



*Sustainable Steward*  
**Chef Rick Bayless**

**Topolobampo  
Frontera Grill**

**by Charlotte Freeman**

**for the CORPORATION FOR THE NORTHERN ROCKIES**



## Sustainable Steward

**Chef Rick Bayless**

**Chicago, Illinois**

When Rick Bayless came to Chicago in 1987 to open Frontera Grill, one of the first things he did was go to the wholesale market looking for the beautiful strawberries that he'd seen offered at roadside stands outside the city. "You won't see those here," he was told. "We don't carry those."

Turns out, the local strawberries were considered too fragile and too difficult to handle by the area wholesalers. They weren't interested. In fact, Rick, who was determined to source as much of his restaurant's food locally as possible, found that the only way to work with the kind of high-quality local produce he was interested in was to go out himself and find farmers who were growing it.

It was difficult at first. In 1987 there were very few Farmer's Markets in Chicago. There also was a historic animosity between farmers and chefs that took Bayless a while to overcome. Farmers didn't trust that chefs would buy from them on a reliable basis, nor did they trust that they'd be paid the price they'd agreed upon. Bayless recalls that those first few years he spent a lot of time convincing farmers, one by one, that he really did want their produce.

To overcome their doubts he started contracting ahead of time, promising to buy an entire season's worth of produce, and as word spread that Frontera Grill really did want local products, and that they'd pay for them, Bayless found that he was building the kind of network any restaurant seeks, a network of people who really cared about food. His purveyors, Rick says, bring in their vegetables "... like their little babies. It's certainly not just a commodity to them."

He was aided by resurgence in boutique farming in the Chicago area. As more and more people became interested in growing organic produce and raising organic livestock, Bayless found that not only was the quality of his provisions increasing, but that the "the relationship between farmer and produce rubs off on the cooks – they know how hard these people worked and it really means something. Both farmers and chefs are so hardworking."

Rick and his wife Deann have two restaurants in Chicago, the Frontera Grill, which they opened in 1987, followed in 1989 by what was one of the first fine-dining

restaurants in the country specializing in Mexican cuisine, Topolobampo. Both restaurants have been enormously successful, have gained national attention, and have garnered any number of awards. As has Rick.

Not only do Rick and Deann run two fine restaurants, a full-time job by anyone's standards, but in 1995, they started Frontera Foods, a specialty-food company that distributes authentically-prepared Mexican products in supermarkets and gourmet stores.

When not running his restaurants, scoping out local purveyors, or building a specialty-food com-

pany, Rick somehow finds the time to write award-winning cookbooks and host cooking programs for PBS. No casual cookbook author, Rick and his wife Deann, dedicated over 6 years to culinary research in Mexico, culminating in 1987 with the publication of *Authentic Mexican: Regional Cooking from the Heart of Mexico*. He went on to publish *Rick Bayless's Mexican Kitchen* and *Rick and Lanie's Excellent Kitchen Adventures: Recipes and Stories*, a book about cooking with his daughter that he hopes will encourage parents to cook with their kids.

### *Chef Bayless's National Awards*

*Best New Chef of 1988* by Food and Wine magazine

*Chef of the Year award in 1995* by the International Association of Culinary Professionals

*Best American Chef: Midwest in 1991, National Chef of the Year 1995* and *Humanitarian of the 1998* by the James Beard Foundation





Rick's work ethic and concern for community values extends to his charitable work. He serves on the Board of Directors for Chefs Collaborative, which supports environmentally sound agricultural practices, and he's active in Share Our Strength, the nation's largest hunger advocacy organization. In 2003, Rick established the Frontera

Farmer Foundation to promote small, sustainable Midwestern farms serving the Chicago area, by providing them with capital development grants. Rick believes that small local farms, which often struggle financially, are more likely to promote biodiversity by planting a wide range of produce and to operate using organic practices. As well, because they take an artisanal approach to agriculture these farmers insure the highest quality food while they add immeasurably to the fabric of their local rural communities.

When asked about why he expends so much effort seeking and supporting organic farmers in his region, Rick admits that although he's concerned about the environment and our food supply, for him "it's really the care that the small organic farms take that's most seductive to me – in the end it's about the flavor." Since he began seeking local produce in the late 1980s, Rick's found and developed enough purveyors that during the growing season, he can source about 90% of his restaurants' needs with local products. Not only that, but he's discovered that even during the legendary Chicago winters he can supply about 40% of the restaurants needs with local produce, mostly greens like spinach and pea shoots, many of which are being grown by farmers using the kinds of hoophouse and row cover techniques that the Frontera Foundation has been instrumental in helping to fund.

Along with buying locally, Rick insists that restaurateurs and cooks need to start thinking about old-fashioned ideas like preserving local produce to be used out of season. Rick swears that through the judicious use of his freezers, he can rely on local produce for much of the year. In a given summer the restaurants will put away fifteen-to-seventeen-thousand pounds of tomatoes, and they also freeze other seasonal produce including tomatillos, strawberries and even lime juice for those months of the year when his purveyor in Southern California can't supply them with fresh limes. He admits that freezer space can be a real limiting factor. For a long time the restaurant relied

on a row of home freezers in the basement – eventually they put in a walk-in and invested in a Cryovac machine to replace the "ramped up home vacuum sealer" they'd been using up until then.

