

Reforming the Carnivores

http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/09/14/students_partner_with_food_service_providers_for_sustainable_meat_on_college_campuses

September 14, 2011

Students have plenty to say about food on campus, whether griping about quality or [protesting over employee conditions](#).

But on some campuses, students and food service providers are forging unlikely partnerships. The cause? An [increasingly widespread interest](#) among students in where their food – and, in these cases, their meat – comes from, and how it’s produced. As part of this growing [cultural movement](#), more students are trying to get sustainable meat – or less meat, period – on campuses. But in doing so, they encounter myriad challenges.

Manon Lefevre, a sophomore at Wesleyan University, works with WesFresh, a group of students advocating for “[real food](#)” such as fair trade and organic products on campuses. Working closely with the food service provider Bon Appetit, WesFresh helped to bring about a weekly meat-free day (though chicken is still available) in its one major campus dining hall.

“We have to be really careful when talking about meat at school, because it’s something people really care about,” Lefevre said. When done quietly and respectfully, transitions to things like meat-free days don’t cause a stir, she said. In fact, at Wesleyan, people haven’t complained about it because they haven’t really noticed it. “If you don’t point it out to people and they don’t feel attacked, then really there isn’t much of a problem at all.”

Students at Bowdoin College [learned that the hard way](#) this spring. When the dining facilities went meatless for dinner as part of the national [Meatless Monday](#) campaign, which started at Johns Hopkins University’s School of Public Health and has since spread to [nearly 60 colleges](#), the event’s organizers were anything but quiet. While they distributed educational materials to students about the environmental and health benefits of cutting back on meat, the college’s pro-meat – and pro-option – contingent camped out around the dining halls with barbecue and Kentucky Fried Chicken. Not all Meatless Mondays are so dramatic; there’s no hard and fast rule for how to carry out the event. While some colleges take Bowdoin’s route, others simply make it an educational campaign, adding extra vegetarian options but not necessarily taking meat off the menu. When dining halls do actually go meatless, it can be at all the facilities or just one of them, depending on the institution.

Some Wesleyan students have reacted similarly to past petitions, Lefevre said, but the activists have adjusted their approach over time. “You have to frame it in a positive way, instead of saying, ‘You shouldn’t eat meat because meat is bad for the environment and probably isn’t that good for you anyway,’” she said. “We say, ‘Help us demand more real food and sustainably grown organic meat from our dining services. Help us hold the university accountable for its promises of sustainability.’”

[CoFed](#), a California Bay Area group that helps students set up cooperative cafes on campuses, doesn’t have a specific focus on meat. But its director and co-founder, Yoni Landau, believes it should be part of the conversation on campuses and elsewhere.

“Eating food accounts for 30 percent of greenhouse gases. The biggest part of that is actually not transit or packaging – the biggest part of that is meat production and fertilizers and pesticides. So eating organic vegetarian food is by far the best way to reduce your carbon impact, in terms of eating,” Landau said. But, he added, it’s important to reach the meat-eating demographic as well – pasture-raised meat is better than livestock coming from factory farms.

“In a sustainable food system, there is space for ranchers,” Landau said.

Because it was the first to address this issue broadly, Bon Appetit has many fans when it comes to offering sustainable options. Maisie Greenawalt, the vice president of strategy, said that while the company hears from more students every year who want sustainable meat, most of the inquiries she gets come from the Bon Appetit employees who visit campuses proactively to ask students for feedback and requests.

“I think that there are some students that may have a preconceived notion about what a big company is like,” Greenawalt said, so many of them might not even realize they can work with their food service provider on this issue. Bon Appetit also helps local farmers adjust their practices to meet the rules regulating sustainable meat production, and then purchases the product.

“We take our role in the supply chain really seriously, and we are actively looking to increase the availability of humanely raised products,” Greenawalt said. “It’s a very different position from saying, ‘I look at the market and there aren’t any, so I don’t have to buy them.’”

In trying to get grass-fed beef into the dining halls at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the student group [Fair Local Organic](#) (FLO) realized just how difficult it is to find such a product. North Carolina contracts with the food service provider Aramark, which has a number of safety, equipment and process regulations that producers must meet in order to supply for the company. But those regulations often aren’t feasible for the smaller producers that raise their animals humanely, students said.

