

THE BIG 'O'

Going Ape Over Organic

Photos and story by Sue Berliner



Buyers at the Town & Country Mall Farmer's Market find Bob McClendon and his McClendon Select brand of organic vegetables the best for their dinner table.

Chimpanzees and I have something in common: we choose organic.

In a 2003 report in Oekologisk Jordbrug (Organic Agriculture), Niels Melchiorson, a zookeeper at the Copenhagen Zoo, discovered that chimpanzees ate organic bananas, skin and all. When handed non-organic bananas they instinctively peeled it before ingesting. Animals, with their superior sense of smell and taste compared to humans, choose organic. Perhaps we should all follow their lead.

Last year I stumbled upon Jane Goodall's *Harvest for Hope*. The 84-year-old is the Gombe chimpanzee expert and co-founder of the Jane Goodall Institute. Her institute's mission is to improve the environment for all living things. The eye-opening read had a profound effect on my eating and food shopping habits. Here is an interesting excerpt from the book:

The big corporations tried to squash organic farming, claiming crop yields would be so puny and labor so intensive, that farmers couldn't support themselves, much less feed the world. But this is being disproved again and again, as more and more farmers are discovering that organic farms with diverse, rotated crops are far less vulnerable to disease and more resilient in adverse weather conditions. In the U.S., the top 25 percent of sustainable farmers who are dedicated to creating healthy ecosystems without relying on chemicals now have higher yields than the nation's industrial farmers.

By the time I read this passage the majority of my food purchases were already organic. Now, it was more than just taste and avoiding chemicals that motivated me. I realized how important my food purchases

were. Every dollar I spent was common "cents" for healthier food, a healthier me, and a greener planet.

I set out to find a local farm or CSA (Community Supported Agriculture.) In simple terms, a CSA is subscription to a local farm. Subscribers or members receive weekly baskets of locally grown food.

On April 1, 2007 — I was no April fool — I participated in the Slow Foods Annual Farm Tour. I was part of a large group who were given a tour of three Glendale farms. Bob McClendon and his McClendon Select brand stood out. About seven years ago, Robert (Bob) McClendon, a pill pushing pharmacist for 32 years, retired his tablet-counting skills and turned his avocation for selecting seeds into a vocation. He exuded passion as we walked the immaculate grounds of his farm. He talked about the benefits of organic farming. The pièce de résistance was seeing his produce wash-room and the expensive, gentle whirlpool bath for fine greens. It was so clean you could have eaten off the floor. At that moment I decided I wanted as much of my produce to come from his farm as possible.

I'm not alone. His every Wednesday produce stand at the Town & Country Mall Farmer's Market at 20th Street and Camelback in Phoenix does more business from October through the end of June than all other farmers selling at Valley farmer's markets.

"I am into organic food, the quality, the taste, the energy, and it's locally grown," said Deborah Laselle, a faithful regular who has been shopping at McClendon's the past four years. "I like to support my local farmers. I'm interested in what goes into my body. The food is more nutritious. I trust Mr. McClendon. I have been to his farm and seen how it's



SUE BERLINER'S EGGPLANT PESTO OVER SPAGHETTI ZUCCHINI

- 1 pound fairy tale eggplant (other varieties may be used)
- 1/2 cup fresh basil leaves
- 1/2 cup pine nuts lightly toasted (in pan or oven)
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 2 pounds zucchini squash (about 2 large or substitute spaghetti squash)
- 1-3 tablespoons olive oil, divided
- 1 pound cherry tomatoes (other varieties may be used)
- 6 medium cloves of garlic, peeled and finely chopped
- 3 small shallots, peeled and finely chopped

Wash the eggplant and tomatoes, remove the green stems. Slice the eggplant in half lengthwise, then cut into half-inch cubes. Cut the tomatoes in quarters. Place eggplant, tomatoes, garlic and shallots in a roasting pan. Toss the vegetables with 1-2 tablespoons olive oil to coat. Bake at 350-degrees for 25 minutes. While vegetables are roasting, use a Spiral Slicer (www.joycejen.com or www.windhawk.com) or mandolin vegetable slicer to slice the zucchini into spaghetti strands. Once the vegetables are roasted, take half of the vegetables out of the pan and let cool a few minutes. Keep the rest covered and warm. Puree the pine nuts and basil in a food processor (blender can be used.)

Add the cooled eggplant mixture to the bowl of the food processor. If needed, drizzle the remaining olive oil sparingly into the food processor to smooth out the pesto mixture.

