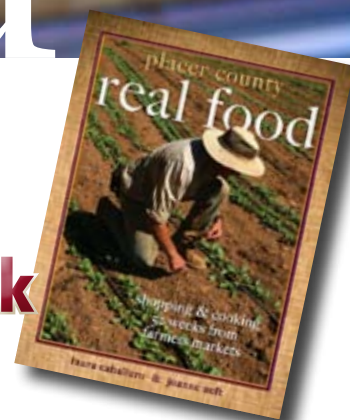




real food

It Takes a Year to Write an In-Season Real Food Cookbook



BY JOANNE NEFT AND LAURA CABALLERO

Educating a community about using year-round, locally-grown foods.

The farmers who sell at the Auburn, California Farmers' Market, like farmers at markets across the state, are caught in a tricky situation. While there are plenty of shoppers during the peak of the summer growing season, the numbers dwindle dramatically when cool weather hits. Farmers were not planting crops for sale during the winter months because many customers think there isn't much in the market between November and April. In addition, it's a mystery to market customers

to know how to prepare various root crops, cruciferous produce, or the many ways to serve persimmons, Asian pears, or citrus. Laura Caballero, a local chef, and Joanne Neft, a driving force behind the first eight farmers' markets in Placer County, decided to change that by writing a totally local in-season healthy food cookbook inspired by fruits, vegetables, greens and meat purchased at the Auburn Farmers' Market. The first meal was prepared and served on January 5; the last meal will be served on December 28. 52 weeks in 2009; 52 Monday night dinners.

Every Saturday morning throughout the year Laura and Joanne meet early at the local farmers market to learn what's available that week. After circling the market once, the discussion focuses on what meats, fruits, vegetables and nuts are available, what foods taste good together and provide a colorful plate. Generally there is a nice selection of lamb, beef, pork, chicken, goat, and even fresh fish caught in Bodega Bay. And, of course, in Placer County throughout the year we are fortunate to grow seasonal fruits and vegetables. Enough food is purchased for eight people since all the cookbook recipes serve eight.

Malcolm Gladwell in “The Tipping Point” suggests it takes 150 people to get the buzz going on an idea or product. On January 7th a short email went out inviting four guests to come to dinner at Joanne’s house on Monday evenings. A donation of \$20/person was suggested to support costs of printing the cookbook. And if people wished to drink wine with dinner they were asked to bring a bottle. Apparently email recipients forwarded the email to friends; surprisingly, by mid-February every Monday night dinner was booked for 52 weeks. Four to six people coming to taste local food over 52 weeks totals more than 250 guests.

At four o’clock on Monday afternoon Laura arrives and the cooking begins. If lamb shanks or beef stew is the main course, the initial preparation began a few hours earlier to allow enough time for slow cooking and the slower the cooking, the tastier the meat.

As each recipe is prepared, careful notes are taken of techniques as well as to measure amounts of food, liquids, spices, seasonings and cooking times. Caballero and Neft are intuitive cooks – a dash here, a splash there, and if something needs a spike in flavor, add some herbs or zest, so measuring amounts has been the most difficult part of writing the cookbook.

A photographer arrives at 4:30 or 5:00 p.m. to take pictures of meal preparation. He captures slicing and dicing, basting, roasting, pouring, simmering, and tasting. Photos are taken of the week’s fruit or vegetable table centerpiece, and a large number of decorative natural materials have been photographed through the seasons. Incidentally, the photographer stays for dinner – one of the perks of the job.

The four to six dinner guests arrive at 6:00 p.m. and many times comment on experiencing the friendly cooking smells as they come down the long steps. Who doesn’t remember the good feelings and sense of well-being from smelling baked bread, or a fresh apple pie, or a pot roast on the stove?



“Real Food” authors Laura Caballero and Joanne Neft.

After a seasonal appetizer the guests gather around the long refectory table and await big platters of fresh-from-the farm food. The meal is served family style and guests are excited about getting their first peek at the food and holding a platter for someone else to dish up a plate. Serving the meal family style has been a unique experience for many guests. Over the years people have forgotten to appreciate the generous spirit shared when meals are served family style. For many it brings back memories of big family dinners and gatherings.

Dinnertime conversation focuses on the food – how it was prepared, which farmer grew it, how long it will be in season, and which oils or seasonings enhance the taste. The recipes are all very simple; the goal is to let the meat or vegetable or fruit reflect its true flavor. Nothing tastes better than just-picked produce; there is no reason to alter it.

During the year over 300 guests have eaten at Neft’s house at special events or Monday night dinners. Inviting community members to share dinner has many rewards. When on the following Saturday morning dinner guests show up at the farmers market, it’s a clear message they enjoyed what they tasted and have decided to continue eating good food. Guests are spreading the word about eating locally grown food and the cookbook buzz is happening.

The Placer County real food cookbook will be available in time for Mothers Day 2010. A cookbook-launching event at an old packing shed in Loomis is scheduled for mid-April. All dinner guests will be invited. Attendees will be asked to bring

an in-season dish to share, something made with locally grown food. It promises to be a celebration of good food, good friends, and a healthier community.

A group of PlacerGROWN food aficionados is laying groundwork for a real food Cook Club. Pods of eight or sixteen participants will gather together on a semi-weekly or monthly basis to prepare the recipe of the week. The goal is to develop larger attendance at weekly farmers’ markets as well as introduce people to the benefits of eating healthy food. ●

About the Authors

Joanne Neft is a PlacerGROWN advocate.

Laura Caballero is a Professional Chef.

Authors’ Picks for Further Reading

Botany of Desire: A Plant’s-Eye View of the World, by Michael Pollan (Paper: 2002 by Random House)

Omnivore’s Dilemma, Michael Pollan (Paper: 2007 by Penguin)

Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A year of Food Life by Barbara Kingsolver (Paper: 2008 by Harper Perennial)

The Tipping Point, by Malcolm Gladwell (Paper: 2002, First Back Bay)

 YouTube Video: Placer County real food

 eatwild.com

 grassfedcooking.com