However, the two leading companies in providing food services on campuses have done significant work on the issue in recent years. In 2009, for instance, Aramark, which [has pledged](#) to increase sustainable food purchases at its colleges by 5 percent annually, [helped start a cafe](#) at Arizona State University that serves sustainable products, including meat. And Sodexo, which [now offers Meatless Monday](#) to nearly 3,000 of its hospital, government and corporate clients, has also made [a commitment](#) to “source local, seasonal or sustainably grown or raised products in all the countries where we operate by 2015.”

FLO and Carolina Dining Services ultimately found a farmer who raises grass-fed beef about 50 miles from the campus – though she did have to make some procedural adjustments to meet regulations – and North Carolina’s dining halls now serve the product once a week. But student demand is always a challenge, said Melissa Tinling, a graduate student who works with FLO.

“In reality, the majority of students still want their chili fries every day, or their all-you-can-eat barbecue,” she said. “So I think there’s a challenge for us to keep working on student education and building awareness and excitement about this food. Because ultimately, [Aramark is] a business, and can only continue to keep doing what they’re doing if they’re making a profit and students are eating the food.”

That’s what worries the anonymous administrator who writes *Inside Higher Ed’s* [Getting to Green](#) blog. At that official’s institution, working with dining services to get students to eat more sustainably and consume less meat has proven difficult.

“They’re typical in that they’re emotionally willing to go along, happy to go along; sure, we all want to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions. But when push comes to shove, they push back,” the administrator said. When it comes right down to it, what matters to the staff is, “How many kids did you serve and how little money did you spend to serve them.”

Still, the official has observed over time that each incoming freshman class is a little more environmentally aware than the previous one, and food service providers simply have to respond to some degree. Students are asking about their food “a little more often and a little more insightfully, and over time, that kind of awareness builds up. But it’s not a dramatic change, it’s just gradual,” the administrator said. “My take is that the contractors have latched onto this as one way to gain competitive advantage, and that’s raised industry awareness.”

Other colleges have been nudged along by staff and administrators as well, with students coming in later to help shape the movement.

The trend toward sustainable animal proteins at the University of California at Davis started out six years ago with a focus on nutrition. First, Davis began offering more vegetarian and vegan options on the menu. Staff began working with students and others around campus to figure out what they wanted and how much of it they needed. Not coincidentally, the timing coincided with the publication of Michael Pollan’s *[The Omnivore’s Dilemma](#)*, which played a huge part in bringing the ethical and environmental quandaries of meat production to the attention of the general public and, in particular, college students.

“Students are becoming more and more knowledgeable about how their food is produced. They’re starting to become more confident in vocalizing a need for change,” said Danielle Lee, Sodexo manager for Davis dining services. Nationwide, “There’s definitely been increased awareness and it’s because of the students, because they’ve been demanding more change and demanding more transparency about where their food comes from.”

Now, 21 percent of the food Davis serves is considered sustainable. The main measure Davis uses is [Food Alliance certification](#). The products must, among other things, not be genetically modified, and livestock must be raised healthily and humanely with no growth promotants or sub-therapeutic antibiotics. (These are common practices in large-scale industrial farming, intended to fatten and sell cattle more quickly, and combat the diseases bred in overcrowded, unsanitary factory farms.) About 90 percent of the seafood and eggs prepared at Davis is certified sustainable, about 10 percent each for pork and red meat, and 5 percent for poultry.

Of course, this type of food -- particularly the meat -- doesn't come cheap.

"Part of the promise of concentrated animal feeding operations is reduced cost," Greenawalt said. "Giving animals more room, access to outdoors and enhanced environments often does drive up prices. That increase in costs may or may not be seen by students directly based on a wide range of factors, including the structure of the food service contract and of the meal plans."

The beef and chicken that Davis serves as part of its sustainable offerings costs two to three times as much as regular meat, Lee said. While this price increase technically trickles down to the students' meal plan rates, Lee and her colleagues have found other ways to offset that cost to the extent that they can, by reducing waste and exercising portion controls when serving the more expensive products. Those include sustainable hamburgers served daily in one dining hall and weekly in others, as well as a new and permanent "burrito bar" with Food Alliance-certified chicken. Sustainable beef, pork and chicken also pop up regularly in chef's specials.

"We would like to feature sustainable meat options on our menu more often; however, price is the largest impediment for moving forward," Lee said. But, she added, "Sodexo alone serves over 50 million meals a year. Even small changes will make significant impact for a better tomorrow."

— [Allie Grasgreen](#)

© Copyright 2011 Inside Higher Ed