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## Deborah Madison: A Passion for Local Food

### "Local Flavors" Author Champions Neighborhood Farmers' Markets

BY LINDA EGENES



**Deborah Madison used her local farmers' market in Sante Fe as a starting point for researching farmers' markets all over the country for her book *Local Flavors: Cooking and Eating from America's Farmers' Markets*. (Photo: Lois Ellen Frank)**

When I was a college student in Bloomington, Illinois, I rose at 3:00 a.m. one morning in 1972 to ride three hours in our food co-op's truck to Chicago's South Water Market. In the predawn chill I rubbed elbows with the windy city's chefs and corner-grocery owners to choose the ripest zucchini, tomatoes, and string beans from the tailgates of farmers' trucks.

In those years, Chicago's wholesale food market was the closest we could get to seasonal, locally grown food, other than our own gardens. A lot has changed in the American foodscape since then. Today, more than 4,000 farmers' markets across the country directly connect consumer to local grower.

Deborah Madison, founding chef at San Francisco's historic Greens Restaurant, author of nine cookbooks, and winner of the Julia Child Cookbook of the Year and three James Beard awards, has been instrumental in bringing about that change. In her colorfully illustrated *Local Flavors: Cooking and Eating from America's Farmers' Markets*, newly released in paperback this May, she visits 100 farmers' markets and provides a cornucopia of recipes based on the regional produce she discovered.

When Madison spoke at the Eco-Fair sponsored by the department of sustainable living at Maharishi University of Management in Fairfield last month, I jumped at the chance to interview her. I found her to be as vibrant and nourishing as the food she writes about.

**Linda Egenes: When you cook, do you first see what's available and then plan your menus?**

**Deborah Madison:** Absolutely. I always cook that way, whether I'm going to the supermarket or farmers' market or my own garden. At certain times of the year, when the farmers' market is predictable, you know ahead of time what is available. Say in summer you want to make the perfect ratatouille, you know that this is a time for peppers, eggplant, and zucchini. So you go with a recipe

in mind. Otherwise, it's good to go to the farmers' market with an open mind, because you never know what you're going to see there.

In *Local Flavors* I talk about the seasonal vegetables I saw and how they inspired what I cooked, to perhaps encourage other people to cook in the same way. I always work from the market out.

***Do eating locally and eating seasonally go hand-in-hand?***

What I have learned from writing this book is a kind of a truism that "in season" is where you live. In season and local aren't separate. They're only separate when you go to the supermarket.

When we try to treat our foodscape as a national one, we really have painted ourselves into some strange corners and ideas about what's in season. June magazine covers will have pictures of strawberries, for instance, but I bought strawberries in Vermont in late October last year, because there are certain kinds of ever-bearing strawberries that last until the frost. Researching *Local Flavors* confirmed for me that even though we often cook by clichés, when you start to look around, you see that the available local produce is very different from what your national magazine is telling you.

***It seems that Local Flavors is trying to break through those clichés.***

Eating local and seasonal food is something I really care about. It's not just about the romance of farmers' markets. We want to become intelligent about who we are and how we relate to the world around us, rather than living in this kind of predefined encapsulated vision of what's local and what's in season. It's really different when you go into a farmers' market and look around. It's an eye opener.

***Is it possible to eat strictly what is local and in season?***

Yes, it's possible but I don't think we need to do that. Certainly people used to eat from their local region year 'round.

A book I'm reading now, *Kitchen Literacy*, by Ann Vileisis, is a portrait of what it takes to eat locally. It's a different way of living and thinking. It would be hard for us because we're used to so much variety. It would mean returning to a life where you spend a lot of time preserving food. We would have to think about how to store food over the winter, how to grow food in winter greenhouses in a way that's not incredibly fuel intensive.

***How do you see the value of organic produce versus local?***

When *Local Flavors* came out, I did some interviews with my friend Alice Waters, and she was very purist about organics. It had to be organic or else. I was saying, "I don't know, after what I've seen, I really support local."

Since then I've written a few articles saying, let's not pit them against each other. Let's try to see how we can look at each for what they are. Obviously, oranges aren't going to be local in Iowa, but you're not going to stop eating oranges. In that case, let's try to find organic oranges. And at my local farmers' market, if I have a choice between a vendor who is selling organic versus one who is not, I'm going to choose the one who is selling organic.

In general, though, I support local producers when that's appropriate. There's such a difference in taste in a vegetable that's grown locally, picked ripe, and bought fresh at your market than a vegetable that's been grown on an industrial organic farm and shipped from California.

*Click here for two recipes from [Locally Grown](#).*

*Read about Deborah's visit to the [Fairfield Farmers' Market](#).*

*Linda Egenes is a Fairfield freelance writer who buys local whenever she can.*

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