

Laughing Planet Cafe in the Ecotrust Building

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BY Arthur Smid

The Laughing Planet Cafe needs no introduction in Portland, but with the opening of their seventh store, it's high time for **Richard Satnick to take a bow**.



The success of the Laughing Planet Cafe is thanks to wholesome food at affordable prices, and it's opened doors for west coast farmers. Laughing Planet Cafe contributed to a chorus of local businesses calling for local produce from their food suppliers. "We go through onions. We need them all year," Richard Satnick, co-owner of Laughing Planet Cafe says. "

A big supplier can buy them from all over the country and buy depending on price. We said, find us a local onion and figure out how to store it – where are you going to put a years worth of onions?"

Laughing Planet Cafe sources its food primarily from Food Services of America. They are the first "broadline distributor" to become Food Alliance certified, a certifier that ensures sustainable food systems. "At first we used commercial chicken," Satnick informs me. "Now we use **chicken raised in Washington**. We had to grow to have the buying power, getting bigger allows the leverage." Whenever possible, Laughing Planet Cafe buys local – or as close to home as they can: local spinach, brown rice from California, beans from Central Bean co-op in Washington, produce from **Gatto & Sons in Portland**, and tofu from Ota, the family-owned Japanese tofu maker in SE Portland.

The public perception of fast food is pretty unanimous: fast food is about convenience and it's unhealthy. So if you're in the business, you want to rebrand yourself. You want to be the healthy choice. The smart option. Satnick calls it "Slow Food Fast". The local products and nutrition of the more traditional Slow Food movement provided in a quick service environment. Not that Laughing Planet Cafe can take on the fast food industry: out-advertise, out-sell, and own more real estate. The Laughing Planet Cafe has a more modest goal "to change the world **one burrito at a time**". How do you change the world with a burrito? Everyone is asking this: how do you change the world? The world is changing and it's taken for granted, so the only thing humanity can do is change it's relationship to the world. And if you're in the restaurant business that starts with food.

The Laughing Planet Cafe doesn't take itself too seriously, but it aspires to nutritional quality on par with the best white tablecloth restaurants in town. If you're a restaurant like Higgins and you can change the menu to accommodate whatever fresh food is locally available, you have an

advantage. But that's an expensive meal, and the Laughing Planet Cafe's advantage is an affordable price, neighborhood convenience, and a down-home feeling. Laughing Planet Cafe doesn't really fit in the category of traditional fast food with locations along busy urban corridors and endless advertising campaigns. Satnick says, "It started as a giant experiment." He had no background in food. He had no money. He learned about balance sheets from running a bike shop in Atlanta "because I loved bikes."

Satnick opened the first Laughing Planet Cafe in Bloomington, Indiana and later moved to Portland where he introduced the burrito as a "Portable Nutrition Device". Expanding on the beans and rice burrito to include a range of healthy options, Satnick developed a menu focused on whole, fresh foods. "We thought, why not broccoli? Something to round it out – we don't have to be traditional. It's a completely balanced meal: organic brown rice, whole legumes, fresh vegetables. And it's designed to fit in water bottle racks on mountain bikes."

The humor apparent in their name, interior design, and website is another endorsement of healthy living. The positive feeling in the restaurants is Satnick's personal style. He's something of a prankster: Zappa and R. Crumb featured in the restaurants decor are personal heroes. To reach economies of scale, Satnick opened a central kitchen on Mississippi. "You don't need to open up four kitchens, when you open up four restaurants," he says. This economizes on the amount of equipment, and makes it easier to store bigger quantities of food. "This interests the vendors – they can just drop off a palette at the central kitchen." Satnick learned to economize not to stand up to the big guys, just to offer an alternative: nutritious, affordable, and accessible. "At the same time," he ventures, "to subvert the systems we're participating in." He views the industrial food system as unsustainable. "It won't last," he opines. "It doesn't respect the earth or the consumers." Satnick uses the buying power of the Laughing Planet Cafe to support methods that don't use pesticides and don't destroy the soil.

The new store is located in the Ecotrust building. The environmental non-profit asked Laughing Planet Cafe to be in the building, and the restaurant wants to do everything it can to live up to the promise of sustainability. "We're not just another burrito joint."

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