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The Neighborhood Files

Q&A on Local Food with the Oyster Club's Daniel Meiser

The Mystic restaurateur talks about the benefits of local food, creating a new menu every day and how to save local farms.

By [Bree Shirvell](#) | [Email the author](#) | October 1, 2012

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Since opening roughly a year ago, the [Oyster Club](#) in downtown Mystic has continued to keep locals and visitors abuzz. The place is almost always packed and a with a menu that changes daily it seems everyone from [The New York Times](#) to my parents can't wait to try out the newest items on the ever-changing farm-to-table menu.

To find out just what makes the Oyster Club's changing menu work I talked with co-owner Daniel Mesier about the benefits of local food, creating a new menu every day and how he thinks we can all help save New England's farms.

The interview has been edited and condensed.

Q: How do you decide what products to buy from where?

A: In most cases, the products decide for us. As you know, our chef James Wayman and his talented staff write a new dinner menu daily. This menu is determined by what our farmers, fisherman and local purveyors are bringing us. At this point, we have a network of 35-plus local farmers, fisherman and purveyors that we are in constant contact with. They will call us, let us know what they have available and the ordering takes place, with deliveries coming in daily. This requires incredible talent on the kitchens end to write and execute a new menu every day, while maintaining the absolute highest level of quality and taste. It's really quite amazing when you stop and think about it.

Q: What benefits do you think local food brings to consumers? Why should consumers spend more money to support local agriculture?

A: Local food makes sense for everyone involved. Let's use the example of a tomato in August. A perfectly ripe tomato in August is about as good as it gets in my opinion. A sharp knife, a little sea salt and maybe a drizzle of really good olive oil is all you need to make that tomato euphoric. Serving a tomato in the raw is a special event, and for this reason you will not see a tomato in the raw served outside of the summer and early fall at Oyster Club. The reason for this is because we want our guests to only eat the best products available, and the easiest way to do that in New England is to eat them when they are ripe! So, the first benefit is quality. A beautifully ripe tomato in August from your local farmers market will taste better than any tomato you can possibly buy in the grocery store in January.

The second benefit of buying that local tomato is economical, both for the farmer and the consumer. The farmers' economical benefits are crucial, especially in New England. As you may know, the New England farmer is a rare breed, with many of these family farms [going back 200 years](#). The unfortunate reality in New England for the small farmer is that their farms are almost always worth more to a developer financially than could ever possibly generate from traditional farm stand income. This is why



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the evolution of the sale of farm products in our area thru famers' markets, CSA's and the growing trend of selling direct to restaurants is so important. If we can help these farmers turn a profit, we can actually save the very farms we buy from. The consumers economical benefit is one that you may not think, but I am a firm believer that local food does not have to be more expensive, it often is not, and in the end you get what you pay for. Paying an extra 0.50 cents a pound for that August tomato is worth it, I promise.

Q: Given the state of our current food system, how do you decide, what if any trade-offs are acceptable given seasonality, availability, and price?

A: We do not compromise when it comes to the quality of our restaurant and trade-offs are not something we consider. We work with what we have, year round, and always find a way to make a great menu. We have lemons and limes for our cocktails year round, and these obviously do not, and will not ever come from Connecticut. We buy Italian olive oil, and that's O.K. However, you will never see a piece of asparagus on our menu that's not local, nor a raw tomato, berries, meat, fish, etc that's out of season and not local. Anything that can grow locally, we will only highlight and use that product when it's seasonally appropriate. As far as price goes, this has never and will never prevent us from sourcing locally. We work with fair farmers and purveyors, who charge fair prices for what their product is worth.

Q: Why should people support businesses and products like yours?

A: First off, let me say that I have never in my life been involved with a project more gratifying and humbling than Oyster Club. The response we have received from the community is amazing and the level of business is greater than we ever imagined. People are so appreciative of what we are providing and we are proud to be able to provide it.

As I mentioned above, the benefits are numerous. You get a superior product and you're supporting a local business that in turn is supporting numerous local businesses. By the end of the year, Oyster Club will have spent literally hundreds of thousands of dollars on local meat, fish, produce and artisan products. This makes a real impact on our local economy.

Q: What advice can you give those trying to eat locally on a tight budget?

A: Like any kind of shopping, it's up to the consumer to shop around. Spend some time at the local farmers markets, but also hit up the farms themselves. You'll often times find real savings by going to the farm stand itself. Ultimately the best way to eat local is do it yourself!

Q: Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of why it's important to know how food is produced and where it comes from. How do you bridge the gap and highlight the importance for those who may not be convinced yet?

A: Come and eat at Oyster Club, and you will instantly realize that local food, expertly prepared is transcending. We let the ingredients shine, we don't manipulate them, but rather give them the platform to really take center stage. Once you are convinced that it tastes better, than you will also begin to care about the other impacts that eating locally has economically, socially and nutritionally. The more people who live like this, the more restaurants and markets that practice this philosophy, the more the general public will see the logic in returning to our food systems back to the local farmers and artisans.

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Here's to continued success to the Oyster Club!

Patty Copp

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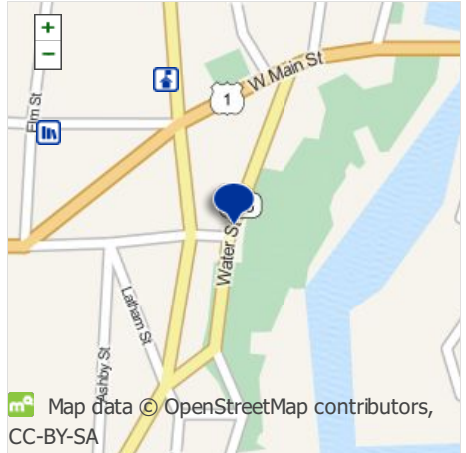
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