

# Growing connections

## Deborah Madison on the value of local

By Linda Egenes

For more than 30 years, Deborah Madison has championed home-cooking that is colorful, healthy and gourmet-good. Madison, who has won the James Beard award, the Julia Child award and other awards for her cookbooks, traveled to Fairfield, Iowa, in May to speak at the annual EcoFair at Maharishi University of Management.

It turns out that Madison has roots in Iowa because her father was born in Burlington, and she visits here yearly as a board member of Seed Saver's Exchange in Decorah. Her book, "Local Flavors: Cooking and Eating from America's Farmers' Markets," newly released in paperback in May. Here she talks to Radish about the book, farmers' markets and local foods.

**Radish:** Why is buying local so important?

**Deborah Madison:** Right now we're seeing the costs of transporting food. But more importantly, the experience of going to a farmers' market to buy local food is more satisfying and connecting. You see your friends, you see the people who live in your community, and you see the people who grow your food, who might also be your friends. It's an experience of connectedness, which I think that Americans in particular are lacking. Walking down the aisle of a big supermarket with a cart is one our saddest chores, whereas going to the farmers' market is a pleasure.

**R:** And the other reasons?

**DM:** Another reason is the quality of food is so much better. When you taste in-season broccoli that's fresh and picked the day before, it's nothing like we get in the store. It's sweet; it's delicious. You're gaining more flavor, and with more flavor, you're getting more nutrition. Foods like figs, apricots and tomatoes that need to be picked when ripe to taste good actually can be picked ripe for the farmers' market. That can't happen in a supermarket, where shipping is involved. Finally, it's

important to buy local because it's a way of keeping money in your community, which is especially important in the rural agricultural sectors.

**R:** What were your favorite Midwestern farmers' markets you visited while you were researching "Local Flavors?"

**DM:** I actually have three that I love, each very different from the other. One was St. Paul's, which is crowded, vibrant and bursting with an interesting combination of modern farmers and traditional Midwestern growers. I also enjoyed the Madison, Wisconsin, market, which is situated around the perimeter of the State Capitol, with lawns and trees. The quality of the food at both markets was amazing. The third market, in Decorah, Iowa, is the opposite of the other two. It's tiny, but I always find many interesting things to take home — foods that we don't have in New Mexico, whether it's ground cherries or jams made with local fruits. It's friendly and relaxed, with interesting people. I remember a man who had ground his own corn and it was absolutely delicious to cook with. It had so much flavor and vibrancy.

**R:** What were the most unusual locally grown fruits and vegetables that you've come across?

**DM:** In the St. Paul market, I must have taken 150 pictures of amazing eggplants in purple or gold or with green stripes — even bright orange ones, grown by Hmong farmers. And there was the most amazing tropical smell. It stopped me in my tracks. It turned out to be a fragrant melon called "passport."

**R:** How far should we be taking the local foods movement? We can't grow oranges in Iowa, for instance.

**DM:** It's useful to think about what should be bought locally: your lettuce should be local, for instance. Wherever you are, it can be grown nearby. When it's something that can be grown where we live, I see no excuse for getting it from California.



Doug Merriam / Broadway Books

**R:** What can we do to support the local foods movement?

**DM:** You can support the local foods movement by buying foods that you know are local. There are active Buy Fresh Buy Local chapters throughout Iowa (and Illinois). Certainly, if you have a farmers' market, you can support local growers there. Sometimes your local co-op will feature local food. And you can always ask for local food. We have to be active consumers. We have to buy it, speak up and ask for it.

### Crostini with Roasted Eggplant and Pine Nut Puree

Makes 1 cup puree. If you have a chance, make this puree using the pale green or white eggplants or the violet Rosa Bianca — all of which are delicate and sweet. You can make it all in a large mortar or a food processor.

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| 1 pound eggplant or a little more  | 1 tablespoon chopped mint              |
| Olive oil                          | 2 tablespoons chopped parsley          |
| ½ cup pine nuts or walnuts         | 2 tablespoons chopped opal basil, plus |
| 1 garlic clove                     | basil leaves for garnish               |
| Sea salt and freshly ground pepper | 12 slices toasted baguette or crackers |
| Fresh lemon juice                  |  |

Preheat the broiler. Peel the eggplant and slice it into rounds about ½-inch thick. Brush both sides of each slice lightly with oil, set on a sheet pan, and broil about 6 inches from the heat until golden, 12 to 15 minutes. Turn and brown on the other side. When done, stack the eggplant slices so that they'll steam and finish cooking. Toast the pine nuts in a dry skillet over low heat until golden. (If using walnuts, toast them in a 350-degree oven for 7 to 10 minutes, until fragrant.)

Pound the garlic and pine nuts with ½ teaspoon salt until smooth. Coarsely chop the eggplant, then work it into a somewhat rough puree with the pestle or in a food processor. Add a little lemon juice to sharpen the flavors. Taste for salt, season with pepper, and stir in the herbs. Spread the puree on the toasted bread or crackers, garnish with a basil leaf and pass around as an appetizer.

### Tomato Juice Sipped through a Lovage Straw

Imagine having your own fresh tomato juice. Strained but not cooked, the juice has a consistency far lighter than what comes out of a can. It's especially fine if you can sip it through the hollow stem of lovage, yet another good reason for having a lovage plant in the garden.

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| 1 pound ripe, juicy tomatoes, any color, | Fresh lemon juice, to taste              |
| coarsely chopped                         | 2 lovage stalks, fennel stalks, or lemon |
| ½ cup ice                                | basil sprigs for garnish                 |
| Sea salt and freshly ground pepper       |  |

Puree the tomatoes and ice in a blender, then pour through a strainer. Add a pinch of salt, some pepper, and lemon juice to taste. Let stand for a few minutes for the air bubbles to dissipate, then pour into 2 glasses and serve with the lovage straws or its sprigs.

Recipes from "Local Flavors: Cooking and Eating from America's Farmers' Markets" by Deborah Madison (Broadway Books). For another recipe, turn to Resources, page 38.