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The Ecologically Sustainable Medicine Network

Member Profile

Wise Food Ways

An Interview with Jessica Prentice

In the latest manifestation of her passion for traditional cuisines and the power of food to bring people together, professional chef Jessica Prentice is completing the manuscript of Full Moon Feast: Food and the Hunger for Connection, which will be published by Chelsea Green in March 2006. In the book, Prentice uses the themes of history, seasonality, ecology, culture, and human longing to explore our food systems.

As a cook and educator, Prentice combines creativity and imagination with a deep respect for traditional cuisine. Her work provides a model for communities who want to feed themselves in ways that are satisfying and supportive of health, with food that is delicious, environmentally responsible, and grounded in the wise nourishing traditions of our ancestors. Residents of the San Francisco Bay Area in California have regular opportunities to enjoy Prentice's cooking during her Full Moon Feasts, meals that she prepares using local, sustainably-grown ingredients.

A graduate of the Natural Gourmet Cookery School in New York, Jessica Prentice is former Director of Education Programs at the Center for Urban Education about Sustainable Agriculture and former chef of the Headlands Center for the Arts in Marin County, California. She is a Bay Area chapter leader for the Weston A. Price Foundation for Wise Traditions in Food, Farming, and the Healing Arts.

Teleosis Executive Director Joel Kreisberg talked with Jessica about sustainable farming practices, focusing especially on the topic of meat production and the growing market for meat produced from animals that have been raised using sustainable practices.

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JK: *Can you talk about how and when the market for sustainably raised meat developed?*

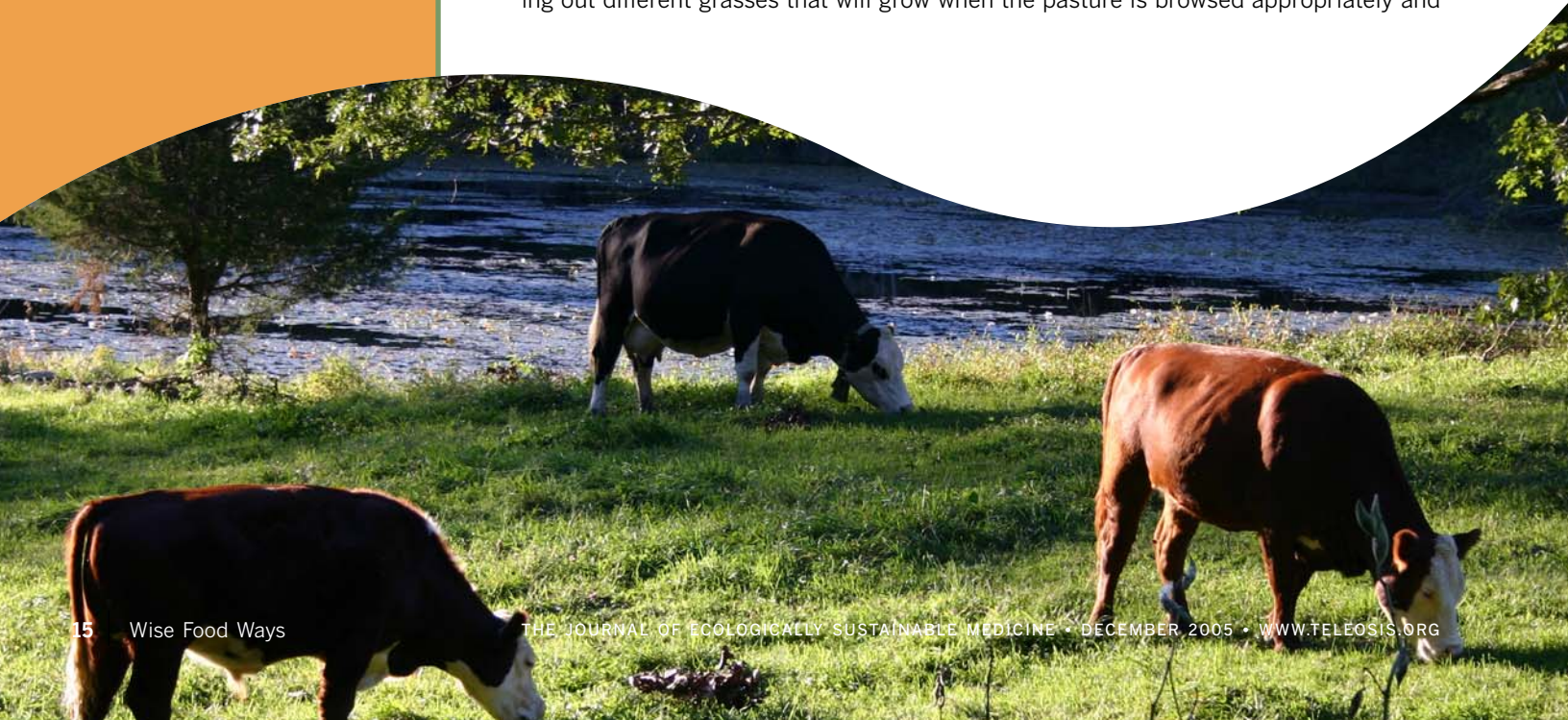
JP: Meat was generally raised in a sustainable fashion until the advent of factory farming and feedlots—which grew out of the grain surpluses produced by industrial agriculture after World War II. Sustainably raised meats have been enjoying a renaissance in recent years as people have become aware of how much suffering factory farming has caused animals and ecosystems. Beginning about five years ago, the Weston A. Price Foundation accelerated this process by creating a great deal of interest in products from animals raised on pasture. Also, Jo Robinson, author of *Why Grass Fed is Best*, has done a great deal to build interest in pasture-based ranching. Ex-vegetarians have also contributed to the growth of the market. As a vegetarian, one becomes very conscious and conscientious about how animals are raised for food. Those who decide to eat meat again don't want to eat unsustainable or factory-farmed meat; they have provided a lot of momentum on this issue. Another support, of course, is the sustainable agriculture movement. All these factors have combined to create a growing number of educated consumers.