Heat a large non-stick skillet over low to medium heat. Place the zucchini spaghetti in the skillet, toss with the pesto until the spaghetti is heated. No more than a few minutes is necessary. Remove from heat. Place spaghetti on plates and top with the remaining eggplant mixture.





Deborah Laselle chooses some gerkin cucumbers.

Websites

- www.mcclendonsselect.com** – Find their schedule, links and order products.
- www.localharvest.org** – Find farms, farmers markets and CSAs in your neighborhood and across the country.
- www.azda.gov** – Find news, farmers markets and Arizona grown products.
- www.slowfoodusa.org** – Official site of the slow food movement, find a local chapter.
- www.janegoodall.org** – Information on the Institute and their programs.
- www.fillyourplate.org** – Part of the Arizona Farm Bureau's site designed to assist consumers in finding the best local foods available.

grown and the care he takes. He always wants the best quality.”

Aside from the once-a-week market, McClendon Select services about 25 mostly high-end restaurants. Other restaurants are on a waiting list. A number of local chefs frequent the McClendon's produce stand. Rachael Albert-Matesz, The Healthy Cooking Coach (www.thehealthycookingcoach.com) and a healthy chef for 20 years, has been attending the market for five years. “I come here to get as much fresh and locally grown produce as possible, because I know it is going to taste better and be more nutritious if it is fresh picked,” Albert-Matesz said.

The bustling produce stands at the Town & Country Mall require five people to check out customers and keep lines moving. He has up to six staff members continually moving the produce from a refrigerated truck to bright yellow bins, keeping everything from corn to cucumbers looking fresh.

While setting up the stand on their last day in June before closing for the summer, I talked with Bob about his practices, what to look for in a market, and the recent tomato scare.

“It stimulated our tomato business,” McClendon said. “People knew our tomatoes were safe. Sales have been above last year.”

He theorized that the contamination was a Texas outbreak of a strain of salmonella, and that it may have come from Mexico. “It is difficult to track because of the shelf life of tomatoes,” he added. “You can't find the tomatoes that caused it.”

With the tomato warnings and last year's spinach scare, it's easy to see why farmer's markets are gaining in popularity. “People are looking for locally grown, very fresh and organic produce,” he said.

What should you look for in a farmer's market? The honest-as-the-day-is-long McClendon had sage advice. “You have to trust the people you are dealing with,” he said. “The popularity of farmer's markets have brought out a few less than reputable vendors.”

He noted some vendors pick up produce from commercial distributors and then sell as farm fresh. “Look at what they are delivering in, look for evidence of ice,” McClendon warned. “Know who your vendors are. Look for refrigerator trucks. Look at how they take care of what they are selling.”

From October through June he runs a full crew seven days a week. They are typi-

cally picking produce the day before or the morning of the market to keep fruits and vegetables at their best.

While McClendon doesn't run the stand from July through September, he emphasized that he and his crew are working five days a week getting the fields ready for planting. Growing areas are 42-inches wide by several hundred feet long, and they rotate the growing areas. “It is no less than two years before a crop returns to a growing area. Different crops take different nutrients out of the soil.”

He mentioned the infamous garlic capital Gilroy, Calif., a victim of no crop rotation. “They can no longer grow garlic there, the soil has been stripped of vital nutrients.”

During the off-season McClendon travels to other markets out of state looking for new varieties of vegetables and fruits to grow. He plants seeds based on what grows best during certain months. On August 15 squash goes down under; leafy vegetables follow on September 1.

During the summer months I'll check out a few of the other markets in town and look for local grown at Whole Foods. But like a junky waiting for a fix, I'll be the first in line when McClendon delivers his beautiful bounty in October.

Several years ago I wrote about chimps peeling bananas from the bottom, not the stem. I now do the same. Chimps are wise creatures. Imagine if the world followed their lead. OK, I am not eating a banana peel anytime soon, nor do I expect you to, but you get the point.

You always have options, so when you can cast your vote for healthier food and a greener planet. Don't monkey around; choose to eat like a chimp. 🐼

Check out:

Chez Panisse Vegetables and *Chez Panisse Fruits* by Alice Waters. Each of these books cover an extensive array of vegetables and fruits. Information on each item includes how to make selections, the best growing season, how to prep, store and prepare, and recipes. Also, Jane Goodall's *Harvest for Hope*. It will change the way you look at food.

