



THE JAMES BEARD
FOUNDATION



THE SYSTEM ON OUR PLATES

A NATIONAL DIALOGUE ON
SUSTAINABILITY, PUBLIC HEALTH,
AND THE RESTAURANT INDUSTRY

IN COLLABORATION WITH THE SUSTAINABLE FOOD LABORATORY

There has never been a time in our nation's history when more people have been so interested in and passionate about food. And yet, simultaneously, the challenges that the current, prevailing food system has created—environmental degradation, water shortages, compromised food safety, poor nutrition, and frightening public health outcomes—have reached critical proportions at every intersection of the system. The James Beard Foundation, along with the Sustainable Food Laboratory, is facilitating a national dialogue on sustainable food and public health through the lens of restaurants to engage chefs, restaurateurs, and other stakeholders in the food system to identify practical ways to make the restaurant industry more sustainable.

From our purview in America's culinary world, the restaurant is a very relevant venue through and at which to investigate sustainability. National Restaurant Association data tracks the increasing rate at which Americans take our meals in the more than 1,000,000 restaurants nationwide, and how the restaurant industry accounts for a \$566 billion piece of our annual economy. The restaurant in America is a nexus of the myriad channels that are important to understand when addressing sustainability: materials and energy use, food production and distribution, labor, consumption and, the inevitable, waste.

Through the front door enter diners with eating habits formed and taste preferences ingrained. They come with health concerns, familial responsibilities, and other personal and cultural predispositions. Through the back door enter ingredients from many sources—products from global supply chains purchased from multinational corporations, as well as hand-crafted products from local purveyors—and other materials required to make a restaurant work, such as cleaning supplies, paper, equipment and cooking supplies, electricity, water, and gas. The back door also serves as the departure point for waste—both garbage and other products that municipalities struggle to dispose of in a responsible way. Staff arrive with their previous experience and education, as well as their own personal and cultural predispositions. Inside, increasingly difficult decisions about energy, food, cooking methods, water, waste, and human resources face chefs and managers on a daily basis, whether we are considering an independent, fine-dining restaurant or an outlet of a multinational chain.

By looking at what goes into planning and building restaurants, and then through the lens of daily operations, what comes in the back and goes out the front doors, and what happens inside, that is, by viewing the *restaurant as a system*, we have a powerful vehicle to view, untangle, illuminate, address, re-imagine, and find ways to make the restaurant industry more sustainable.



THE SCOPE OF THE PROJECT

In the Spring and Summer 2010, The James Beard Foundation and the Sustainable Food Laboratory will facilitate a series of three to six regional conversations to introduce the full range of sustainability concepts to restaurant industry stakeholders. These concepts will help clarify common issues across the restaurant sector, define the obstacles, and clarify opportunities to bring sustainability to restaurants. Information and ideas gathered from the regional meetings will shape a national gathering in Washington, DC in the Fall 2010. The objective for the national meeting is to develop an agenda that the James Beard Founda-

tion will lead to help the restaurant industry to move forward. The outcome will be a series of educational programs and practical, actionable ideas for restaurants becoming more sustainable and health conscious as an industry—from chains to individual locations serving every demographic and region in the country.

It is anticipated that the meeting outcome will help create standards and “how to” guides that will help restaurateurs measure and improve on a range of sustainability metrics from building to powering to purchasing to cooking and providing quality meals for a growing population more sustainably.

THE SMALL, REGIONAL CONVERSATIONS (JUNE THRU SEPTEMBER 2010)

We have selected locations in different regions across the country in which we will convene a small, intimate conversation with local and regional stakeholders: Portland, OR, central California, the South Fork of Long Island, NY, Central Maine, Kansas City, MO, and New Orleans, LA. Each of these locations is in or near an epicenter of one or more large food system issues, which also have thriving restaurant industries and cultures. We expect conversations in each region to raise some common yet also regionally specific themes.

We will invite a group of between 16-20 people to join each regional conversation: local chefs, restaurateurs both independent and chain, procurement professionals, food writers, academics, farmers, policy-makers, and other food-industry actors. Each meeting will begin at 10 a.m. with a discussion of the “system on our plates” to introduce sustainability concepts relevant to the supply chain that build on the “local” and “organic” discussion that is part of the vernacular in many restaurants already, and which also points out the global nature of our food resources. The meeting will go until 1 p.m., when we’ll have a working lunch. We will discuss additional sustainability concepts, including life-cycle analysis, carbon footprint, waste disposal, etc. The discussion will be guided by a well-crafted agenda and discussion questions.

Mitchell Davis, Vice President of the James Beard Foundation, and Karen Karp, a consultant to the Sustainable Food

Laboratory, will facilitate the regional discussions. In addition to introducing sustainability concepts, they will elicit from the participants the key food-system issues and sustainability challenges facing them in their day-to-day work in restaurants, as well as the larger issues they see as important to sustain and improve our food system as a whole. As an exercise to tease out the most critical issues, we will discuss how these issues impact a hypothetical restaurant. Guests will be asked to imagine a restaurant in 20 years time given our current path and through new information about the key sustainability issues presented in the learning session, such as pressures on water supply and soil, climate change, energy trends, etc. Then each group will be asked to envisage and discuss how a restaurant might be different in 20 years based on the new knowledge and emerging paradigms, to imagine new behaviors, beliefs, and values based on a new physical and food system environment. We will discuss industry-wide approaches that might provide the most leverage, which actions would need to be taken to launch and bring these to scale, and introduce critical policy topics required to achieve the sort of restaurant –and restaurant system—we envision in the future.

The outcome from these conversations will be used to shape the agenda for the subsequent national policy conversation in Washington, DC.

THE NATIONAL MEETING (OCTOBER 2010)

Hosted at the Pew Charitable Trusts DC Conference Center on Thursday, October 21, 2010, the national conversation will be modeled on a successful NYC event held last November for which James Beard Foundation collaborated with Pew and New York University’s Department of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health. Guests from various backgrounds, including chefs, restaurant owners and executives, farmers, philanthropists, writers, journalists, retailers, purveyors, academics, policy-makers, and other specialists will be invited to a dinner and day-long conference. Participants from our regional conversations will be invited to this larger meeting.

While high-end restaurants have incorporated sustainability into their menus and operations for years, and many new property developments have incorporated sustainable building and energy efficiency into their designs, this project aims to identify practical ways to bring these methods to scale, to lift the bar (and the benefits) for the whole industry.

To ensure continuity, this larger meeting will engage the same facilitators from the four regional meetings. The national meeting’s objective will be to bring the local and regional issues discussed in our smaller meetings to the forefront and put them in the national context.

The meeting’s outcomes will be:

1. Development of the agenda for an anticipated two-day food policy summit to be held in 2011,
2. Creation of initial prioritized list of practical actions that restaurants as an industry, at the chain-level, and individual level can undertake to become more sustainable, and
3. Identification of policy obstacles that could hinder implementation of these actions by restaurants.

Carrying momentum forth from November 2009 in New York City it is our hope that this gathering of thought leaders from diverse and disparate backgrounds will ignite actors all along the chain to work towards new solutions to the problems facing our food system.

We believe that convening a diverse set of stakeholders at the regional meetings and subsequent national meetings will accelerate identification of obstacles, recommendations of solutions, and conversation regarding policy to bring about sustainability in restaurants. We also hope the momentum we build will continue through 2011 and our anticipated two-day food policy summit.