JK: *What is the protocol for becoming a sustainable ranch?*

JP: Every ranch has to do it differently, depending on the environment and the people involved. An organization called Holistic Management (<http://managingwholes.com/index.php>; 800-654-3619) can help to provide structure. They train ranchers to become holistic practitioners, showing them how to raise animals for food in ecologically and financially sustainable ways. AcresUSA (www.acresusa.org) has also helped ranchers make this transition.

JK: *Can you give an example of what sustainable ranching looks like?*

JP: Joe Morris, a rancher in Santa Cruz, California, is a good example. When he takes you on a tour of his ranch, he talks about watershed protection and biodiversity, pointing out different grasses that will grow when the pasture is browsed appropriately and





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explaining why this biodiversity is important. Hearing him talk makes you realize that he really is committed to caring for the Earth through his management of the grasslands—and the meat he produces is almost a by-product of his holistic management vision. If you don't graze animals at all, or you overgraze, you actually create conditions that allow one type of grass to take over, destroying biodiversity. It's fascinating to realize that this person who is raising such high quality meat is really an ecologist—he sees his primary role as managing the grasslands and watersheds.

JK: *Is it possible to meet the demand for food sources without using conventional slaughterhouses? I know that there can be health risks when procedures aren't carefully followed. Also, however, more and more people are interested in how animals that are grown for food are treated while they are alive.*

JP: There is a strong local demand for pastured meats and the supply is just barely keeping up. There is a general consciousness in this country that factory farming is bad, and more and more people are becoming interested in sustainability, particularly when it comes to animals. In her book *Animals in Translation*, Dr. Temple Grandin describes a five-point audit she developed to be used in meat production. She believes that if these simple steps are fulfilled in a slaughterhouse, it is a more humane process. McDonalds was one of the first to sign on to it because of consumer pressure. Slaughterhouses are still used, but at least there is a baseline of what is acceptable. Ultimately, however, I believe that the factory farm system is not sustainable and will at some point come crashing down.

JK: *Do some ranchers slaughter animals right on the ranch?*

JP: Ideally, most local ranchers would like to have the slaughter done on farm, but the government doesn't allow this. So many ranchers will use family-owned or small-scale slaughterhouses, which tend to be located near feedlots.