Rick's dedication to buying food from "real people" means that even those items he can't get from local sources are still contracted "from a real person." For instance, he gets his limes from a biodynamic farm in San Diego county and contracts to have coffee grown by a fair trade co-op in Mexico. The coffee is shipped north and roasted in the restaurant. Rick sells this same coffee in grocery and specialty stores around the country as part of his Frontera Foods specialty line.

Because of his yearning to do business with "real people," Rick has wound up as a sort of steward to a whole group of small farmers in the Chicago and southern Wisconsin area. Take, for example, the story of how Rick came to get his chickens. The chicken producer was originally a pork producer. The problem was that the restaurant had two pork producers, and they liked them both, so they convinced one of them to go into chickens. The farmer had raised chickens as a kid, so said he'd give it a try. "At first," Rick says, "the size was irregular, and the birds were kind of tough." But Rick told the producer that the restaurant would hang in there until he figured out the chicken business.

Rick says this relationship took some creativity on the restaurant side as well. While they loved the taste of the chickens, they were tougher than the average American diner was used to because they'd had a real life outdoors. Eventually Rick discovered that if they brined the breasts before grilling, they wound up as "... the best chicken in the whole wide world."

When asked about the common perception that sustainably-ranched meat products are inconsistent in quality, Rick's response is to harken back to his experience with his chicken producer. "You have to be patient with and you have to commit to your suppliers", he says. "You have to consider yourself a partner with your purveyors. You have to develop an interdependent relationship between your suppliers, not just treat them like they're interchangeable."



Fifteen years ago, when Rick started working with the woman who supplies his lamb, it was exactly this patience and commitment that made the relationship a success. They spent the first two years figuring out how to raise the kind of lamb the restaurants needed. “It took her a long time,” Rick says. “But now the lamb is perfect and consistent and gorgeous – so good that we bone out the leg muscles and everyone thinks they’re prime cuts.”

As for the common complaint that sustainably-ranched meat products are too expensive, Rick says, “you have to know how to cook. The job of the cooking schools is to teach how to utilize other cuts. I mean,” he continues, “anyone can sauté off a lamb chop.” Balance is the key, he says. With careful portion control, and creative cooking techniques that use the entire animal, you can control your costs and run at per-plate rate that is comparable to the national average. For instance, when Ricks’ pork producer brings them the loin, they cut off the ribs and use it for a separate dish later. Rick also does some creative bartering – he splits the cost of lamb with a fellow restaurateur. Bayless keeps the legs and shoulders, and the more expensive cuts go to the other restaurant. That way they can both use local organic lamb instead of a commodity product.

Although it’s not a product local to the Chicago area, Rick uses Montana beef which he likes for its quality. When asked about the debate between which is better, grass-fed or “grain finished” beef, Rick replies that he “can’t stand that it’s a conflict.” For Bayless, as always, it comes down to having a relationship with the ranchers, and finding beef with the best flavor. They’re just different from one another, he says. “Nutritionally, grass fed beef is great, but again it comes down to knowing how to cook. I can cook it so it tastes really good.” He notes that in Chicago, where steakhouses are popular, many of them are starting to offer a choice between grass fed, grain finished, and conventional steaks. “It’s great,” Rick says, “because they’re educating the consumers that each has a different flavor.”

Bayless has also benefited from the urban gardening movement, and buys a lot of his produce from people who are building gardens right inside the city. “There’s this group called The Resource Center” he says. “They go out and find open lots, often they’re pieces of property

that have been sold but won’t be developed for a couple of years, and they go and put in gardens.

Rick’s commitment to sustainability extends not only to his sourcing, but to how he handles his restaurant waste. A couple of years ago, Rick and his team discovered that although the commercial waste collection company with whom they contracted claimed to be recycling, in reality they were just dumping all the separated waste in the landfill. Fed up, the Frontera team decided to find their own way to recycle. Turns out that the Resource Center folks who were pioneering urban gardening, were also pioneering a commercial recycling program. Now the two restaurants recycle all of their post-consumer food waste, as well as glass, cardboard and plastic.



Chef Bayless delivering the keynote address at the Corporation for the Northern Rockies sustainable food celebration.

What really comes through when talking to Rick is how his commitment to sustainability isn’t limited to any one part of his business. It’s part and parcel of the creative, engaged approach he brings to everything he does, whether it’s building relationships with his purveyors, building exciting, vibrant restaurants where people can learn how much more varied and interesting Mexican food is than they might have thought, to his cookbooks and television shows. He says that forging the kinds of relationships he has with his purveyors “Is so much more interesting. It makes me a better chef. I have to learn how to cook everything. That’s why I got into this.” This is someone who wants not just to cook beautiful food in his restaurants, but who wants to foster relationships between real people and real food; who wants to bring people together, whether it’s

American diners and our neighbors to the south, or farmers and chefs. It’s clear that this is a chef whose drive and creativity are making a real difference in the food industry as we know it.



Topolobampo



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