had prepared **local** meals for students at Wheaton College. He was undaunted by the annual **Eat Local** Challenge task until he went to the Austin farmers' markets in September to purchase for the **local eating** date and found limited produce, no flour and no sugar.

September in the Midwest offers a bounty of produce, he says. But September in Central Texas is between seasons and supplies are short. (Bon Appetit says that with clients in 28 states from Florida to Maine, there is no perfect date when all crops are at their peak.)

So Trevino scrounged for **local** veggies in Texas. At one farmers market, he tried to buy a grower's entire tomato harvest, but she did not want to short her other customers. He searched in vain for fruit

grown within 150 miles of Austin in September.

Trevino settled on a **local** menu of Thunder Heart bison braised in Travis Peak Select cabernet, basmati rice from Lowell Farms, fresh beans and a ratatouille of eggplants, peppers, tomatoes and squash with herbs from the chef's garden at St. Edward's.

Aguas frescas were planned for the beverage but had to be abandoned because the melon supply never materialized. (Even as late as the afternoon before the meal, Hays Atkins, Austin general manager of Bon Appetit, planned to make a San Antonio run if fruit from within 150 miles could be **located**. He monitored his phone faithfully, hoping for the call.)

Trevino also ditched dessert from the menu, although he briefly considered pumpkin pie. "I could get pumpkin and egg but no vanilla, no nutmeg, no cinnamon," he said of his dearth of **local** supplies at this time of year. Salt was the only nonlocal ingredient allowed under Bon Appetit guidelines.

At the St. Edward's dining facility, a refrigerated truck is parked at its back dock to supplement the kitchen's walk-in refrigerator. Unlike some food service companies, Bon Appetit says it cooks most dishes from scratch, be it stock for braised bison or crust and sauce for its popular pizzas. It focuses on fresh, not frozen or canned ingredients. So there is a need for more refrigeration.

There are other changes afoot. The St. Edward's dining hall is the only food service on the campus at 3001 S. Congress Ave., and Trevino says on a given day, he serves about 500 to 600 students, faculty and staff for breakfast, 1,500 for lunch and 1,100 for dinner. The dining hall was designed for 2,000 people, but the university now has 5,000 students. Remodeling is under way to add several hundred more seats, to provide outdoor dining and to build a dish room. Trevino and staff members are making plans to switch from disposable dishware to reusable china and glass to lower the carbon footprint.

Back in the kitchen, cook Scott Crim took the **local** meal seriously, preparing a day ahead two cuts of bison - a stew meat version and a shank or osso buco version - so the flavors would have time to meld. Typically, he says, he would use carrots, celery, onion and garlic in the preparation. But no **local** celery or carrots had been found. Normally, he would dredge, or coat, the meat in flour before cooking, but he had no **local** wheat.

He cooked 250 to 300 bison portions. The hot lunch entree, where the bison would be featured, would be only one of seven or eight food stations. Competing against it would be stations for salad, pasta and pizza, fresh-rolled sushi, sandwiches, rice bowls and burgers.

On **eat-local** day, Dustin Burton, a psychology major from La Grange, was one of the first in line to try the bison meal. He chose the osso buco, or shank cut. "Tastes good," he said. Bison was not new to him. Nor was it new to grad student Courtney Sames of Laredo. "Tastes like carne guisada," said Sames, who chose the entree because she was trying to **eat** healthfully.

Debbie Taylor, St. Edward's athletic director, pronounced the bison really good and tender. "Much more tender than I thought, but not as tender as a filet."

Andy Caswell of Dripping Springs passed on the **local** meal altogether, favoring instead chicken tender and fries. **Eating local** is not on the freshman's radar yet.

But it is on the sustainability agenda of St. Edward's University President George Martin, says Pat Kirby, associate vice president of financial affairs. When the school put the food service contract up for bid, a campus dining committee of students and staff listened to the proposals of half a dozen companies. They made on-site visits. Bon Appetit Management was the unanimous choice for its "passion for sustainability and healthy (food)."

Good food, healthy food, **local** food, from scratch is not cheap, he added, as he dined on the bison, plus selections from the salad bar. But though Bon Appetit Management increased prices for faculty and staff, it did not raise the cost of the student meal plan, he says.

Hot entrees typically run \$4.95 to \$6.95. The bison meal was \$6.95. Trevino said because of the volume, the rancher near San Antonio let him purchase the bison at \$6 a pound. In comparison, he usually pays about \$5 a pound for beef.

The students and staff bought into the **local-eating** emphasis. Before the lunch hour was over, the bison entree was gone.

Trevino was pumped about the students' response: "I didn't think they would go after the shanks like they did. That's the Texan in them, I guess. Up north, they would have shied away. This boosts my confidence to push the envelope.

"Next year, we will blow it out," Trevino said. For now, their **local** food focus will center not on single meals, but using Central Texas ingredients in general cooking as they become available in sufficient quantity. Already the kitchen is working on **local** milk, pork and beef supplies.

"We will build relationships with farmers," said sous chef Cory Mahlke.

Count me in for **Eat Local** Challenge '08. The dining hall is open to the public.

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