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## Good for you, better for the Earth

### Chef turned author looks to take bite out of global warming

By ELIZABETH MCMUNN-TETANGCO

Imagine biting into a piece of cheese.

Feel the soft surrender of its heft against your teeth as your mouth fills with the creamy flavor.

Instead of swallowing right away, absorb the cheese like a fine wine as you picture how it got to your mouth.

Did the milk to make it come from a cow? A goat? When was the milk collected, and how was it nurtured into cheese? Did it travel to you from Europe? From Hilmar? From somewhere else? What was the cost of the cheese in terms of human and animal production, fuel, and carbon output?

Laura Stec, co-author with Dr. Eugene Cordero of "Cool Cuisine: Taking the Bite Out of Global Warming," due out today, was struck by these issues and more when she heard an NPR broadcast about global warming and food production.

"I had to stay in the driveway and listen in the car," she said -- the issues involved were that riveting. The unhealthy relationship with food shared by many Americans has to do with emotions, social systems, and the food system as a whole -- and better-quality food is, categorically, better for the eater. "As you deepen your relationship with food, it feeds more than your stomach," Stec said, "it feeds hearts and health and gives people a deeper sense of satisfaction in their food."

Stec is a Bay Area chef who runs her own personal chef/catering business, Laura Stec -- Innovative Cuisine, and serves as a culinary health educator for Kaiser Permanente Medical Group. She teaches cooking classes and lectures publicly about eating well and regionally responsibly. While she takes her job and the environment seriously, her sense of humor shines throughout her work. One of her lectures, for instance, is called "I Hate Cooking -- Now What?" Having been involved in food and the environmental movement since the 1980s, Stec sees her "heart song" as the use of food to make changes in peoples' lives.

When two-thirds of the people who make up a country's population are overweight, there's clearly a problem with the way they're eating. And when that same country has a food system that is built around efficiency rather than health and flavor, it's a pretty safe bet that we've identified part of the problem. It takes 500 gallons of oil per person to run the U.S. food system, and, according to Stec, this food system is not about pleasing the eater -- it's about doing things quickly and conveniently, creating an American diet that contributes to global warming. Stec calls it the Global Warming Diet. "No one likes diets," said Stec, "they're unappetizing and unappealing ... and that's how we're eating."

Everyone has to eat. With this information and her credo that "if it ain't fun, it don't get done," Stec and her co-author Cordero sought to find a way to show people that eating well not only tastes better, but is better for the world around us -- without guilt-tripping or depressing them. "We're coming from a position of pleasure," Stec said. "Eating a Cool Cuisine helps people serve themselves as much as they serve the environment."

A "Cool Cuisine" is one that actually fights against global warming -- thus the "Cool" of its title. "It's about looking at solutions," Stec said. Armed with a UC Davis study of the largest contributors to the Global Warming Diet, Stec and Cordero go through them one by one, proposing small changes everyday people can make that will help alleviate the problem. One issue, for instance, is the number of miles foods often travel before they arrive on our plates, incurring fuel and oil costs along the way. Stec and Cordero's solution to this issue is to buy things that are "shelf-stable," and to buy fresh products from a local source rather than having them sent from overseas. Additionally, they advocate reducing the number of miles spent in the car by making one trip to cover several errands, or by riding bikes and walking instead of driving altogether.

Stec believes in what she calls "high-vibe foods," meaning "foods grown with hands of loving grace, good air and good clean water." Eating these foods, she said, grants us "a strong life force from a strong, healthy way of living," and research backs her up.

Soil, for instance, has a huge impact on the quality of the food we eat. "Look at soil like making a sauce," Stec said, "putting things into the soil has hurt it -- and when you have better soil, you get better fruits and vegetables." Stec cited information from Dr. Christine Jones, an Australian scientist, who explained to her the symbiotic relationship between microbes in the soil and plant roots. When the soil is rich in minerals and microbes, plants can pull protective minerals and vitamins into their roots, meaning that when we eat the plants grown in the soil, we benefit from these healthy phytochemicals as well. Pesticide use, however, kills off these microbes, depriving the plants and the humans who eat them of these beneficial properties. "The idea is that the richer the soil, the more we can benefit from it," Stec said.

Part of the book's appeal is its positive outlook. While Stec and Cordero definitely have a message, their means of communication is more communal than heavy-handed -- and the book includes personal stories, recipes, and interviews in addition to hard scientific facts. The book's layout is full of color and charts, and it emphasizes taking change slowly. "It's important to take things step-by-step," Stec said. "People often don't make changes because they're afraid of not doing things perfectly" -- but with such small changes, it's hard to actually mess up. And luckily, the small changes Stec and Cordero suggest are actually more fun than the alternatives. Bringing your own bags to the store, for instance, cuts down on lots of waste and eliminates clutter in the home, and buying seasonal produce raised in your own country not only helps the environment -- it also tastes a lot better.

Really, it's all about people doing what they can to nourish themselves and their families today and in the future, thus ensuring a brighter tomorrow for everyone. As Stec said, "the most satisfying meal is prepared with love. That's what the book is about."

"Cool Cuisine: Taking the Bite Out of Global Warming," by Laura Stec and Dr. Eugene Cordero arrives in bookstores today (\$24.99). It will be sold at Barnes & Noble or through [www.keplers.com](http://www.keplers.com) or [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com). More information about it can be found at [www.globalwarmingdiet.org](http://www.globalwarmingdiet.org). Information about Laura Stec can be found at her Web site, [www.laurastec.com](http://www.laurastec.com).

*Elizabeth McMunn-Tetangco worked as a research assistant for Laura Stec during the summer of 2007.*