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A Conversation With Helene York, Sustainable Dining Expert

By Daniel Fromson



Imagine a different kind of university café or corporate cafeteria—one that cares about sustainable seafood and fair-trade chocolate, in addition to serving real, from-scratch food and keeping people healthy. The chances are good that if you know a dining facility like this one, [Helene York](#) has been involved.

As director of strategic initiatives for the Bon Appétit Management Company and director of the Bon Appétit Management Company Foundation, York has helped develop sustainability practices for a leading sustainable foodservice company with more than 400 locations in 29 states. She is also a longtime contributor to TheAtlantic.com, writing on everything from [the myth of "green" beef](#) to [how to find a food-world internship](#). Here, she discusses fake artisanal food, the impact of rising commodities prices, and Bollywood dance music.

What do you say when people ask, "What do you do?"

I push the envelope on sustainable food for a national restaurant company. Most people like to talk about food, so if they don't turn away when I tell them that I also tell them I'm director of purchasing policy for a company that's been doing great things for over a decade.

What new idea or innovation is having the most significant impact on how people think about sustainable food?

That sustainable food can be a celebration of pleasure. That it's not "don't eat this or that"—because it's fattening, bad for the environment, cancer-causing or whatever. It's about seeking out fresh, flavorful food, cooking and eating (reasonable amounts!) together.

What's something that most people just don't understand about your job?

Our company serves 120 million meals a year. That's a lot of food, but Americans eat a billion meals every day. I don't have the "monopoly power" to change aspects of the food system that lots of wonderfully activist students (or folks who comment on blogs) think I have. I spend a lot of time negotiating. I don't always win (the first round anyway).

What's an emerging trend that you think will shake up the food world?

Inflation in the commodity markets. The price of grain, fish meal/fish oil, and petroleum are at or near record highs. Grain and fish meal feed chicken, pork, beef, most farmed fish, and are primary staples for direct human consumption of bread, rice, and pasta. Petroleum literally drives our products to every stop in the supply chain. Everything is going to get more expensive. Perhaps non-industrial good food that uses less grain and fish meal will become more competitively priced. Or some big suppliers will reformulate some products and make them better.

What's a food trend that you wish would go away?

Faux "artisanal food" marketing. I have a New Yorker cartoon pinned to my bulletin board of a large factory, smokestacks and all, with a corporate sign on it that says "Artisanal Everything." Oh please. My colleague's rant on this topic says it all: <http://www.ethicurean.com/2010/10/28/artisanal-plea/>

What's a sustainability idea you became fascinated with but that ended up taking you off track?

Sourcing frozen-at-sea salmon and black cod directly from a fishing co-op in Alaska. I knew our chefs would love the taste, the quality, and the story, but the logistics proved overwhelming. There were too many pieces to fit together and we couldn't bring in enough volume to make it worthwhile for the co-op.

Who are three people you'd put in a sustainability Hall of Fame?

Three forward-thinking academics who have influenced my thinking a lot.

Patricia Majluf, Center for Environmental Sustainability, Cayetano Heredia University. She promotes the consumption of anchovies as human food rather than fish food in her native Peru. Peru's anchovy fishery is huge but 98 percent goes to feed other animals while 56 percent of Peruvian children are undernourished. That's just wrong.

Daniel Pauly, at University of British Columbia, whose research has demonstrated the importance of eating smaller species like mussels instead of tuna and buying from non-industrial-scale fish sources.

Jeremy Jackson, Center for Marine Biodiversity and Conservation at UC-San Diego, who has the chops to study hard things well and the guts to tell it like it is.

What other field or occupation did you consider going into?

I started a nonprofit after college coaching elderly people to fight abusive landlords together in New York. They stood up for themselves and prevented numerous evictions. Despite the many rewarding grandmotherly hugs of appreciation, I could see that the real issue was a lack of affordable housing supply. I went to business school to learn how to develop community-based housing alternatives for low-income elderly people but never found a home for my passion and new skills.

What website or app most helps you do your job on a daily basis?

Seafoodwatch.org at work and the iPhone app on the road. I can remember the rankings of most species that a supplier or chef asks me about but I need to check sometimes.

What song's been stuck in your head lately?

Ha! I seem to have spent most of March on or waiting for a delayed airplane so I plug into instrumental music mostly—Erik Satie's piano works, or Bollywood dance music with lyrics I can't understand, so it doesn't distract me when I'm doing something else. If I think of an Old School tune, though, like Earth, Wind & Fire's "Devotion," my brain gets stuck there. Uh-oh.

Image: Courtesy of Helene York

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