

TRAVEL

A world of good (and tasty) examples

There is no magic cuisine to save the earth, but we can eat more sustainably

BY SOMINI SENGUPTA

Can I eat well without wrecking the planet? As a climate reporter and personal chef to a growing, ravenous child, I think about this question a lot. Is there a cuisine somewhere in the world that is healthy both for us and for the planet we live on? And if one exists, would we even want to eat it?

Turns out, there is no magic cuisine to save our species. There are, however, many ways to eat sustainably. They're built into many traditional cuisines around the world, and we can learn from them.

In any case, we don't have much choice. To avert the most severe effects of climate change, scientists say, we have to very quickly transform the way we eat. Food production accounts for between 21 percent and 26 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions, depending on how you slice the data; food waste accounts for an additional 8 percent, considering that worldwide, we waste a third of the food we produce. Also, with climate change turbocharging droughts and storms, there are new risks to food security for the 800 million people worldwide who don't have enough to eat.

Eating well doesn't have to mean eating weirdly or depriving ourselves or even breaking the bank. Here are five simple ideas to guide you, whether you're eating out or cooking at home.

VIETNAM: SOME MEAT, BUT LESS

Pho, the hearty Vietnamese noodle soup, I discovered on a recent reporting trip to Hanoi, can deliver happiness at breakfast, lunch and dinner. At meal-times, I scanned the streets and headed over to what looked to be the most popular pho stand, took the first free plastic stool and waited for the chef, usually an enterprising woman seated on an identical plastic stool, to assemble my bowl.

The soul of pho is the broth, and the genius of the broth is that a bit of meat, not even the best meat, goes a long way. I like the beef version, made with bones, tendon, a bit of brisket, and simmered for three hours or more with charred onions, ginger, the spices of the tropics and



Above, hot and cold dishes at Beit El Qamar, near Beirut, Lebanon. Below, paella by Alejandra Schrader, based on her mother's recipe.

An example of this principle is the revival of bison, a traditional source of protein for native people in the Midwest.

Bison have started to make a comeback in the region, replacing cattle, which were brought by European settlers.

With them, wild turnips and sage have returned to the land, said Mark Tilsen, co-founder of a snack bar company, called Tanka, on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. Many more songbirds are around, and the Lakota people who live there have their traditional source of meat once more. The Tanka Bar is a modern version of a traditional native snack, made of smoked meat and preserved with tart fruits.

LEBANON: PASS THE HALLOUMI

It was a Sunday morning and the kitchen at Beit El Qamar, in the hills above Beirut, was a bright, busy enterprise. Herbs had been picked from the garden out back. Pots were simmering on the stove. Chickpeas were folded into an earthen bowl of yogurt and tahini.

By midday, as my family and I sat on the terrace, small plates of many things appeared on the tables all around. There were cold and hot foods, blended and whole, a spectrum of colors from every part of the landscape. There was sheep cheese, grilled or plain, tabbouleh heavy in mint, walnuts puréed with red peppers, dandelions sautéed with onions and, for dipping, a bowl of olive oil with crushed thyme and sesame.

It was all there. Grains, fruits, vegetables, nuts and seeds. There was meat, too. But, as in pho, it didn't dominate. It hid in the heart of a fried kibbe: ground, spiced lamb cocooned in bulgur.

It was a meal meant to be eaten with others, to be passed around and discussed. A meal designed to slow me down, even if just for an afternoon.

I tell you about this meal because it embodies the final and most basic principle of eating well, both for our health and the health of the planet: eating together.

Sharing a meal can be a good way to avoid waste and overconsumption. There's usually someone in the group who will pop the last piece of cheese into her mouth (my kid), or scrape the last bits of kibbe from the plate (me).

Not least, eating together makes eating more pleasurable.

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endon, a bit of brisket, and simmered for three hours or more with charred onions, ginger, the spices of the tropics and the essence of all Vietnamese cooking, fish sauce. Chicken works fine, too, and I've even had a vegetarian version, which was delicious.

