

## "Locavore Adventures" with Jim Weaver

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I first met Jim Weaver, chef/owner of Tre Piani restaurant in Forrestal Village, at a January 1999 cooking class he gave at a friend's café/cooking school. I loved the short ribs and other dishes he prepared that evening, so of course I had to try his recently opened restaurant, which quickly became a family favorite.

Since then, Jim has become a powerful presence on the New Jersey food scene. When he started the Central New Jersey chapter of Slow Food in 1999, he amassed over 300 members, and this was the first that most of us had heard of the parent organization, Slow Food International, founded in Italy in 1986 by Carlo Petrini.

Now Petrini has written the introduction to Jim's new book, "Locavore Adventures: One Chef's Slow Food Journey" (Rutgers Press, 2012). Part memoir, part cookbook, "Locavore Adventures" describes Jim's journey in search of the freshest ingredients and artisanal techniques for himself and his customers.

Jim was an early adopter of local, sustainably raised food, and describes one of his first "ah-ha" moments at the beginning of the book: "As a chef and restaurant owner in the Garden State, I had long been frustrated that I couldn't directly purchase all the wonderful fresh foods that were being produced virtually next door to my restaurant. It made absolutely no sense that a locally farmed tomato had to be trucked out of state through a network of brokers and distributors, only to be trucked back to my door days later at three times the price and half the quality."

I have Jim to thank for my education on this subject in a series of meetings he organized for the local culinary community over the years, invariably accompanied by a delicious luncheon featuring as many local products as possible. (Think "Too much is just enough!") Many of the people he writes about attended or were represented in some way at these meetings, such as my In The Kitchen colleague Pat Tanner, to whom he devotes a whole chapter, "Getting the Word Out," about the important role she played in co-founding and publicizing our Slow Food Chapter. (I can just see Pat squirming in embarrassment about now, so I'll desist, but do read that chapter to gain insight into one of New Jersey's top food writers.)

Not only did I find Jim's journey fascinating, but his stories about the people he meets along the way are also intriguing, giving back story insights into local food lore. There is a chapter about Patrick Martins, who founded Slow Food USA from his Brooklyn apartment, inspired in part by Jim's success on the local level. Martins went on to found Heritage Foods USA, which buys sustainably raised meats and poultry from a network of family farms, selling to devoted chefs and individuals all over the country. Little did I dream that his first deliveries to New York chefs were made from Tre Piani's capacious walk-in refrigerator.

Another chapter is about Pegi Ballister-Howells, manager of Hightstown's Tri-County Co-op, which is re-writing the ground rules of food distribution in our area, making that tomato's trip much shorter. There are also chapters on Griggstown Quail Farm, Valley Shepherd Cheeses, LBI's Viking Village fishery, and New York's Salumeria Biellese.

Jim also writes about other chefs who share his commitment to Slow Food principles, such as Will Mooney of Brother's Moon in Hopewell, Gary Giberson of The Lawrenceville School, and Dan Barber of Blue Hill Stone Barns in New York.

The book ends with the Slow Food Manifesto, and just to show you how easy it can be to fulfill those basic tenets, I include Jim's take on baked potatoes, below. In the book, you'll also find recipes of his own and others, including his famous Garden State Seafood Panzanella Salad, Pignolia-Nut Encrusted Sea Scallops, and a Berkshire pork shoulder slow-roasted in olive oil.

More than once over the years, when I was writing about a fundraising event like Taste of the Nation, I would go to Jim for a recipe to include, and he'd deflect that, saying "Give the publicity to someone else, I've had my share." Jim, this time there's no getting out of it!

## STICK A FORK IN IT

From "Locavore Adventures," Jim Weaver

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"One day, as I was walking through a supermarket, I caught sight of a product so ridiculous that I could scarcely believe what I was seeing. Before me, on the shelf, was an Idaho potato wrapped in plastic, complete with microwave instructions. The price was one dollar. That's twice the price of a potato in the produce bin.

"In case you've had an impulse to make such a purchase, I offer the following recipe as an effort to stave off such absurdities and to drive a stake into corporate profits, one potato at a time.

### MICROWAVE-BAKED POTATO

Serves 1

1 certified organic russet potato

1 piece of plastic wrap

Poke through potato skin with fork. Wrap potato in plastic wrap. Microwave for 4 to 6 minutes. When the potato is soft, it's done.

But here's an easier and tastier method.

## BAKED POTATOES

Use that same dollar to buy two naked russet potatoes from the bin. Take them home, poke the skins with a fork, and bake them in a preheated 400-degree oven until the skin is crisp and the insides are fluffy.

Why two potatoes? So you can invite a friend over. That way, you've fulfilled three major tenets of the Slow Food movement: you've eaten authentic food, you've paid a fair price, and you've fostered conviviality."

If you want to see Jim Weaver's culinary activism in action, attend the Feb. 19 Slow Food Indoor Farmer's Market at Tre Piani, where you can buy local products plus purchase the book and have it signed by the author. Information is at <http://www.slowfoodcentralnj.org/>.

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