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Columbia Forum discovers you are what you eat

The director, the farmer and the chef build food-based relationships

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ALEX PAJUNAS — The Daily Astorian

Chef Eric Jenkins prepares the main course of homemade fresh basil pasta with local razor clams and capicola ham for Wednesday's Columbia Forum at the Duncan Law Seafood Consumer Center.

At Wednesday night's Columbia Forum, food was everywhere.

It was in the kitchen, as chef Eric Jenkins tossed sauté pans in the air, combining grass-green fresh basil fettuccine, salty capicola ham and tender razor clams with a cream sauce.

It was on the tables, as attendees sampled antipasto in the form of smoky roasted eggplant with a tangy anchovy-caper dressing and scooped servings from a mound of cured olives, glistening with olive oil and dressed up with the punch of fresh lemon zest.

But perhaps most memorable will be the food-related conversation of the evening's three guests: a farmer, a chef and the director of a nonprofit group.



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From left, Scott Exo, director of the Food Alliance, Anita Azarenko, the head of Oregon State University's Department of Horticulture, and Cory Schreiber, director of the Oregon Department of Agriculture Farm to School Program, speak about food-related issues at the Columbia Forum Wednesday.

Anita Azarenko, Cory Schreiber and Scott Exo spoke from their varied perspectives about the food we all eat, where it comes from, and how we can get healthier food into the kitchens of local schools.

Scott Exo is the executive director of Portland-based Food Alliance, a certifier for sustainable and environmentally friendly produce. Exo spoke to the packed house at the Duncan Law Seafood Consumer Center first, acknowledging that the way food arrives at our tables in this country is undergoing a major shift.

"You'd have to be living under a rock these days not to know that things are changing in our food and agriculture systems," Exo said. He moved on to a hopeful call to action, drawing ties between areas that some might see as divided.

"The food marketplace can be a powerful lever for change. People can actually vote for change with their forks. It's not rural or urban, it's both. They depend on each other."

The Food Alliance puts its stamp of approval on more than 200 products, from fruit and vegetables to wheat, meat and dairy, letting consumers know exactly what they're buying, and whom they're buying from.

"We developed a certification program to define what sustainable practices, both environmental and social, looked like on the farm, and we cultivated relationships with food companies who wanted food grown responsibly," Exo said. Farmers are able to get a premium price for their crops, and consumers can feel good about knowing what they're eating and whose farm they're supporting, he said. Exo said the Food Alliance is in the early stages of developing a certification program for cultivated shellfish, which could have a positive economic impact on commercial operations in this area.

Schreiber said he wants to build relationships between schools, the kids in them and the farms in their communities.

"I need to find farms that want to sell to schools," he said.

Schreiber is an award-winning chef, managing the Oregon Department of Education's Farm to School program. At his ground-breaking Portland restaurant Wildwood, Schreiber helped define what's now widely understood to be Northwest regional cuisine.

After opening the restaurant 13 years ago, he established relationships with farmers to keep his larders full of fresh vegetables, fruit and herbs, a practice that's much more common today. Schreiber left Wildwood in 2007, and for the last 15 months has been focusing his effort on bringing that farm-direct approach of food purchasing to the kitchens and cafeterias of Oregon's public school system.

He said that while it is encouraging that his position even exists, no one can yet say exactly what the economic impact of the program would be on the state.

"The state is actively listening, but no one knows how much money actually stays in the state," Schreiber said. He said the Oregon Farm to School Coalition is asking the state legislature for \$22 million to add on to funding schools get for the meals served to children.

Schreiber broke down the current spending on an average school meal for the audience: Of the \$1.09 total, 25 cents goes to commodity foods like meats and cheeses, another 21 cents goes to a local dairy for milk, and the remaining 65 cents goes to bread, grains and vegetables. The \$22 million in funding would add about \$1 per meal, Schreiber said.

Getting families to buy healthy lunches at school, unassisted by free and reduced price government programs, he said, is a critical element of the program's success. Those subsidized meals make up an average of about 47 percent of those served in the state - and they don't do as much to help the program's bottom line. The Astoria School District's meals served are currently 46 percent free and reduced, up from 36 percent in 2004.

Schreiber added he's been impressed while working with the Astoria and Naselle, Wash., school districts' food service manager, Jim Rowan. He works for Chartwell's, a contract food service provider, managing the daily operations of all the kitchens in the districts, and will be attending the fourth National Farm to Cafeteria conference in Portland later this month.

Azarenko shared her experiences selling produce to schools in Corvallis, where she owns a three-acre organic apple orchard. The Farm to School concept doesn't just make for healthier kids, she said, it makes for healthier farms too. She sells some of her apples to a local co-op and to other area wholesalers, but she makes more profit by selling directly to schools, customers at farmer's markets and at her own farm stand.

"The benefit is substantial," she said of selling direct. "If I sell to the co-op, that's about 60 percent less in your pocket." She said she sells about a half a ton of apples to the schools in Corvallis every 10 days during the apple season, and she's happy with the wholesale price those apples earn.

Azarenko is head of the Department of Horticulture at Oregon State University, where she is also a professor. Her primary area of focus is integrated and organic tree fruit farming systems and she teaches undergraduate classes in the Bioresource Research program. Azarenko also has a 160 acre farm just north of Sweet Home, where she and her husband grow fruit and nuts, raise beef, grow hay and have timber.

The audience peppered the speakers with questions, from food irradiation and safety to community supported agriculture and when today's commodity-based food system might collapse.

The Seafood Consumer Center chef Eric Jenkins had a query for the trio.

"I try to buy local and organic as much as possible, but I wonder if there's been any discussion of how more low-income folks can afford to purchase these items? Are we waiting for prices to go down when it becomes mainstream?"

All three speakers tackled the question; Azarenko said there's still much to be done to make local produce affordable.

"I personally still see a disconnect. Even though people can use food stamps to make purchases at farmer's markets, they can't buy as much volume," she said. All three expressed hope that the next few years could hold much progress, especially with the increasing number of community gardens in urban areas.

After the event, Exo reflected on the conversations of the speakers and the audience. When times are tough, he said, we're all looking for something to ground us. Simple food, prepared in simple ways, is something we can all share, he said.

"It doesn't have to be hard. Ingredients are key, and the best ingredients come from where you are. Astoria, and this area in general, is blessed being on the shoulder of the Pacific Ocean, with all the seafood and the bounty of the ocean," Exo said.

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