For me, the lesson of pho is a lesson embodied in many traditional cuisines. Meat can discreetly be the star of the meal. It can be used in small quantities to enrich grains and vegetables.

No question, some of us must eat less meat. North Americans eat six times as much red meat as they should, according to a recent report published in the medical journal *The Lancet*. Its authors recommend instead filling most of our plates with fruits, nuts, vegetables, legumes and whole grains. They did not suggest that humanity forgo all flesh. (The average Vietnamese eats about a third as much beef as the average American.)

INDIA: LEAN IN ON LEGUMES

Legumes are a universe unto themselves, whether fava in the Middle East, flor de mayo in Mexico, cowpeas in Ghana or mung beans in Bangladesh. I've eaten them on five continents.

Nowhere have I eaten legumes in as many variations as I have in India. Pigeon peas become breakfast pancakes known as dosa. Chickpea flour, steamed and topped with oil-popped mustard seeds, turns into a fluffy yellow dhokla. Mung beans are repurposed into sweet halwa, swollen with ghee and cardamom.

And then there's dal, the savory lentil stew without which no Indian meal is complete.

Lentils and beans are high in protein and fiber, low in fat. They are good for the planet, too. The Food and Agriculture Organization calls them "climate smart," because they can adapt to rough weather, restore degraded soils and even make cattle feed more digestible.

Above, hot and cold dishes at Beit El Qamar, near Beirut, Lebanon. Below, paella by Alejandra Schrader



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VENEZUELA: MUSSEL POWER

Alejandra Schrader, a chef based in Los Angeles, grew up on shellfish in Venezuela. She remembers a seafood cocktail sold near the beach: steamed plates of mussels and clams, sometimes oysters, soaked with lime and herbs. Levanta muertos, people would call it, roughly, "the resurrector," because its iron could help revive you after a night of hard drinking.

Then, there was her mother's thrifty paella. The Spanish version — which has mussels and clams but also needs rabbit, a short-grain rice called bomba and a special pan — is often too luxurious for many of us.

But her mom's version required just going to the beach with a plastic bucket and digging for clams in the sand. At home, her mother cooked a sofrito of onion, garlic and sweet pepper, added some cooking wine, if there was any in the house, and then folded in the clams and a bowl of leftover white rice, which was always in the fridge. No special pans were needed. No fancy ingredients.

"To me it's very comforting," Ms. Schrader said. "You add a little cilantro or top it with some avocado, and it's a really great meal."

Bivalves like mussels, clams and scallops are a healthy protein, as long as they come from clean waters. That's important, because they filter the waters in which they grow. But, because they are filter feeders slurping up phytoplankton, they need only a tiny piece of the ecosystem to produce their protein.

"It's the closest thing you have to a free lunch, from an animal protein perspective," said Richard Waites, who specializes in agriculture at the World Resources Institute, a research and advocacy group based in Washington.

KANSAS: BE KIND TO THE LAND

Every spring, Devon Mihesuah, a professor of indigenous history and culture at the University of Kansas, prepares salads of dandelions from her garden and collects wild onions that grow in the fields. When the frost lifts, she puts gourds and peppers into the ground. She does not spray chemicals to get rid of what others would consider weeds, she says, because bees need them to pollinate.

Those habits are grounded in the culinary tradition of indigenous people. Eating local is part of that tradition, but it's not everything. Often it means treating food as medicine. Always, it means eating in a way that doesn't pollute the place where the food is grown. And not eating all of it.

That's why Dr. Mihesuah, a member of the Choctaw nation and editor of a forthcoming anthology of essays on indigenous eating, is wary of recommending specific foods. She worries that some could become trendy and then be depleted through overconsumption.

"It's a real respect for your resources," Dr. Mihesuah said. "You don't take all of it. You don't pull things out by root."



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Devon Mihesuah preparing a salad at her home in Baldwin City, Kan.