

Locavore Heroes, Bali Style

*By Cat Wheeler
bali_cat7@yahoo.com
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This article brings together two of my favourite subjects, food and sustainability. You'd think here would be a synergy between all the new restaurants opening in Bali and the many farmers scratching a living right next door, but building mutually beneficial relationships between chefs and producers is not easy.

For years I've been writing about seeking out Indonesian food products instead of bringing them in from Europe and Australia. But now the subject is hot. TIME magazine's March 26 issue featured Danish chef Rene Redzepi and his philosophy of serving only Nordic cuisine using locally sourced foods. His restaurant Noma was named the world's top eatery by Restaurants magazine in 2010, and his tables are booked three months in advance. Patrons dine on cured bear meat, flower salads and foraged wild plants, and the international restaurant scene has begun to take a more serious look at what's growing outside the kitchen door. So the term 'locavore' was created to describe people who choose to include as much locally produced food as possible in their diets.

Slow Food Ubud (soon to be renamed Slow Food Bali) was established 3 years ago to celebrate and promote locally, sustainably produced foods. Yes, this means fewer trips to the deli and seeking out local substitutes for recipe ingredients. But it's not just about the massive carbon footprint attached to flying in everything from exotic cheese to stuffed olives. Slow Food is about supporting and educating local farmers and producers to provide high quality, sustainably produced and competitively priced foods that will inspire Bali's chefs to use them. And in doing so, enhance the local economy and return some of Bali's abundance to its farmers.

Responsible tourism takes two partners – sustainably managed hotels and restaurants, and travelers that select them on that basis. Travelers are slowly becoming more aware of the impacts of their activities, and choosing hotels on the basis of their environmental programs. In 2008 I wrote a couple of stories about ethical tourism that featured Alila Ubud hotel as an example of best practices. While researching this story I revisited Alila Ubud to see if it was still walking the green talk, and what was cooking in its kitchens.

I'm happy to report that Alila Ubud is still an excellent example of environmental best practices for the hospitality industry. And behind the kitchen's swing door is a chef dedicated to bringing together his classical training and experience with locally sourced ingredients.

Chef Eelke Plasmeijer's transition to locavorism began in Jakarta five years ago. The restaurant he worked in imported everything it served. "I was used to working with turbot, foie gras and all the usual European ingredients, and never thought

much about it. Vegetable suppliers came twice a week, and everything was from Australia; there was no local produce that I knew of. Then one day a big, fresh barramundi was delivered and I got very excited. It sounds odd, but for the first time it really struck me that we were probably surrounded with fresh food.

"I realized that what we were doing was crazy. Why import everything? It doesn't make sense to bring food in frozen, it can't be as good as fresh food at the source. Also the carbon footprint is huge." But it was -- and is -- difficult to find local produce. Eelke didn't know where to source it. It took a lot of time, which chefs don't have, to research.

For the past two years he has been executive chef at Plantation Alila Ubud, and has become a committed locavore. He and Ray Adriansyah, his Sumatran-born, New Zealand trained sous chef, have challenged themselves to use local (which they interpret as Indonesian) ingredients to create both Balinese and western food.

"On Bali, almost everything on most of the tasting menus is imported," he points out. "But I like to think that the people who come here, the Europeans and Australians, don't come to Bali specially to eat imported steaks and truffles. They can get pizzas and hamburgers at home. A thoughtful traveler will be more adventurous."

The philosophy of Plantation was inspired by the abundance of Bali's rice terraces, farms and seas. Featuring authentic seasonal local and western cuisine, Plantation is becoming a destination restaurant for discriminating diners in Bali. Both its Authentic five course Balinese tasting menu, and five to seven course Seasonal western tasting menu are 100% local.

In Holland where Eelke trained, the better restaurants bring in whole, freshly killed animals and cut them into usable pieces. Eelke's experience includes preparing rabbit, poultry, lamb, pigs and game dishes from the whole animal. "It is so much more interesting than buying a vacuum-packed tenderloin and there is so much more potential to create new dishes," he enthuses.

A recent initiative involved butchering two local pigs which had been raised on chemical-free food. (Vegetarians may wish to skip this paragraph). Each time, a hundred kilograms of very recently deceased pig was turned into hams, bacon (cured in palm sugar and sea salt), salami, chorizo and blood sausage, roasts, chops, pate and head cheese. Eelke found that the black Bali pig was more flavourful but was too lean to make bacon or sausages. The white hybrid pigs are ideal for the restaurant. In many villages these pigs are fed rice bran, greens from the field and banana trunks instead of growth-hormone laced commercial feed. Hams from these pigs are now being cured for Plantation's Christmas menu.

Eelke relies on his staff to help source the ingredients he needs. He'd like to do more of the field work himself, but he doesn't have the time to visit Bedugul every week or so as he would like to explore what's in season.

I asked how chefs in Bali could work more closely with producers to enhance local content and encourage chemical-free production of vegetables and meat animals.

“We have to change the mindset of the chefs,” Eelke told me. “And that will only happen if the chef is interested; many are content with the way things are. Most chefs are not known for environmental awareness -- we are cooks, that is our focus. I hope chefs will be influenced by this new wave, but it is a conservative profession that’s not really known for innovation.

“So it’s about education, mindset and the willingness to do it, and also the time it takes to source things. Every email I get from suppliers is about imported stuff, which makes it so easy for the chefs. But it’s not easy to source locally, there’s a lot of frustration involved. When I find a beautiful product sample I get excited, but then a month later it’s not available any more.”

Then there are the farmer’s frustrations. Climate change has brought much more rain to Bali than usual, and vegetables need lots of sun. Some farmers invest in plastic sheeting to keep the rain off the plants, but the high winds of January destroyed most of these makeshift greenhouses. The combination of heavy rain and wind ruined many crops (you might have noticed that there’s not a lot of salad around these days) including the rice crop in some areas.

Most farmers live hand to mouth, and replacing plastic sheeting might mean a bank loan at crippling interest rates. If a farmer does manage to grow some chemical-free rucola, he has to belong to a cooperative that will help him distribute it that same day. If he happens to have a relationship with a restaurant chef and delivers his rucola directly to the kitchen door, he’ll have to wait months to be paid. That doesn’t work for Bali’s farmers, who are very small producers and need drip-feed income on a daily basis.

Running a restaurant is a business like any other, so price is an important issue. The huge demand for imported foods in Bali keeps the prices competitive, and sometimes it is actually cheaper to buy imported items than local.

So the concept of Bali’s restaurants using more local produce is a challenging one. As a chef who’s walking the talk, Eelke sometimes finds it discouraging. “Chefs would need to work closely with farmers on a production schedule and there would have to be a firm commitment on both sides. That takes a lot of time. Chefs move on every two years or so, which makes continuity another issue.”

The philosophy of the Slow Food movement is to bring together good, clean, fairly produced food with people who are aware of and engaged with what they are putting on their plates.

"Slow Food Bali recognizes that agriculture needs to be refocused by bringing 'community' back into our food sourcing process," says Slow Food Bali convivium leader Mary Jane Edleson. "As a young organization on one of the world's most fertile islands, we seek to narrow the current widening gap between chefs, consumers and food producers by developing events and programs that encourage more direct and meaningful relationships -- economically, socially and spiritually."

For more information, email slowfoodubud@gmail.com To join Slow Food Bali, drop by its table at the Earth Day celebration at Green School on April 20 or visit www.slowfood.com <http://www.slowfood.com/>

Ibu Kat's book of stories *Bali Daze - Freefall off the Tourist Trail* is available from:

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