If you want to sell meat by the pound, the law requires you to slaughter in a slaughterhouse. Of course, you can slaughter and eat your own animals on the farm; you just can't sell the meat by the pound. So, some people have set up a system called "cow-share." People buy portions of the cow so that together they actually own it; then they pay the rancher to slaughter and package it. This is a way of getting around the system and slaughtering on-farm. Ultimately, it is more humane, and you know exactly where the meat is coming from and how the animals have been treated.

JK: *You offer cooking classes and "full moon feasts" where residents of the San Francisco Bay Area can hear about your philosophy and sample your cooking. Why do people come to you?*

JP: Many people find me through the Weston A. Price Foundation, others through my work in sustainable agriculture. Some come from the movement and perspective of Slow Food, which opposes fast food culture. When people learn about "Nourishing Traditions"—the traditional food selection and preparation of our ancestors—they



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often want to learn how to integrate the ideas and practices into their lives. More and more people understand that vibrant, healthy food is necessary for human health and as “medicine.” And many people who come to my classes have had health problems.

In my classes, as people learn how to eat differently, they begin to think about how food reaches their table. For example, for the full moon feasts I usually bring a rancher to talk about his or her ranching practices. Whenever I cook a meal for an event, I ask that I be allowed to provide an introduction to the food. I tell people where the food comes from, and anything special about the ecological practices of the farmer. In this way, those eating the food get a better sense of the kinds of energy and activities that were involved in producing the vegetables and meats they are eating.

JK: *So, you’ve integrated the growing and raising of sustainable food with cooking and preparation?*

JP: I have a strong interest both in the culinary arts *and* sustainable agriculture issues and practices. I would have a hard time choosing between them because they are inseparable; both are extremely important to me. The reason that Weston Price resonates for me is because it addresses both ecological and health elements. I like to be involved on all levels: politically, ecologically, and from the perspective of what is healthy.

JK: *How can we encourage others to become more knowledgeable about the importance of sustainable and organic agriculture and more actively involved in environmental issues?*

JP: From an ecological perspective, let’s look at the fact that for many people around the globe, animal fats are a very important nutritional element in their diet. Because environmental toxins concentrate in animal fats, this throws into sharp relief the fact that we need to clean up our environment. Healthy fats require a clean environment, period. If we are going to eat meat—and the majority of people likely will continue to do so—how can we have the healthiest animal products available if we don’t pay attention to sustainability? Having dangerously high levels of toxins in the environment won’t support the production of meats that are healthy for humans to eat; unsustainable practices won’t help us ensure the health of our children. Fats reflect in a concentrated form whatever happens on the land—if the land and seas are healthy, the animals we harvest from them will be healthy, and their fats will nourish us. If the Earth is poisoned, those poisons will show up in the fats. This is disastrous for human health because it is a Catch-22: we can’t be healthy without the fats, but we can’t be healthy *with* the fats if they are toxic.

JK: *People who are concerned about the “right relationship” between humans and other animals say that the food industry is very anthropogenic, that is, strictly focused on human needs and desires. Do you have any comment on that?*



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JP: I think the system is too money-driven. Because of that, it is focused on only certain human needs and desires, and only in a short-term view. We've neglected the human need and desire to feel a connection to our food source, to live on a planet with thriving ecosystems, to care for animals and the welfare of other beings, to live in right relationship with all life on Earth. If we really cared about human needs and desires, we would care about those things too, but industrial agriculture doesn't.

Our perspective is also often limited in having agriculture as a sole reference point for our food system. There is a great deal to be learned from looking at hunter-gatherer and pastoralist lifestyles as well. Humans were hunter-gatherers for most of their history—agriculture is still a new development.

JK: *Are you suggesting that we go back to hunting and gathering and herding?*

JP: That's impossible, and agriculture has offered enormous gifts. But there is much we can learn from the lives of people who have related to the Earth in a different way, even from their mistakes. Even hunter/gatherers may do things that are unsustainable. We have evidence that early humans did things such as driving whole herds of bison over cliffs to kill them. Huge numbers of buffalo were wasted; it was unnecessary. We need to look at the big picture, and try our best to make choices that are wise—choices that sustain us as human beings as well as the planet and her other creatures. We have to try to find win-win solutions for all life on Earth. We really don't have any choice but to try. 🌱

To learn more about Jessica Prentice, her approach to traditional diet, and the community-based organization, Wise Food Ways, visit <http://www.wisefoodsways.com>

